



# COMMON RULES OF GOLF

# INTRODUCTION

Golf is a game built on skill, respect, honesty, and sportsmanship. As a member of Nenagh Golf Club, you are not just learning how to swing a club — you are learning how to play a game that values integrity above everything else.

Unlike many sports, golf does not always have a referee watching every move. Players are responsible for knowing the rules, applying them correctly, and being honest about their scores. That responsibility is what makes golf special.

This booklet explains the most common rules you will use during practice rounds and competitions. You do not need to memorise every rule — even professionals check the rule book — but understanding the basics will help you:

- Feel more confident on the course
- Avoid unnecessary penalties
- Keep play moving smoothly
- Show respect for fellow players

Golf is a game of learning. Everyone makes mistakes. What matters most is asking questions, being honest, and always trying to improve.

When you step onto the course, you represent yourself and your club. Knowing the rules helps you play fairly, play smart, and play with pride.

# 1. PLAY THE BALL AS IT LIES

One of the most important principles in golf is that you must **play the ball as it lies**. This means that wherever your ball comes to rest after a shot, you must play it from that position unless a rule specifically allows you to move it. Golf is designed to test your skill in dealing with different lies — whether that's in the fairway, rough, trees, or even an awkward stance.

You are not allowed to improve your lie by:

- Moving the ball to better grass
- Pressing down grass behind the ball
- Moving loose turf to make your swing easier

The only time you can move your ball without penalty is when a rule allows relief — for example from a cart path or ground under repair.

This rule teaches honesty and fairness. Every player faces the course as they find it. Part of improving as a golfer is learning how to play from difficult positions instead of trying to avoid them.

If you ever accidentally move your ball, tell your marker immediately. Being honest is always more important than saving a shot.

## 2. OUT OF BOUNDS (OB)

Out of Bounds is usually marked by **white stakes or boundary fences**. If your ball crosses the boundary line and comes to rest outside the course, it is considered Out of Bounds.

If your ball is OB:

- You receive **one penalty stroke**
- You must replay from where you last hit

This is called **stroke and distance** because you lose a stroke and must replay the distance again.

Example:

If you hit your tee shot OB, you are now playing your **third shot** from the tee.

To save time, players are encouraged to hit a **provisional ball** if they think their first shot may be out of bounds. This avoids walking all the way forward and back again.

Understanding OB is important in competitions. Always check the local rules to see where boundaries are located. If unsure whether your ball is out, ask another player before picking it up.

Learning to manage risky shots near boundaries is part of smart course management.

### 3. LOST BALL

A ball is considered lost if you cannot find it within **three minutes** of beginning your search. The timer starts when you or your playing partners start looking.

If your ball is lost:

- You receive **one penalty stroke**
- You must return to where you last played and hit again

Just like Out of Bounds, this is stroke and distance.

To avoid delay:

- Watch where every player's ball lands
- Help each other search
- Hit a provisional ball if unsure

You are not allowed to simply drop a ball where you think it might have been (unless a local rule allows it). In most competitions, standard stroke and distance applies.

Searching properly is important, but so is keeping pace of play. If three minutes pass, the ball is officially lost — even if you find it later.

This rule encourages accuracy and awareness. Paying attention to where your ball lands can save strokes.

## 4. PENALTY AREAS (RED AND YELLOW STAKES)

Penalty areas are marked by **red or yellow stakes** and usually contain water, ditches, or areas where balls are difficult to play.

If your ball goes into a penalty area, you add **one penalty stroke** and take relief.

With **yellow stakes**, you may:

- Replay from previous spot, or
- Drop back in line with where the ball crossed the edge

With **red stakes**, you also have the option to:

- Drop within two club-lengths of where it crossed

You may play the ball as it lies inside a penalty area if safe to do so.

Knowing where your ball crossed the edge of the penalty area is very important — that determines where you can drop.

Penalty areas are part of course design. Learning when to play safely versus taking a risk is part of becoming a smarter golfer.

## 5. TAKING A PROPER DROP

When a rule allows you to drop a ball, it must be done correctly.

You must:

- Stand upright
- Drop the ball from **knee height**
- Let it fall straight down

The ball must land in the defined relief area and stay within that area. If it rolls outside, you must re-drop. If it rolls out again, you place it on the spot where it first touched the ground on the second drop.

You cannot:

- Throw it
- Spin it
- Roll it

The relief area is usually:

- One or two club-lengths
- No nearer the hole

Dropping properly ensures fairness and consistency. Members should practise this, so it becomes automatic during competitions.

If unsure about the correct relief area, always confirm with your marker before dropping.

## 6. UNPLAYABLE BALL

If your ball is in a position where you believe you cannot play it — for example deep in bushes or against a tree — you may declare it **unplayable** anywhere on the course (except inside a penalty area).

You add **one penalty stroke** and choose one of three options:

1. Replay from where you last hit
2. Drop back in line with the hole
3. Drop within two club-lengths (not nearer the hole)

Only the player can decide their ball is unplayable.

This rule gives you options when stuck in trouble. Sometimes taking a small penalty is smarter than attempting a miracle shot.

Golf rewards smart decisions. Knowing when to take your medicine and move on is a sign of maturity on the course.

## 7. BUNKER RULES

Bunkers are hazards designed to be challenging.

In a bunker:

- You must not ground your club directly behind the ball
- You must not test the sand before your shot

After playing:

- Rake the bunker carefully
- Leave it smooth for the next player

If your ball is unplayable in a bunker, you normally must drop back into the bunker with a penalty. In some formats, you may drop outside for two penalty strokes.

Bunkers test technique and focus. Practising bunker shots will help remove fear from this part of the game.

Always show respect by raking properly — it keeps the course fair for everyone.

## 8. BALL MOVED ON THE PUTTING GREEN

The putting green has some special rules that make it slightly different from the rest of the course. If you accidentally move your ball on the green — for example while marking it, addressing it, or picking up your marker — there is **no penalty**, as long as you replace it on its original spot.

However, if you deliberately move your ball without marking it first, that may result in a penalty. Always mark your ball before lifting it. Use a coin or small marker placed directly behind the ball.

If wind moves your ball after you have addressed it, there is no penalty — you must play it from its new position unless it had already been marked and replaced.

This rule exists because greens are delicate surfaces and small accidental movements are common. The key points for members are:

- Always mark before lifting.
- Replace the ball exactly where it was.
- Be careful not to move another player's ball.

Respecting these small details shows good golfing habits and helps competitions run smoothly.

## 9. MARKING, LIFTING AND CLEANING YOUR BALL ON THE GREEN

When your ball is on the putting green, you are allowed to mark it, lift it, and clean it. This ensures that mud or grass does not unfairly affect your putting stroke.

The correct procedure is:

1. Place your marker directly behind the ball.
2. Lift the ball.
3. Clean it if necessary.
4. Replace it exactly in front of your marker.
5. Remove the marker before putting.

If another player's line is affected by your marker, you may move your marker one or two clubhead lengths to the side — but you must return it to its original spot before replacing your ball.

You must not clean your ball elsewhere on the course unless a rule allows it (for example, when taking relief).

Being careful when marking prevents penalties and avoids disputes. It also shows respect for your fellow players.

Good green etiquette is one of the clearest signs of a developing golfer.

## 10. ORDER OF PLAY AND READY GOLF

Traditionally, the player furthest from the hole plays first. On the tee, the player with the lowest score on the previous hole has the honour.

However, in most competitions, **Ready Golf** is encouraged. This means:

If you are ready and it is safe, play your shot.

Do not wait unnecessarily.

Safety always comes first. Never hit if someone is within range.

Ready Golf helps speed up play and keeps rounds enjoyable. Slow play is one of the biggest issues in golf, so players should learn early how to:

- Be prepared for their turn
- Select their club early
- Walk quickly between shots

Understanding order of play is important, but playing efficiently is equally important.

Smart golfers think ahead and are ready.

## II. ADVICE

In stroke play competitions, you are not allowed to ask another competitor for advice. Advice includes:

- What club they used
- How they played a shot
- What shot they think you should play

However, you may ask for:

- Distance to the hole
- Location of hazards
- Clarification of rules

You may also ask your marker to confirm your score.

This rule ensures fairness. Each player must rely on their own skill and judgement.

In team formats, such as fourball, partners may give advice to each other.

Learning to make your own decisions builds confidence and independence on the course.

## 12. PLAYING A WRONG BALL

If you accidentally hit another player's ball, you have played a wrong ball.

In stroke play:

- You receive a **two-stroke penalty**
- You must correct the mistake by playing your own ball

The strokes made with the wrong ball do not count.

To avoid this:

- Always identify your ball before playing.
- Use a unique marking (initials or dots).

Many golf balls look similar. Checking takes only a few seconds but avoids serious penalties.

Develop the habit of saying, "That's my ball," before playing.

## 13. BALL ACCIDENTALLY MOVED BY PLAYER

If you accidentally move your ball in the general area (for example while taking practice swings or searching), you usually receive:

- **One penalty stroke**
- You must replace the ball

If you move it while searching, there is no penalty — but you must replace it.

Always be careful around your ball, especially in rough or near trees.

This rule reinforces responsibility. Players are accountable for their actions around the ball.

Being honest about accidental movement is part of golf's tradition of integrity.

## 14. EMBEDDED BALL

If your ball plugs into soft ground in the general area (for example after heavy rain), you are allowed free relief.

An embedded ball is one that is:

- In its own pitch mark
- Below the level of the ground

You may:

- Mark the spot
- Lift the ball
- Clean it
- Drop within one club-length, not nearer the hole

This rule prevents unfair punishment from soft conditions.

It does not apply in bunkers.

Always confirm that the ball is truly embedded before lifting it.

## 15. RELIEF FROM CART PATHS AND MAN-MADE OBSTRUCTIONS



Cart paths, sprinkler heads, and artificial drains are called **immovable obstructions**.

If they interfere with:

- Your lie
- Your stance
- Your swing

You are entitled to **free relief**.

Find the nearest point of complete relief (not nearer the hole), then drop within one club-length.

You do not get relief just because the obstruction is between you and the hole.

Learning how to find the correct relief point is important in competitions.

## 16. GROUND UNDER REPAIR (GUR)

Ground Under Repair is marked by blue stakes or white lines.

If your ball lies in GUR, or your stance is affected:

- You may take free relief
- Drop outside the marked area
- Not nearer the hole

GUR areas protect damaged parts of the course.

You must take relief if the local rules say it is mandatory.

Always check the scorecard or notice board for local rules before a competition.

## 17. ANIMAL DAMAGE (E.G., RABBIT SCRAPES)

If your ball lies in damage caused by animals (such as rabbit scrapes or burrows), you are entitled to free relief.

You may:

- Find the nearest point of relief
- Drop within one club-length
- No penalty

This rule prevents unfair lies caused by animals.

However, not all uneven ground counts — normal rough is part of the game.

If unsure, ask a committee member after the round.

## 18. MAXIMUM SCORE COMPETITIONS

Some competitions use a maximum score format, such as **Net Double Bogey**.

If you reach the maximum allowed score:

- Pick up your ball
- Record the maximum score

This keeps play moving and prevents very high scores from slowing the group.

Even though you pick up, you must record the correct maximum — not an estimated score.

Understanding the competition format is important before starting your round.

## 19. STABLEFORD SCORING

Stableford scoring awards points based on your score relative to par.

Typical points:

- Double Bogey or worse = 0
- Bogey = 1
- Par = 2
- Birdie = 3
- Eagle = 4

The goal is to score the **most points**.

One bad hole does not ruin your round, which makes Stableford popular in golf.

For each hole you may have handicap strokes. Subtract the handicap strokes on the hole before calculating the Stableford score. Always understand your handicap strokes before starting.

## 20. HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

Golf is different from most sports because players call penalties on themselves.

If you break a rule:

- Admit it
- Apply the correct penalty
- Inform your marker

Winning by cheating is not winning.

Your reputation matters more than your score.

At your club, golfers are expected to:

- Respect rules
- Respect players
- Respect the course

Integrity is the most important rule of all.

The rules in this booklet cover the most common situations you will face as a golfer. However, golf has many more rules that help ensure the game is fair and consistent all over the world.

The official Rules of Golf are written and published by **The R&A**, one of the governing bodies of world golf. The same rules apply at junior level, club level, and even in The Open Championship.

If you would like to learn more, you can explore the full Rules of Golf in several ways:

### Online

Visit the official website:  
**[www.randa.org](http://www.randa.org)**



There you will find:

- The full Rules of Golf
- A simplified “Player’s Edition”
- Short videos explaining common situations
- Quick guides and rule quizzes

### R&A Rules App

You can also download the free **R&A Rules of Golf App**, which allows you to:

- Search rules quickly
- Watch video explanations
- Check rulings during a round



It is a very useful tool for competitions.

[WWW.NENAGHGOLFCLUB.IE](http://WWW.NENAGHGOLFCLUB.IE)

(067) 31476

[INFO@NENAGHGOLFCLUB.IE](mailto:INFO@NENAGHGOLFCLUB.IE)