

Rule Tip of the Week

Missing in Action!

After posting a 7-over 79 for his second round of the 2018 Masters Tournament and barely making the cut, Phil Mickelson needed to make something happen early in his third round. Perhaps trying a bit too hard, Phil hooked his drive on the first hole into the woods, and found his ball resting on some pine straw among some low-hanging branches of a tree. Rather than deem his ball unplayable and drop away from the overhanging branches with a one-stroke penalty, Phil decided to play his ball as it lay.

When Lefty attempted to play his ball out of the woods, his hand and/or his club struck a branch of the tree, causing him to miss the ball completely. Under the Rules, that unfortunate miss counts as a stroke! Why? As stated in the Definition of "Stroke," "A *stroke* is the forward movement of the club made with the intention of striking at and moving the ball, but if a player checks his downswing voluntarily before the clubhead reaches the ball he has not made a stroke." Note that nothing in this Definition requires that the clubhead make contact with the ball!



Unfortunately, Phil could not use the interfering tree branch as an excuse to pardon him from being charged with making a stroke. As noted in Decision 14/1 [Club Stopped on Downswing by Agency Other Than Player], if a player starts his downswing and his clubhead is deflected or stopped by an agency other than himself, e.g., the branch of a tree, he is deemed to have made a stroke.

What if you commence your downswing with the intention of striking your ball, but you abandon that intention for some reason, e.g., hearing someone shouting "fore"? Is that still considered to be a stroke? Well, it depends on whether you are able to stop or redirect your club so that it does not strike your ball. Consider the following text of Decision 14/1.5 [Intent to Strike Ball Ceases During Downswing; Club Not Stopped But Path of Club Altered to Avoid Striking Ball]:

Q. A player begins his downswing with the intention of striking the ball but decides during the downswing not to strike the ball. The player is unable to stop the club before it reaches the ball, but he is able to swing intentionally over the top of the ball. Is the player deemed to have made a stroke?

A. No. The player is considered to have checked his downswing voluntarily by altering the path of his downswing and missing the ball even though the swing carried the clubhead beyond the ball.

If the player had not successfully checked his downswing (i.e., he had struck the ball), he is considered to have made a stroke.

Any doubt regarding the player's intent must be resolved against the player.



You may be familiar with a couple of PGA Tour players who have been known to make partial or full swings that are not deemed to be strokes. In the photograph on the left, Tiger Woods has actually checked his downswing. He is renowned for being able to do this after being distracted by a nearby spectator or photographer. In this case, he has not made a stroke because he has voluntarily checked his downswing before his clubhead reaches the ball.

In the photograph on the right, Kevin Na has swung past his ball on the teeing ground. You may recall that he was having difficulty a few years ago in executing his drives without first making seemingly endless waggles and even swinging over the top of the ball. Na's swings and misses were not counted as strokes because he had no intention of striking the ball.

