

Rule Tip of the Week Fescue Faux Pas

After teeing his ball within the elevated teeing ground of the 7th hole during the final round of the 2018 A Military Tribute at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, Phil Mickelson noticed a clump of tall fescue grass growing on his intended line of play in front of the teeing ground. Mickelson was contemplating playing a low “stinger” off the tee, and he was concerned that the fescue might disrupt the flight of his ball. Instead of re-teeing elsewhere within the teeing ground, Phil walked forward and pushed down the offending clump of fescue with his right foot.

After stomping down the grass, and prior to playing his tee shot, Phil questioned whether he might have breached a Rule. So, on his way to his ball in the fairway, he summoned over a Rules Official to find out the answer. Unfortunately for Mickelson, the Rules Official advised Phil that he had incurred a two-stroke penalty for improving his line of play!

Rule 13-2 [Improving Lie, Area of Intended Stance or Swing, or Line of Play] points out, in relevant part, “A player must not improve or allow to be improved ... the position or lie of his ball, the area of his intended stance or swing, his line of play ... or the area in which he is to drop or place a ball ... by ... moving, bending or breaking anything growing or fixed...”



Phil's fescue faux pas may have been the result of a mental lapse on his part, possibly getting confused with another excerpt from Rule 13-2. That portion of Rule 13-2 advises, “... the player incurs no penalty if the action occurs ... in creating or eliminating irregularities of surface **within** the teeing ground....” [Emphasis added]. Decision 13-2/3 [Breaking Off Grass Behind Ball on Teeing Ground] indicates that it is permissible to break off or even pull out grass growing **within** the teeing ground. Likewise, Decision 13-2/2 [Player Who Misses Tee Shot Presses Down Irregularities Before Next Stroke] confirms that a player may, without penalty, press down turf **within** the teeing ground.

It must be noted that it did not matter that Phil's ball was not yet in play when he committed his faux pas. It must also be noted that Phil would not have been able to avoid the penalty simply by re-teeing his ball somewhere else within the teeing ground after flattening the fescue. See Decision 13-2/14 [Breaking Branch Interfering with Backswing on Teeing Ground] which reads as follows:

Q. On the teeing ground, a player broke off a branch of a tree which was interfering with his swing. The player maintained that such action was not a breach of Rule 13-2 because his ball was not yet in play. Was the player correct?

A. No. The player was in breach of Rule 13-2 for improving the area of his intended swing. Although Rule 13-2 allows a player to eliminate irregularities of surface on the teeing ground, it does not allow him to break a branch interfering with his swing. The penalty would apply even if the player, before playing his next stroke, re-teeed elsewhere on the teeing ground