

The Golf Rules Review

An Intermittent Communique by the 2020 WWGA Golf Rules Maven

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Lost & Found or Soon to be Abandon

The new 3 minute limit to search for lost balls has raised questions about lost balls that we never thought much about before. So what really has changed or what hasn't. Lost balls is the topic for this issue of The Golf Rules Review.

Two significant changes happened regarding lost balls in the 2019 revised rules but a lot has remained the same. The 2 rule changes are:

1. The time allowed to search for a ball has been reduced from 5 minutes to 3 minutes.
2. A local rule is in effect which can be used instead of Stroke & Distance to take relief. This Local Relief Rule for Lost or OB balls was explained Issue VII of The Golf Rules Review so I will not review it here.

Searching for Your Ball

What are the rules on searching for a ball?

You have a 3 minute time limit to find and identify your ball. The 3 minutes starts when you or your caddie begin to search for your ball and ends at 3 minutes or when you find and identify your ball, whichever comes first.

- You have a reasonable time to get to your ball to start the search, but basically the clock starts when you arrive at the area where your ball may be lost whether you are walking or riding/driving around in the cart.
- Other players (or spotters, watchers) can help in the search and start the search before you arrive but the clock doesn't start until you arrive to start the search.
- Don't dilly-dally. You cannot delay your search by waiting for others to help before you start your search.
- Other players do not have to help in the search. But it is always good sportsmanship for them to do so (and they usually do) once they have hit their balls.
- You don't have to use the full 3 minutes. If you drop a ball at any time, that ball is in play. This means you cannot play your "lost" ball if you then find it.

Who determines when 3 minutes are up for a lost ball search?

Golf is a game of integrity and has no referees. Just as each golfer is responsible for knowing the rules and assessing their own penalties, each golfer is responsible for monitoring their 3 minutes.

- If necessary, enlist other players to track the time. The 3 minute time limit happens whether you have a watch or not.
- Unless you have evidence to the contrary, you will probably have to stop when your fellow golfers say time is up. Likewise they will have to do the same when you tell them time's up.

What happens after the 3 minute time limit is up and I haven't found my ball?

After 3 minutes, your ball is deemed to be lost. You cannot play it, even if you find it shortly after the 3 minutes. You will have to take either stroke and distance relief or use the local rule for lost ball relief covered in Issue VII of The Golf Rules Review.

Continued on next page

Why the Rules Were Changed

The reason for both rule changes were pace of play. Studies by USGA indicated most players find their ball within 3 minutes. After that, the ball probably won't be found and play is just delayed.

The USGA also saw that during casual rounds, golfers were just dropping a ball where their ball went OB or where they thought the ball was lost and maybe adding a penalty stroke or two.

To speed up play, the USGA formalized this casual remedy and assigned a two stroke penalty. This made both types of relief comparable, each type takes 3 strokes...the original shot, the second shot from the same spot and a penalty drop for Stroke and Distance Relief and the original shot and a 2 stroke penalty drop from the fairway for Local Lost Ball/OB Relief.

The USGA designed the Local Rule for Lost or OB Ball Relief for amateur play and tournaments like ours. It is "not to be used for Professional or Elite Amateur Tournaments." It is perfect for our WWGA.

A Helpful Time-Saving Habit

One WWGA player is really good about dropping an extra towel if she is driving by and sees a ball or when she knows where the player's errant ball may be. Are you that player?

Searching for your Ball (continued)

Is it possible to start or stop the time limit or re-set the clock back to 3 minutes?

Yes, the time limit can be stopped and then resumed with the time remaining:

- If you need to move out of the way of another player hitting behind you or to get out of the way of a maintenance mower.
- If you find a ball, stop your search, then realize it is not yours. For example, in 2 minutes you find a ball you assume is your ball (time stops) and take 20 seconds to get a club before realizing the ball is not yours. You may resume the search (clock starts again) with 1 minute left in the clock.
- If Play is suspended during your search, the clock stops. It starts again when you return to the area after play is resumed.

There are no provisions for re-setting the time limit /clock back to zero. For example, if you start your search and someone says "I think you are looking in the wrong place" so you moved to a new place to look, the clock keeps ticking,

What if after 3 minutes, I find my ball and play it as is lies?

DON'T! You are then playing the wrong ball. It is a 2 stroke penalty and you must correct your mistake by going back and re-playing your ball under one of the relief procedures. The strokes played with the wrong ball do not count. So when you go back to play, you will have 2 penalty strokes for the wrong ball, plus another 1 or 2 penalty strokes depending on the relief you used, plus the stroke(s) that you used to get to where your ball was lost. If you do not correct your mistake and hole out with the wrong ball and start the next hole, you are disqualified.

What should I do if I find my lost ball after 3 minutes.

If you have not yet taken any action to put another ball in play, then pick up the ball and you may use it to take relief for a lost ball (e.g. stroke and distance or Local Lost Ball Relief with a 2 stroke penalty).

This is so important to do. The act of picking up the ball signifies that you have decided to substitute that ball for the lost ball. When you then drop that ball, that ball is now in play. If after 3 minutes, you hit your "lost ball" without picking it up, you can't say after the fact "I just decided to use the 2 stroke penalty local relief rule and played the ball." because you did nothing to indicate that...you are merely trying to bend the rule.

If you have taken action to put another ball in play, then pick up your lost ball and put it in your pocket.

What if I decide at 2 minutes to just go ahead and take local lost ball relief, drop a ball and then someone in my group finds my ball.

When you dropped your ball that ball is now in play. If abandon the dropped ball to play your first ball you are playing the wrong ball. See above.

What if I run over my ball with my cart while searching?

Anytime you run over a ball, the relief is 1 club length no closer to the hole and recreate the ball's original lie. Nothing is yet is definitively available, but our Pro thinks under philosophy of the Revised 2019 Rules there is no penalty anytime a ball is accidentally run over whether it is yours or someone else's.

You've probably exceeded your 3 minutes when....

1. The group behind you has come up and is waiting to tee off.
2. Your playing partners start moving back to their carts.
3. You are told it is time to move on.
4. When everyone in your foursome has hit their ball and also helped you look.
5. You start to feel weepy or very irate because now you wont break 90, or whatever.
6. You've timed yourself so you already know.
7. You're playing in an elite tournament and they really do time your search and tell you when it is up.

Lost Ball Search Etiquette

1. Always help in the search during a Tournament, but stick to the time limit.
 2. Hit first, then help search. One person should always be hitting while others search.
 3. Don't make other players feel guilty for telling you your time it up.
 4. After 3 minutes, move on. Lost balls are part of golf.
 5. Don't do another player "a favor" by telling them it is okay to hit a lost ball after 3 minutes or after they have dropped a second ball. Neither of you can change the rules of golf and you both can be disqualified by trading "favors".
 6. If you're a new golfer and still losing a lot of balls, play with old balls. Don't spend a lot of time looking for each ball and exhaust other golfers. Don't worry about score, pace of play is more important.
 7. In casual rounds don't hold up the players behind you.... just drop.
- Remember, you probably find just as many balls as you have lost.

