

Immovable Obstructions

What comes to mind when you think of an immovable obstruction? A brick wall? An overturned tractor-trailer on the freeway?

For golfers, it may be those nagging swing thoughts that persist as you prepare to play a shot! Even though the mental game is a passion of mine and I would love to offer my help in that department, rest assured that's not the topic of today's discussion. I have been asked many times about immovable obstructions on the course and what to do about them. By immovable obstructions we're referring to those man-made objects on the golf course that are either permanently fixed in place or not easily moved, that may prevent a player from playing a shot.

Rules questions that make their way to the pro-shop often involve this very issue - what to do in situations where your ball ends up on a cart path, in a trash can, against a generator, or perhaps on or near a sprinkler valve in the fairway. Fortunately, these immovable obstructions are far easier to deal with than those swing thoughts!

To develop an understanding of the rules, I would first suggest obtaining a copy of *The Rules of Golf*, published by the USGA. Take a look at *Section II, Definitions*, and the terminology used to describe various situations. Most golf rules are fairly straightforward once you've gotten to know the lingo. For example, an obstruction is defined as:

“anything artificial, including the artificial surfaces and sides of roads and paths and manufactured ice.... an obstruction is a movable obstruction if it may be moved without unreasonable effort.”

In short – anything that is man-made, in other words artificial, is an obstruction. If it's not natural and it's in your way, in most cases you'll get free relief (there are one or two exceptions that I will mention later). **Rule 24, Obstructions**, specifically addresses this situation, so let's take a look at a few common situations.

Let's assume your ball comes to rest on a cart path. The path is man-made and definitely can't be moved. It is therefore an immovable obstruction. If you decide that you would like to take relief, you must first find the closest point of relief from where your ball lies that gives you complete relief from the cart path (this includes your feet). From that point, you may drop your ball within one club length, no nearer the hole. You do not get to choose which side of the cart path – you must go to the side that gives the nearest relief. Keep in mind you are not obligated to take relief from an obstruction – you can always just play it.

What if your ball is close enough to an electrical box that your club will hit the box as you swing? **Rule 24** says that you can take relief from an immovable obstruction if it “lies in or on the obstruction, or so close to the obstruction that it interferes with your stance or area of intended swing”. In this case, you would once again find the nearest

point of relief that allows you to take a normal swing. From that point, you may drop the ball within one club length, no nearer the hole, without penalty.

What if your ball lands in a trash can that is a permanent fixture and you can't retrieve it? If your playing partners agree that it is in the obstruction, you may determine the spot where it last entered the trash can and take relief from this spot. Find the nearest point of relief, then drop a substituted ball within one club length from that spot, no nearer the hole. The same procedure can be followed if the original ball is found in the immovable obstruction.

In most cases where there is interference from a man-made object, you can take relief with no penalty. There are, however, one or two exceptions. If your ball lies in a water hazard or a lateral water hazard, you may not take relief from an immovable obstruction.

As the name suggests, movable obstructions are also artificial objects. Relief is obtained by picking up and removing the obstruction. For example, you can, without penalty, move an obstruction in a hazard if it is easily movable and it interferes with your ability to play your shot. If your ball lies in or on the movable obstruction, the ball may be lifted, the obstruction removed, and the ball dropped (or placed, if on the green) on the spot under which it had come to rest.

So the next time you're in a bunker (hazard) and an inconsiderate golfer has discarded a soda can that just happens to be sitting in front of your golf ball, announce to your playing partners that it is a movable obstruction and that you are going to remove it because it is interfering with your shot. Remember, almost anything man-made is either an immovable or movable obstruction. This may just save you a shot or two in your next round.

At this point, I must point out that there are exceptions to this rule. There are certain artificial objects that are not considered obstructions. They are:

- (a) Objects defining out of bounds, such as walls, fences, stakes and railings.
- (b) Any part of an immovable artificial object which is out of bounds.
- (c) Any construction declared by the committee to be an integral part of the course.

The first two are relatively straight forward, however (c) requires a little more explanation. Occasionally a golf course architect will decide to manufacture a retaining wall or use railroad ties around a green. In these cases, the construction is often declared an "integral part of the course" and is usually mentioned on the score card. These are not immovable obstructions and free relief is not available.

If you have any rules questions, please contact your PGA staff at the Heritage Golf Club. Alternatively, send me an email any time. If you would like to test yourself and improve your knowledge of the rules, you may visit the USGA website at www.usga.org, and go to the rules section. They provide quizzes that will help you better understand the rules of the game.



Doug Hodges is a Class A PGA Professional and founder of Creative Golf, an organization specializing in unique corporate teambuilding events that use golf as a vehicle to emphasize creativity in the workplace. Teambuilding events and weekend golf schools are conducted at the Heritage Golf Club. For more information, contact Doug at (919) 453-2020, ext. 11, or visit www.thinkworkplay.com.