



Rules Corner – Singles Matchplay

Most golfers play their competitive golf as Medals and Stablefords under the Rules of Stroke Play.

However, since the Covid-19 safety guidelines are restricting play to 2 balls, Match Play will probably be the preferred format, and Summer Knockout Matchplay may well be the first competitive golf allowed. It is important, therefore, for players to fully understand the many differences between Stroke Play and Singles Match Play so that they do not incur loss of hole penalties, or worse, the unnecessary loss of a match.

So, let's look at the main differences between Singles match Play and Singles Stroke Play.

Format

A match consists of one player playing against another player over a stipulated round (18 holes or fewer). A player wins a hole when he/she 'holes out' in fewer strokes than the opponent. The hole is tied or 'halved' when both player and opponent hole out in the same number of strokes.

In a Handicap Match, the lower net score wins the hole.

Strokes, holes and matches can be conceded by either player but this must be done in the correct manner (see later section).

A match is won when a player is 'up' more holes than there are holes left to play. So, for example, if the player is '3 up' when there are only two holes left, the player has won the match by '3 and 2'.

Scorecard

There is no requirement under the Rules of Golf to keep a scorecard in Match Play.

Penalties

For all minor rule breaches where the level of penalty is one stroke in Stroke Play, there is the same one stroke penalty in Match Play.

More serious rule breaches in both formats warrant the **General Penalty**. In Stroke Play this is 2 strokes but in Match Play it is 'loss of hole'.

However, there are few occasions where the penalties differ between formats e.g

- In Match Play, when putting on the putting green, if a player's ball strikes an opponent's ball at rest on the putting green, **there is no penalty**. The player's ball is played from where it comes to rest and the opponent's ball is replaced. The General Penalty of 2 strokes is applicable in Stroke Play.
- In Match Play, a player will be penalised 1 stroke for deliberately touching or moving an opponent's ball. There is no penalty for a player touching or moving another player's ball in Stroke Play. The ball is simply replaced.

Handicap Matches (Rule 3-2c)

Players **should** declare their handicaps **before** the match begins. If a player declares a wrong handicap and this isn't corrected before either player tees off (or if declared later in the match, before the opponent makes their next stroke), there are outcomes depending on whether the handicap declared is too low or too high.

- Too low; player must play off that handicap
- Too high; **player is disqualified**

If players fail to declare their handicaps before a match and this results in one of them not receiving a handicap stroke at a hole where they were entitled to receive one, the result of that hole stands as played.

If a match has to be extended due to a tie, play must continue from the first tee used for the match and handicaps apply at the same holes as before.

Practice (Rule 5.2a)

Unlike in Stroke Play competitions, on any day of a Match Play competition, a player may practice on the competition course before a round or between rounds. However, occasionally a Committee may prohibit practice on the day in the Terms of the Competition, so it is wise to check first.

Time of Starting (Rule 5.3a)

Some players mistakenly think that the start time for a match is not as important as it is for a Stroke Play competition. This is not the case.

If a player arrives at the first teeing area late, but within five minutes of their start time, they lose the hole. **If they arrive more than five minutes late, they are disqualified.**

If both players arrive on the first teeing area late, but within five minutes of their start time, each player will incur a penalty of loss of the 1st hole.

Therefore, the 1st hole is deemed halved and the match would commence on the 2nd hole (Interpretation 5-3a/5).

Note: If the committee decides that Exceptional Circumstances prevented one or both players from starting on time then there is no breach of this rule and no penalty.

Similarly, if a player suffers an injury or is ill and unable to play at the time arranged, the Committee may, with the concurrence of the opponent, postpone the match for a reasonable period.

Stopping Play, Resuming Play (Rule 5.7a)

In Stroke Play, players may not suspend play for bad weather, unless they consider there is danger from lightning. If they do, the Committee would be justified in disqualifying them.

This is not the case in Match Play. Players in a match may agree to stop play for any reason, **except** if doing so delays the competition.

If they agree to stop play and then one player wants to resume play, the agreement has ended and the other player **must** resume play.

If a match is stopped by agreement, e.g. due to darkness or threat of lightning, the match **must** be resumed from where it was stopped; **the players do not start the match again, even if resumption occurs on a subsequent day.**

Order of Play (Rule 6.4a)

The player and opponent must play in order.

At the first hole, the honour is decided by the order of the draw set by the Committee or, if there is no draw, by agreement or by using a random method (such as tossing a coin). The player who wins the hole has the honour at the next teeing area. If the hole is tied, the player with the honour at the previous teeing area keeps it.

Anywhere else on the course the ball farthest from the hole is played first. **Ready Golf is not allowed in Match Play unless the players agree to play out of turn.**

If a player makes a stroke when their opponent should have played first, there is no penalty, but the opponent may immediately require the player to cancel that stroke and play again, in the correct order, as nearly as possible at the spot from which the original ball was last played.

Similar to playing out of order, if a player starts a hole from outside the teeing area, there is no penalty but the opponent may cancel the stroke. This must be done promptly and before either player makes another stroke. When the opponent cancels the stroke, he or she cannot withdraw the cancellation.

If the opponent cancels the stroke, the player must play a ball from inside the teeing area and it is still his or her turn to play.

If the opponent does not cancel the stroke, the stroke counts and the ball is in play and must be played as it lies.

Concessions (Rule 3.2b)

A player can concede an opponent's next stroke at any time before the opponent's next stroke; a hole at any time before the hole is completed and a match at any time before the result of the match is decided.

A concession is final and cannot be declined or withdrawn.

There is no penalty for putting out after the next stroke has been conceded in singles matches (though there would be a penalty involved if this helped a partner in a best-ball or 4-ball match).

Concessions can be made either verbally or by an action that clearly shows the player's intent to concede the stroke, the hole or the match (such as making a gesture).

A player and opponent can agree to halve a hole but **only after one or other of them has made a stroke at that hole.**

A player and opponent cannot agree to shorten the stipulated round by conceding equal numbers of holes and playing just a few to decide the result of the match.

Responsibility of Player and Opponent (Rule 3.2d)

If a player incurs a penalty that has **not been observed** by the opponent, the player must inform the opponent as soon as practicable.

If the player fails to do so before the opponent makes their next stroke, **the player loses the hole.**

However, If the opponent knew that the player had a penalty, such as when seeing the player obviously take penalty relief, the player gets no penalty for failing to tell the opponent about it.

In Stroke Play, a player must report a breach of the Rules but in Match Play a player can choose to act on it or ignore it.

But if the player and opponent deliberately agree to ignore a breach or penalty they know applies, both players are **disqualified** under Rule 1.3b.

If an opponent asks how many strokes a player has taken at any given hole, the player must give the correct number of strokes. If the player gives the wrong number of strokes and this isn't corrected before the opponent makes the next stroke, the player loses the hole.

Players are expected to know the match score – that is, whether one of them leads by a certain number of holes.

If the players mistakenly agree on a wrong match score:

- They may correct the match score before either player makes a stroke to begin another hole or, for the final hole, before the result of the match is final.
- If not corrected in that time, that wrong match score becomes the actual match score.

Wrong Ball (Rule 6.3c)

A player who plays a wrong ball in singles Match Play gets the **General Penalty** (loss of hole).

If the player and opponent play each other's ball during the play of a hole, the first to have made a stroke at a wrong ball gets the **General Penalty**.

If it is not known which wrong ball was played first, there is **no penalty** and the hole must be played out with the balls exchanged.

Playing from Wrong Place (Rule 14.7a)

A player who plays a ball from the wrong place in singles Match Play gets the **General Penalty** (loss of hole).

Rules Issues in Match Play (Rule 20.1b)

If a player is unsure of a Rule or a procedure in Match Play the Rules **do not** permit the player to play a second ball, which is the case in Stroke Play.

The player and opponent need to try and resolve the issue without unnecessarily delaying play. If an agreement cannot be reached, then the player concerned can 'request a ruling'.

This has to be clearly announced to the opponent, clearly stating the facts of the matter, **before teeing off at the next hole**, otherwise the result of the hole in question will stand even if the rules were applied in the wrong way.

The request for a ruling must be made to the Committee or a referee as soon as possible and before the result of the match is finalised.

Happy Golfing

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