



# THE REFEREE

## Decisions by the Rules of Golf Committees

Example of Symbols: "USGA" indicates decision by the United States Golf Association. "R & A" indicates decision by the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland. "61-1" means the first decision issued in 1961. "D" means definition. "R. 37-7" refers to Section 7 of Rule 37 in the 1961 Rules of Golf.

## THE RULE ABOUT OBSTRUCTIONS

By  
JOSEPH C. DEY, JR.  
USGA Executive Director

It was a sad story the new golfer was telling:

"My drive was right down the middle," he said; "one of the few I hit in the fairway all day. But I found the ball nestling against a water outlet.

"Well, I tried to hit it with my number three iron. Not only was it a punk shot, but I broke my club, and it was a new one"

"But why didn't you lift the ball?" his friend asked.

"Lift it? I thought you had to play the ball as it lies all the time."

That's a good, safe way to start life as a golfer—to play the ball as it lies. But the fact is that there are times when the ball may be lifted and its position improved, without penalty.

The average golfer is inclined to regard the Rules of Golf as being mainly prohibitions and obligations—you can't do this

and you must do that. But that dim view is an uninformed view.

The Rules contain a great many rights and privileges which can be appreciated only by reading the code. An important Rule in this respect is the one which the new golfer in the sad incident above could have invoked but did not—Rule 31, dealing with obstructions. This rule is a prolific source of questions submitted to the USGA.

### Artificial or Natural?

It should first be understood what is meant by the term "obstruction." Definition 20 in the Rules provides:

"An 'obstruction' is anything artificial, whether erected, placed or left on the course except:

- a. Objects defining out of bounds, such as walls, fences, stakes, and railings;
- b. Artificially constructed roads and paths anywhere;

c. Any construction which is an integral part of the course, such as retaining walls of hazards and masonry on banks or beds of open water courses. (Bridges and bridge supports which are not part of water hazards are obstructions.)”

Thus, obstructions include such things as:

pipes	water outlets	buildings
vehicles	bottles	shelters
paper	rakes	hoses

The Rules make a distinction between **artificial things** (which are obstructions) and **natural objects**. For example, Definition 17 describes loose impediments as follows:

“The term ‘loose impediments’ denotes natural objects not fixed or growing and not adhering to the ball, and includes stones not solidly embedded, leaves, twigs, branches and the like, dung, worms and insects and casts or heaps made by them.”

In summary: An obstruction is an artificial thing. A loose impediment is a natural thing.

#### How to Treat an Obstruction

We are discussing obstructions here. Relief from an obstruction is provided for in Rule 31. The Rule has two sections.

The first section presents no problems:

“Any movable obstruction may be removed. If the ball be moved in so doing, it shall be replaced on the exact spot from which it was moved, without penalty. If it be impossible to determine the spot or to replace the ball on the exact spot from which it was moved, the ball shall, through the green or in a hazard, be dropped, or on the putting green be placed, as near as possible to the spot from which it was moved but not nearer the hole, without penalty.

“When a ball is in motion, an obstruction other than an attended flagstick and equipment of the players shall not be removed.”

Suppose a rake has been left in a bunker. Your ball comes to rest against the rake. As the rake is movable, you may remove it. If your ball is moved in the process, you must place or drop it as specified.

The second section of Rule 31 deals with **immovable** obstructions:

“When the ball lies on or touches an immovable obstruction, or when

an immovable obstruction within two club-lengths of the ball interferes with the player’s stance, stroke or backward movement of his club for the stroke in the direction in which he wishes to play, the ball may be lifted without penalty. Through the green or in a hazard, the ball may be dropped, or on the putting green placed, within two club-lengths of that point on the outside of the obstruction nearest which the ball originally lay; it must come to rest not nearer the hole than its original position.

“The player may not measure through the obstruction.

“Interference with the line of play is not of itself interference under this Rule.”

#### When the Rule Applies

In the first place, we may apply the Rule if the ball lies on or touches an **immovable** obstruction.

Secondly, we may apply the Rule when **all three** of the following conditions exist:

1. There must be interference with the player’s stance or stroke or the backward movement of his club for the stroke.

2. The interference must come from an obstruction which is immovable.

3. The obstruction must be within two club-lengths of the ball.

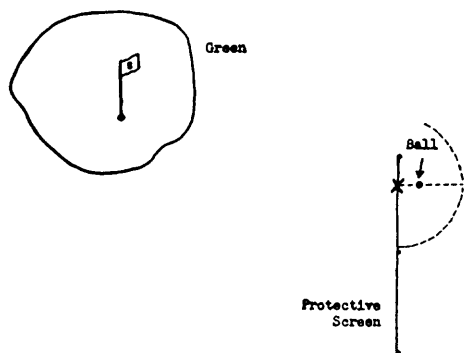
If any one of those three conditions is not present, you can’t invoke this section of the Rule.

But assuming all three conditions do exist, what relief does the Rule allow? Well, you may lift the ball, without penalty. Then, everywhere except on the putting green, you **drop** it within two club-lengths of **that point on the outside of the obstruction nearest which the ball originally lay**, and it must come to rest not nearer the hole. On the putting green you **place** it as described above.

Note that you don’t drop it within two club-lengths of where the ball originally lay. Suppose the ball originally lay a club-length from a protective screen which interfered with your backswing. If you were allowed to drop it within two club-lengths of where it originally lay, you might drop it a total of three club-lengths from the screen.

To make matters uniform and fair, the Rule requires dropping the ball within

two club-lengths of that point on the outside of the screen nearest which the ball originally lay. Here is an example:



Point X is that point of the screen nearest which the ball originally lay. You are allowed to drop within two club-lengths of that point, not nearer the hole than where the ball first lay. Thus, if the straight dotted line is two club-lengths long, you may drop the ball anywhere within the territory bounded by the curved dotted line, provided the ball comes to rest not nearer the hole than its original position. You may **not** measure **through** the obstruction in determining where to drop within two club-lengths.

#### Out-of-Bounds Stakes Not Obstructions

Under Definition 20, stakes or similar objects used to mark out of bounds are **not** obstructions. Therefore, they may not be pulled up. If they interfere with a stroke or stance, there is no free relief from them.

Various means are used to define boundaries: stakes, fence posts and so forth. Sometimes, on a single hole, part of a boundary is marked by a fence and part by stakes. It is considered advisable to treat them uniformly. Since the nearest inside points of stakes and fence posts at ground level determine the line of bounds (Definition 21), the stakes and posts themselves are out of bounds. Rule 31 applies only to obstructions **on the course**.

Further, if out-of-bounds stakes were classified as obstructions, some might be removed to enable a player to play a stroke, and the player might neglect to have them replaced. Thus, the competitors in a tournament might not play a uniform course.

It was therefore felt that classifying out-of-bounds stakes as non-obstructions would discourage tampering with them, would simplify the definition with regard to boundary markers, and would help insure uniform playing conditions.

(However, stakes defining water hazards are obstructions under the Rules.)

Incidentally, some clubs set out-of-bounds stakes permanently in concrete, or use concrete markers. This prevents a fluctuating boundary and in the long run should reduce upkeep costs.

Following are some points about obstructions which have arisen under the Rules:

#### BALL IN HAZARD MUST BE DROPPED IN HAZARD

USGA 58-24

**Q:** A ball lies on a bridge crossing a water hazard. The spot on the bridge at which the ball lies is within the confines of the hazard, but is less than two club-lengths from the rear margin of the hazard. In proceeding under Rule 31-2, may the player drop the ball without penalty outside the hazard but within two club-lengths of the spot on the bridge where the ball originally lay, but not nearer the hole?

Question by: FIELDING WALLACE  
Augusta, Ga.

**A:** No. As the ball originally lay within the confines of a hazard, it must be dropped within the confines of the same hazard in proceeding under Rule 31-2. See Rule 22-3.

#### CANNOT MEASURE THROUGH OBSTRUCTION

USGA 53-23

**Q:** A wire screen protects our 13th tee from players approaching the 12th green. Your rule on obstructions does not state clearly whether or not a ball resting within two club-lengths of this screen may be dropped either side of the screen, not nearer the hole. Can the ball be dropped through the screen, no nearer the hole? The rule is not definite as it is now written.

Question by: SAMUEL Y. BOGGS  
Jenkintown, Pa.

**A:** In proceeding under Rule 31-2, the player may not measure **through** an immovable obstruction in determining where to drop within two club-lengths of that point of the obstruction nearest which the ball originally lay.

**"NEAREST POINT" OF OPEN SHED**  
USGA 52-19

**Q1:** Ball went into a shed on the course. It stopped in the middle of the shed and the nearest point of the obstruction to the ball was a post in the middle of the shed. Moving two club-lengths from nearest point of the obstruction to the ball would not get the ball out of the shed. Is this correct?

**A1:** No. In Rule 31 the reference to the nearest point of the obstruction means the nearest point on the outside of the obstruction. The object of the Rule is to provide the player with relief from the obstruction.

**PAVEMENT AROUND OBSTRUCTION**

**Q2:** On the course there is a drink stand. Around the stand is pavement. The ball stopped on the pavement. Again, moving two club-lengths from the nearest point of the obstruction would not get the ball off the pavement. Would it have to be played on the pavement?

**A2:** It depends upon whether the local committee defined the pavement as an obstruction. Under Definition 20, artificially constructed roads and paths are not obstructions; however, it would not be improper to consider the pavement in question as an obstruction. If it were classified as an obstruction, see answer 1 above.

**OUT-OF-BOUNDS POST — NO RELIEF**

**Q3:** According to the Rule book, a ball cannot be moved away from an out-of-bounds post, or anything marking out of bounds. Is this correct?

**A3:** Yes. Under Definition 20, a boundary marker is not an obstruction and there is no relief under Rule 31.

Questions by: CHARLES F. BAILEY  
Tampa, Fla.

**BALL IN DRAIN PIPE**

USGA 55-51

**Q:** My partner hit a ball which apparently went out of bounds. The ball struck a bank of a roadway which was definitely out of bounds and bounced into a ditch beside the roadway which was also out of bounds. After a diligent search, the ball was found resting in a metal drain pipe leading from the aforementioned ditch underneath the golf course. Although the entrance to the drain pipe was out of bounds, the ball had traveled some two or three feet in

bounds in the drain pipe, but underground some six feet. In other words, the ball was under the golf course in a metal drain pipe.

It was ruled that he was entitled to drop from the metal drain pipe without penalty even though he had to go out of bounds to retrieve the ball. The ball was dropped immediately above its resting place in the drain pipe and subsequently was holed out for a birdie 4.

Did we rule correctly on this unusual situation?

**A:** No. In obtaining relief under Rule 31-2, the player may not measure through an obstruction or through the ground.

To obtain relief under Rule 31-2 under the circumstances described, the player must drop the ball within two club-lengths of the opening of the obstruction nearest to where the ball lay, and it must come to rest not nearer to the hole than the place where the ball lay.

Since the Rules do not give relief from obstructions which are out of bounds, the player may not use any part of an obstruction which is out of bounds as the beginning point in the application of Rule 31-2. Therefore, if the opening of the drain pipe nearest to where the ball lay is out of bounds, Rule 31-2 does not apply, and the only recourse is for the player to declare the ball unplayable and proceed under Rule 29-2.

**LOCAL RULE FOR CONCRETE  
EDGING OF WATER HAZARD**

USGA 60-4

**Q.** Definition 20: Indian Creek Island, on which this course is located, is a man-made island, earth from the bottom of Biscayne Bay having been pumped into a concrete bulkhead with a coping about two feet wide on its top. We have several holes of the course bordering Biscayne Bay and a ball frequently stops against this coping. Heretofore the Bay has been played as a lateral water hazard because occasionally at low tide, with the wind from a certain direction, considerable sand is exposed and it is permissible for a player to play from it. On account of this the coping has been considered an immovable obstruction.

Does the language of Definition 20 mean now that this coping is not an immovable obstruction, which would mean

on frequent occasions that the ball would be in an unplayable lie?

If your answer to the first question concerning Rule 29-2b(i), should be negative, it often would mean that a ball could not be properly dropped. If you can recognize the question that this poses, your suggestions would be appreciated.

Question by: J. SIMPSON DEAN  
Miami Beach, Fla.

**A:** The coping is not an immovable obstruction—Definition 20c.

Since the condition is abnormal with respect to balls lying through the green, the Club would be justified in adopting a local rule classifying the coping as an obstruction with relation to balls lying through the green. However, we would not recommend that this be applicable to a ball in the lateral water hazard. See USGA Appendix, Local Rules, item 2, on page 55 of the 1961 Rules booklet.

#### **LIMED LINE NOT OBSTRUCTION**

USGA 56-8

**Q:** A ball comes to rest on a limed line laid on the ground to control the gallery. Is the player allowed to lift it without penalty and drop it as provided for in Rule 31-2?

**A:** No. Such a line is not in the nature of an obstruction as defined in Definition 20.

Question by: WARREN ORLICK  
Orchard Lake, Mich.  
and

HAROLD SARGENT  
Atlanta, Ga.

#### **TURF RAISED BY UNDERGROUND PIPE**

USGA 58-2

**Q:** If a water-pipe is just underground in some places and above ground in other places, but the covered parts raise the ground to a point where it would make a very uncomfortable stance, and if the player spread his feet a little further apart he would be standing on exposed pipe, can this covered part be treated as an immovable obstruction.

Question by: LEON KAPLAN  
Waltham, Mass.

**A:** In the absence of a local rule, the Rules of Golf provide no relief from turf raised to cover an underground water pipe.

Two avenues of relief appear to be open to the club. The first would be to level

the terrain surrounding the pipe. The second would be to draft a local rule to provide free relief, based upon the principles of Rule 31-2.

Where the pipe is exposed, Rule 31-2 would of course apply.

#### **WHEN NATURAL OBJECTS MAY BE TRANSFORMED INTO OBSTRUCTIONS**

Revised USGA 59-40

**Q:** Is a half-eaten pear in front of a ball in a hazard an obstruction as defined in Definition 20 or is a two-stroke penalty incurred in removing the pear before the ball is hit? The hazard in which the pear was lodged is not in close proximity of the pear tree.

Question by: MRS. ROBERT I. LACEY  
Great Neck, N. Y.

**A:** If the player removed the pear, she violated Rule 33-1, the penalty for which is: Match play—Loss of hole; Stroke play—Two strokes.

A pear is a natural object. When detached from a tree it is a loose impediment under Definition 17 and may not be removed from a hazard. The facts that someone had partially eaten the pear in question and that it was foreign to its natural area do not alter the case.

Natural objects may be transformed into obstructions (Definition 20) through processes of manufacturing or construction. For example: a log (loose impediment) which has been split and has had legs attached to it has been changed by construction into a bench (obstruction); or a piece of coal (loose impediment) is considered an obstruction after it has been manufactured into a charcoal briquet. However, a loose impediment does not become an obstruction merely because it may have been slightly altered by man. If it were otherwise, a player might declare that a twig broken by a man's footstep is an obstruction.

#### **BALL IN COIL OF HOSE**

USGA 56-36

**Q:** In the final of the 1956 Spokane city championship the following occurred:

On the second extra hole one player's second shot rolled off the back right-hand side of the green and came to rest in a coil of hose on top of a retaining wall behind the slightly elevated green.

The referee ruled the ball could be lifted out of the hose and within two

club-lengths away from the retaining wall, which he ruled was an immovable obstruction.

The referee picked up the ball and placed it within the two club-lengths. The player on order from the referee picked up the ball again and placed it once more at a spot designated by the referee. The player then played the ball onto the green.

1. Did the referee break a Rule by lifting and placing the ball?

2. Can the referee arbitrarily rule that a ball may be placed before it is first dropped in the prescribed manner to determine whether it would roll into a hazard or out of bounds?

3. Is it permissible, under any circumstances, for a ball being played through the green to be placed before it has first been dropped in a manner prescribed by the Rules?

Question by: BOB JOHNSON  
Spokane, Wash.

A: 1. A referee should not handle a ball in play. See the last paragraph of Definition 26. However, no penalty can attach to the player because of the referee's action; the referee's decision is final, under Rule 11-2.

2 and 3. Although referees are allowed some discretion, there was no justification for ruling that the ball should be placed in this case. Apparently the referee felt that Rule 31-2 applied. However, Rule 31-2 requires that the ball be dropped (through the green). Dropping is necessary to resolve any doubt as to whether it is impossible to prevent it from rolling into a hazard, out of bounds or nearer the hole, before permitting it to be placed under Rule 22-2.

A hose is normally a movable obstruction, and relief from that alone would have been governed by Rule 31-1.

### CONCRETE BASES OF FENCE POSTS

USGA 57-19

Q: Fence posts were set in approximately 14-inch concrete bases for a fence which bounded the course. Is the part of the concrete base which is within the boundary of the course considered an obstruction? A ball was lying against such concrete base.

Question by: M. SANDERS  
Valley Stream, N. Y.

A: A fence defining out of bounds is not an obstruction (Definition 20); posts and other means of supporting such a fence ordinarily should not be regarded as obstructions. We recommend that the local committee publish a local rule stating that the concrete bases of the fence posts are not obstructions.

If it were ruled otherwise, inequities and confusion could arise from the fact that, under Rule 31-2, relief would be available from the concrete bases but would not be available from the fence and its posts.

### BALL RESTING AGAINST FLAGSTICK

USGA 59-29

Q: One of our players chipped a ball onto the green. It came to rest against the flagstick. The player ran up, pulled the flagstick, and the ball came out with the flagstick.

Her opponent told her to putt it out, which she did. She must count the putt, but does she have to add a penalty?

Question by: MRS. RINDA J. STURGIS  
Canton, Ohio

A: We understand that the ball as it rested against the flagstick did not lie within the circumference of the hole and all of it was not below the level of the lip of the hole; it therefore was not holed—see Definition 4. We further understand that the player, in pulling the flagstick, moved the ball.

Since the flagstick is an obstruction (Definition 20), Rule 31-1 would govern and there would be no penalty. The ball must be replaced on the lip of the hole.

If the ball had fallen into the hole with the removal of the flagstick, the player would be considered to have holed on his last stroke (see Rule 34-4).

### CONSTRUCTION WHICH IS PART OF THE COURSE

USGA 60-28

Q.1: Under the definition of obstructions as revised for 1960, "any construction which is an integral part of the course" is not an obstruction (Definition 20c) and Rule 31 gives no relief from it. Please point out the difference between such construction and artificial objects erected on the course which are still classed as obstructions.

**A.1:** Construction which is an integral part of the course refers primarily to such things as retaining walls used to shore up the bank of a water hazard or the side of a teeing ground. The playing problem presented by such a wall would be substantially the same whether the area were covered with turf or with masonry; the fact that it is covered with masonry does not justify relief from it under the rule for obstructions (Rule 31-2). The same is true of concrete beds of water courses which serve to prevent erosion.

Obstructions still include artificial objects such as water outlets; covers for water outlets, whether they be made of wood, concrete or metal; drain tiles; pipes; drinking fountains; and shelters. There has been no change in the classification of such items. The local committee should publish its determination of the status of doubtful obstructions.

#### **BRIDGES, ABUTMENTS AND PIERS**

**Q.2:** Definition 20c provides that "Bridges and bridge supports which are not part of water hazards are obstructions." Consider a metal bridge that starts at the edge of a fairway and crosses a water hazard. Against each bank of the water hazard the bridge is supported by a vertical concrete abutment which serves the additional purpose of being a retaining wall to shore up the bank of the water hazard and prevent it from caving in. Between the two abutments the bridge is supported by several wooden piers in the water hazard. Please explain whether the bridge, the abutments and the piers are obstructions.

**A.2:** The bridge and the piers are obstructions. The abutments are not obstructions since they are integral parts of the water hazard, and free relief may not be had from them.

Questions by: **MRS. POLLY ERICKSON**  
Madison, Wis.

#### **RELIEF FROM TWO OBSTRUCTIONS**

USGA 59-43

**Q:** A ball came to rest within the confines of an open-walled shelter house. There was a concrete water fountain near the shelter. Where may the player drop his ball in conformance with Rule 31-2?

Question by: **NORMAN BUTLER**  
Dayton, Ohio

**A:** As the ball lay within the confines of the shelter, Rule 31-2 permits the player to lift the ball without penalty and to drop it within two club-lengths of that point on the outside of the obstruction nearest which the ball originally lay; the ball must come to rest not nearer the hole than its original position.

If the concrete water fountain interfered with the player's stance, stroke or backswing either before or after the player took relief from the shelter, the player was entitled to further relief from the fountain, under Rule 31-2.

The word "outside" as used in Rule 31-2 means, with respect to an obstruction such as an open shelter, the vertical plane formed by a downward projection of the outer limits such as the roof edge.

See Definition 20 regarding obstructions.

#### **(1) GRAVEL PATHWAY IS NOT OBSTRUCTION**

#### **(2) STEPS OF ARTIFICIAL MATERIAL ARE OBSTRUCTIONS**

USGA 60-38

**Q:** We have recently constructed gravel pathways leading away from the edge of certain greens. In some cases there are steps constructed. The question arises as to the proper framing of a local ruling to permit a free lift for a ball lying (a) on the gravel path and (b) on one of the steps. Would you let us have your suggestion?

**A:** (a) We do not recommend a local rule giving relief from gravel pathways. Among things not considered obstructions are "artificially constructed roads and pathways anywhere." See Definition 20.

(b) Steps made of artificial material, not located within a hazard, are obstructions and relief is provided under Rule 31-2. Therefore, a local rule is not necessary.

Question by: **RAYMOND HAPPEL**  
East Norwalk, Conn.

#### **TEE MARKERS: WHEN CONSIDERED OBSTRUCTIONS**

USGA 59-32

**Q:** A player plays from the tee and the ball contacts a tee marker. There is no Rule to prevent the player from removing the tee marker in playing so long as

it comes within the meaning of immovable obstruction under Rule 31-2. Is this correct?

Question by: SEIICHI TAKAHATA  
Osaka, Japan

**A:** Tee markers must always remain in place while all members of a group are completing their play from a teeing ground.

However, after all play from a teeing ground has been completed, tee markers may be treated as movable obstructions in accordance with Definition 20 and Rule 31-1. Tee markers of a hole other than that being played may also be treated as movable obstructions. Any tee markers moved under this interpretation should be immediately replaced after the stroke has been completed.

#### **BALL IN BIRD'S NEST IN ROUGH** USGA 58-20

**Q:** A player's ball came to rest in a bird's nest in the rough. He feels that he is entitled to a drop according to Rule 32-1 but the Rule does not specify a bird's nest. Will you please give a ruling?

Question by: JOHN BARNUM  
Belmont, Mich.

**A:** The nest should be regarded as an immovable obstruction and the ball dropped under Rule 31-2.

#### **OBSTRUCTIONS: NO RELIEF IF STROKE UNNECESSARILY ABNORMAL**

USGA 60-12

**Q:** Rule 31-2—May a referee or a committee determine whether an artificial obstruction interferes with a stroke? For example, a player's ball was 38 inches from a water pipe which was exposed about three inches above the ground. The player demonstrated with a weird and highly unorthodox follow-through that he could hit the pipe. The referee would not allow the player any relief because he felt the player wanted relief from a tree and a large stone which interfered with the flight of the ball. The player contended that the referee had no right to question the manner in which he intended to swing. Who was correct?

**A:** The purpose of Rule 31-2 is to provide relief if immovable artificial objects interfere with the stance, backswing, or stroke in the direction in which the player desires to play.

It is a question of fact whether interference exists. In event of a question, the Committee (or referee if there is one) must decide. Their decision is final. See Rules 11-2 and 11-3.

In the case you cite, it would appear that the player could claim interference only through employment of an unnecessarily abnormal stroke. He was therefore not entitled to relief.

Relief is not provided for interference with the flight of the ball.

Question by: ROBERT H. ELLIOTT  
Manchester, N. H.

#### **MEASURING ACROSS OBSTRUCTION** USGA 61-9

**Q.1:** What is meant by the following provision in Rule 31-2: "The player may not measure through the obstruction?" Does this mean that a ball at rest alongside a water pipe, which runs along about two inches above the ground, must be dropped only on the side of the pipe on which it lies?

**A.1:** No. In this case the player would be measuring across the obstruction, not through it. A player may measure across an obstruction where it can be done readily as in this case or, for example, in the case of a drain cover or a hydrant of normal size.

#### **MUST MEASURE IN STRAIGHT LINE**

**Q.2:** A player's ball comes to rest against a side of a small enclosed shelter house three feet long on each side. He wishes to invoke Rule 31-2. If he drops two club-lengths away in a straight line, he will be dropping in an unplayable area of dense underbrush, regardless of the direction in which he measures.

The area opposite an adjacent side of the shelter house is void of underbrush. The player cannot drop around the corner into this area without measuring through the obstruction unless it be permissible for him to measure one club-length parallel to the side on which the ball lies and then measure a second club-length at a 90-degree angle to the first. Would it be permissible for him to do this?

**A.2:** No. A player must always measure in a straight line when obtaining relief from an obstruction.

Questions by: J. WALTER MCGARRY  
Vero Beach, Fla.