

Rule Tip of the Week Which Way Do I Go?

In the adjacent photograph, a player's ball has come to rest smack-dab in the middle of a cart path. You happen to be the attending PGA Professional/Rules Official, and the player, wanting to know where she will drop when she takes relief from the cart path, asks "Which way do I go?" At this point, and without having any other information (no fair peeking in her golf bag!) which of the following would be the correct reply: (a) "You must drop your ball to the left of the cart path." (b) "You must drop your ball to the right of the cart path." (c) "Since your ball came to rest in the middle of the cart path, you may choose to drop your ball on either side of the cart path." or (d) "It depends ..."



If you correctly picked answer (d), then you understand that you cannot make the correct ruling until you first find out if the player plays left-handed or right-handed! If the player plays golf left-handed, then she will be dropping adjacent to the right side of the cart path. If the player plays right-handed, then she will be dropping adjacent to the left side of the cart path.

Rule 24-2 [Immovable Obstruction] is applicable to this situation and provides that relief without penalty is permitted if an immovable obstruction interferes with the lie, stance, or area of intended swing of the player. Moreover, when taking relief for her ball lying on the cart path through the green, the player must drop her ball within one club-length of, and not nearer the hole than, the "nearest point of relief."

The Definition of "nearest point of relief" states that, "It is the point on the course nearest to where the ball lies: (i) that is not nearer the hole, and (ii) where, if the ball were so positioned, **NO** interference by the condition from which relief is sought would exist for the stroke the player would have made from the original position if the condition were not there." [Emphasis added]

Let's examine how this works for the right-handed player, and show why she is not free to choose which side of the path to take relief. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that she would rather take relief on the right side of the cart path, perhaps because there is a tree interfering with her line of play on the other side of the cart path. In the adjacent photograph, she suggests that her nearest point of relief is where a ball would be just a few inches away from the right edge of the cart path. At that point, the cart path no longer interferes with the lie of her ball or the area of her intended swing. However, this cannot be the nearest point of relief because it does not provide complete relief from the path. Yes, this point would eliminate interference to the lie of the ball and the area of the player's intended swing. However, this point does not eliminate the interference to her stance!



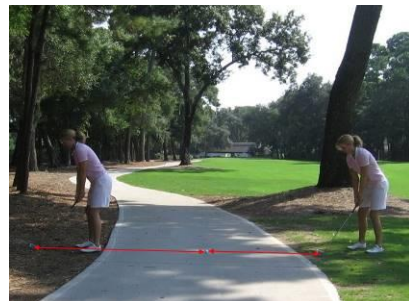
In the next photograph, we have coaxed the player further to the right so that she is no longer standing on the cart path. Her ball came to rest on the cart path about 140 yards from the green, so we need to find out from the player which club she would use for that distance. When she replies, "7-iron," we have her take her normal stance with her 7-iron and with her feet completely off the cart path. The point where she is grounding her 7-iron to the right of the cart path MIGHT be the nearest point of relief. However, we can't make a definitive determination and allow her to drop to the right of the cart path until we first investigate whether or not the nearest point of relief might be to the left of the path.



In this photograph, we have relocated the player to the left of the cart path where she is addressing an imaginary ball positioned a few inches away from the cart path. At that point, the cart path no longer interferes with the lie of the ball or the area of her intended swing. And guess what? At that point, the cart path no longer interferes with her stance! Could this point be the one and only nearest point of relief in this situation?



By magically combining the previous two photographs, it becomes apparent that the point where the player is grounding her club to the left of the cart path is closer to her ball in the middle of the cart path than the point where the player is grounding her club to the right of the cart path. That means that the point where the player is grounding her club to the left of the cart path is the nearest point of relief. In actual practice and to eliminate any doubt, we would have the player place a tee at the potential nearest points of relief on either side of the cart path, i.e., at each point where she was grounding her 7-iron. Then, if necessary, we would measure and compare the relative distances between those two tees and her original ball on the cart path to confirm the nearest point of relief.



One final point: In the process of making this ruling, you should advise the player not to pick up her ball on the cart path until she knows where the nearest point of relief is located and is comfortable with the area in which she will have to drop her ball. For example, if she picks up her ball anticipating that she will be able to drop to the right of the cart path, but then discovers that she must drop on the left side of the cart path where there is interference to her line of play, then she may not go back and replace her ball on the cart path without penalty! See Decision 18-2/12 [Player Entitled to Relief from Condition Lifts Ball; Player Then Replaces Ball and Plays It from Original Position] which states, in part, “*The player was entitled to lift the ball to take relief under Rule 24.... However, by subsequently deciding not to take relief, his right to lift the ball was negated and he incurred a penalty stroke under Rule 18-2 for having lifted his ball in play.*”