

Rules Corner #6 –May 2010

The Reason Why a Provisional Ball Can't be used with an Unplayable Lie *(Please note that these are my PERSONAL opinions)*

You know what you must do if you find that your last shot is either lost, or out-of-bounds - go back to where you hit your lost/out-of-bounds shot and hit another ball and take a penalty stroke. We have all made that long, time consuming walk back to the original spot. The rules give you NO other option.

The USGA recognizes this problem, so they created the 'Provisional Ball' for use if you believe your ball is lost *outside a water hazard* or is out-of-bounds. You must announce your decision and play a Provisional Ball before you or your partner goes to search for your original ball. (USGA permits a Local Rule permitting Provisional Balls on Water Hazard Holes – I'll deal with that at the end.)

Just so it is clear, a provisional ball has only one purpose - to take the place of a ball that is out-of-bounds or not found within 5 minutes of searching. If your ball is found in bounds, and within 5 minutes of searching, the provisional no longer is part of the game, and you proceed with your original ball.

(You may opt not to look for your ball knowing that as soon as you hit the Provisional Ball past where your ball is apt to be, it becomes the ball in play. But if before that happens someone finds your ball, you must play the original ball. You may Request others not to look, but you cannot Demand them not to look.)

I am often asked, "If your original ball is found, but unplayable, why not use the provisional ball you hit when you thought your ball might be lost – after all, going back to the original spot and hitting another ball is an option for an unplayable lie".

Option is the critical word here. For a lost or out-of-bounds ball there are no options. You must play a ball from the original spot, and the Provisional Ball is just a short cut to doing that.

But unplayable lies have several options. First of all, is it unplayable? There is no criteria defining what makes a ball unplayable. What you call unplayable another player (or you on a different day) might want to take a 'swat' at it.

If you declare it unplayable, you have three options: play another ball from original spot; drop a ball behind; or drop a ball 2 club lengths from unplayable spot. (Refer if necessary to full text of the Rule on email.)

Knowing where the provision ball is could influence which option you choose. If it was a good shot, it might be your best bet, but if it was a poor shot, you might want to use one of the other options – even going back and hitting another ball. **The point is, you may not choose between two outcomes when one of them is already known.**

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What if you are playing in a tournament and there is a dispute over a rule so you decide to play two balls and check with the Tournament Committee at the end. Aren't you playing two legal balls? Yes and no. You MUST CHOOSE which ball you want to count if the rules permit. Then, if the ball you chose was legal, you take that score even if the other ball had a lower score.

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Why may a club make a Local Rule permitting a Provisional Ball on water hazard hole? Sometimes you cannot see the landing area, and often a somewhat poor shot may or may not be OK. For example, hitting over a ravine filled with vegetation. To avoid the long walk over the ravine to see if your ball is there, it makes sense to permit a Provisional Ball. (But if you do, and you find your ball playable in the hazard, you must choose between the original ball and the provisional ball -- the other water hazard options can't be used in this case.) Some of the courses that adopt this local rule allow it only on certain holes. Always check with a new course for Local Rules.

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Is it OK to send a player back to hit another ball while the other players continue to search saying that if they find it before she hits another ball she can use her original ball? Major Tournaments use stop watches to time the 5 minutes, but we just estimate the time. Also, tournament players have caddies, officials, and spectators to help look – we don't. We actually advise players near their own ball to take time to hit it before going over to help look. Thus if our estimate of 5 minutes is sometimes a little generous, we don't worry about it. But the ball must be found before the player hits a new ball, and (even with the Pros) the time coming over to a found ball doesn't count. What counts is if the ball was found within the 5 minute period.