

# LET 'EM PLAY

*Addressing environmentally sensitive areas on the golf course.*

by JOHN MORRISSETT

THESE DAYS IT HAS become fashionable to keep players from playing golf. More and more courses are cultivating what they call *no-play* areas where they do not want the players to set foot.

Some programs are undertaken for laudable goals, e.g., to create a safe habitat for certain wildlife species on the golf course. Some are undertaken for cosmetic or maintenance purposes. The tall, native grasses can be aesthetically appealing and reduce the amount of area that requires regular maintenance. Some courses grow such areas just to keep up with the course down the road, as they are now perceived by some as status symbols — “You have only two *no-play* areas? We have six!”

While the reasons for having such areas may vary, the one issue that all golf courses should consider is how such a program will affect the players. This is where the Rules of Golf come into play. In 1996 a Local Rule for handling environmentally sensitive areas (ESAs) was introduced (it can be found in Appendix I of the Rules of Golf). Some courses look at this as a green light to initiate their own programs. Nothing could be further from the intent behind the Local Rule.

The Local Rule was created to help golf courses (such as Pumpkin Ridge near Portland, Oregon) operate under the Rules of Golf. Starting in the early part of this decade, some courses were forced, by law, to prohibit players from entering, let alone play from, areas that had been designated as environmentally sensitive, such as wetlands. Such actions immediately raised some eyebrows in Rules circles, as there was not a good way to treat such areas. Before 1996, a Committee could have prevented players from playing from an area by defining it as either out of bounds or as ground under repair from which play is prohibited. Such a procedure would work well with something like a fragile sand dune, but it would be either too severe or too lenient with a wetland area, something that would otherwise be a water hazard. There was simply nothing in



the Rules at that time that would allow a Committee to prohibit a player from playing a ball from a water hazard.

The primary significance of the Local Rule is that it gave Committees the authority to prohibit play from water hazards that are also ESAs. Another important step included provisions for taking relief for a ball outside the ESA when the player's stance or area of intended swing would be interfered with by the ESA.

So when should a course employ this new, wonderful Local Rule? Only when forced at gunpoint.

Points to consider:

- The Local Rule for ESAs is authorized only when a governmental agency has declared the area(s) to be environmentally sensitive (e.g., Army Corps of Engineers, state department of environmental protection, etc.). A Committee may not, on its own, make such a determination. It has to be imposed on the golf course.

- Such a Local Rule is a pain in the neck. For water hazards it requires a different marking so as to differentiate it from *normal* water hazards (the USGA recommends yellow or red stakes, whichever is appropriate, with green tops); the course has to put the lengthy and somewhat complicated Local Rule from Appendix I in effect, with some question as to whether the players will learn it and properly play by it; and the players themselves can

be forced to take a penalty stroke in some frustrating situations (e.g., a player's ball lies one inch inside an ESA water hazard with a good lie and nothing that would keep him from playing the necessary 5-iron to the green).

- The Local Rule cannot penalize a player for entering the ESA; it penalizes him only for playing from it. Although a player who enters the ESA may have broken the law or might be subject to disciplinary action from the course, it is still difficult to keep a player from walking five yards to retrieve his new, shiny golf ball, to some degree defeating the purpose of the Local Rule.

- A Committee may not define an area such as native grasses or trees as a lateral water hazard if that area does not meet the Definition of “Water Hazard” (Decision 33-8/35). Some golf courses will do so to discourage players from searching for their balls in such an area and to help the pace of play, but such a procedure is contrary to the Rules of Golf.

An old tenet when marking courses is to give the player as much room to play as possible. That goes hand in hand with the enjoyment of the game — in playing strokes, not dropping balls.

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