

The Rules Applied – April ‘23

Free Relief. It's one of our favorite phrases on the golf course. We've talked about it before, in the context of cart path relief, relief from interior (protective) fences, and relief from other immovable objects. Here are some more instances of free relief:

I hit a big tee shot on 18, but unfortunately pushed the ball way right, onto 16 green. Free relief? Yes. In fact, relief from the wrong green is mandatory (Rule 13.1f) – if either your ball or your stance is on the wrong green, you must take relief. In taking relief, you identify your nearest point of relief no nearer the hole and drop within 1 club length. Remember that your drop must be in the same “area of the course” as your nearest point of relief. Bunkers, penalty areas, greens, tee boxes are all special areas of the course, while the remainder of the course is known as the general area. So if your nearest point of relief is in the general area, and your ball rolls into a bunker, you should re-drop – you do not play from the bunker.

My buddy's shot on 18 was even worse. He hit into a fallen tree on the right side of 18. Free relief for him? This one is actually a bit tricky, but ultimately the answer is yes, he too can enjoy the benefits of the rules. Under one of the interpretations of the rules, a fallen tree is not automatically ground under repair, but a player may ask that the area affected be declared ground under repair, and the tournament committee would be justified in making that call. In our tournaments, the tournament committee is willing to state that in all cases of a fallen tree, the affected area is ground under repair, and free relief is granted. But if you play in an outside tournament, you should check with tournament officials.

But what if the whole tree did not come down, just some branches, and my ball is lying in the middle of those sticks? Sorry, branches and leaves do not count as ground under repair. They are simply loose impediments – they can be removed if this does not cause your ball to move; but otherwise, you must play it as it lies or take a 1-stroke penalty for an unplayable lie.

I sense that there is an exception somewhere. Well of course. Why make things easy? If branches or leaves are piled together for purpose of collection by the course, then the pile would be considered an abnormal course condition. In this case, free relief would be available. But this is allowed only where a pile has been put together for purposes of collection, not to a random pile of leaves.