



# The Golf Chronicles

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



Number 50 • March 10, 2017



**A Dead Stymie.** A golfer attempts to chip his ball over the ball blocking his path to the hole; 17th green at North Berwick, Scotland, c1888.

## Golf Association Rules Out Stymie

The ancient and ridiculous rule of golf that requires a contestant to play stymies imposes an element of luck on the putting greens that has no legitimate place in the game. Skill does not lay the stymie; inaccurate play, a slight inequality in the surface of the green, an unforeseen bound of the ball, the unconsidered roll of the ground: one or another of these aligns the balls so that the player further from the cup finds his way blocked. The incident may cost him the match thru no failure of his own game and through no skill of his opponent.

Golfers have denounced the stymie for generations, but the traditions of the game have been too strong for them to overcome. Buttressed by antiquity, it has persisted even to the present, and so great is the respect felt by practitioners of the sport for the authority of the past that efforts to do away with it have fallen on deaf ears. But the Western Golf Association, which has jurisdiction over the game in a large part of the United States and Canada, has at last overthrown the stymie. It has decreed that hereafter the ball nearest the cup shall be played first and golfers everywhere will applaud its action.

The stymie is a nuisance, unworthy of the part it plays in contests between gentlemen. The Western Association has done well to deprive it of its unmerited potency.

**Ancient and ridiculous.** The Toronto World, in this article from June 6, 1917, makes clear its disdain for the stymie rule.

## A Rule that Riled

### The death of a 400-year-old nuisance

Today's golf biz buzz is all about rules. What should be a simple set of rules had become a voluminous nightmare, with rules decisions played out for all to see in real time at golf's marquee events. After a summer of discontent, the games' rules makers decided that enough was enough.

And now, something strange has happened. Common sense has reared its all-to-infrequently-seen head. A sweeping revision to the game's rules will welcome the new year in 2019 and today's head-scratchers will be kicked to the curb. That events moved quickly is a tribute to the people in charge who realized that very few golfers are prone to giving their ball a little nudge when nobody is looking.

With that as background, perhaps a little controversy from time to time is a good thing. Would anybody care about the rules of golf if Dustin hadn't done what he didn't do at the '16 U.S. Open?

Dustin's dust-up raged for a few days. Golfers and non-golfers alike were riveted to the story, and why not? What's not to like about a bunch of guys in blazers analyzing video frame by frame to determine if a golf ball moved a titch and why.

But when it comes to a rules controversy, this was a piker. Who doesn't love a rules controversy that raged for decades? Centuries, even. Such was the debate over golf's stymie rule. When I first typed the previous sentence, I made an error on the word rule, typing instead rile. I think rile is accurate, because the stymie rule certainly riled the singular world of golf's rules makers.

The stymie rule ruled golf and riled golfers for centuries. The March 11, 1918, article on page 2 reports that the stymie was added to the rules in 1775. It also notes that prior to 1889 the order of play on each hole was decided by a coin toss, not the previous hole's score. Nothing to do with the stymie, but interesting. A golfer's lament that a competitor "Laid me a dead stymie" has no meaning and probably no understanding in today's game.

**Trenham's Treasure.** I got to thinking about the stymie rule – a rule I have never played – after reading an article posted to Pete Trenham's golf history web site, <http://trenhamgolfhistory.org/>. Pete has been a PGA pro for more than 50 years, including 10 at RCC, and one of Philadelphia's most accomplished golfers. He is also a respected historian of the sport. His writing about the game, which appears on his web site, has earned him considerable acclaim.

Today, a player marks his or her ball on the green and fellow competitors putt with an unimpeded route to the hole. Play was not always so. When the stymie was allowed by the rules of golf, a player could use his or her ball to block another player's path to the hole. The stymie was for match play and only in singles or in alternate stroke competition. And why did it exist? The stymie was born of the Scottish conviction that the ball should be played as it lies from tee to hole.

It's a funny word, stymie. Collins Online Dictionary states that its origin may be from the same Scottish word, meaning a person who sees poorly. Collins cites the word's first use for golf in 1857 and its use in the general sense "to block, hinder or thwart" in 1902.

Golfers who played in the stymie era probably didn't give two figs about the word's origin. They had to learn how to putt around or hit over the opponent's ball. Here is a [good example](#) on YouTube from Paul Runyan, who was laid a dead stymie by Sam Snead in the finals of the 1938 PGA Championship at Shawnee on the Delaware. The action occurs about 20 seconds into the newsreel clip.

Oh, and the term, laid a dead stymie? It has nothing to do with necrophilia. Players from the stymie era were fond of applying that description to their handiwork.



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**Defeating the stymie.** Detail from a photo that appeared in a 1913 instruction book shows Jerome Travers preparing to chip his stymied ball over the stymie his opponent laid for him. Travers was one of the leading amateur golfers of the early 20th century. He won the U.S. Amateur in 1907, '08, '12 and '13, and the '15 U.S. Open.

## STYMIE RULE PART OF GOLF GAME SINCE 1775

While comparatively few golfers really take the trouble to analyze the rules of golf, fewer are aware of the true origin of the code. It may be interesting to know that the much discussed and abused stymie rule has been a part of the game since 1775, when it was drafted by the Honorable Company of Edinburgh.

Take the rule defining "honor," or the precedence at the teeing ground. The order of starting play at each teeing ground is not referred to in any code prior to 1889. Before that date, a coin was tossed at every hole. The term "honor" does not appear in the rules until 1888, but it was in vogue long before.

### **Milwaukee Sentinel, March 11, 1918.**

*This article not only dates the stymie rule, it describes a rather curious means for determining who has the honor on the tee.*

Back to Pete Trenham. Pete posted an article in March 2015 about the stymie rule and the role of a prominent Philadelphia-area professional in keeping the rule in place for 30 years. According to Pete, the stymie rule was established in Scotland for 300 years. In the 1800s the rule was revised to state that the stymie was only for match play when there was just one ball in play for each side.

Here's the stymie rule: During a match-play event, the two golf balls on the green had to remain in place unless they lay within six inches of each other. The golfer who was away had to play around or over the other ball. If the stymied player's putted ball moved the opponent's ball, the player could replace it or play from its new position. If the opponent's ball went in the hole, the player was deemed to have holed out with his previous stroke.

**Unfair, say some.** Many golfers were of the opinion that the rule was unfair and a matter of luck. Many but not all. In 1920 the USGA softened the rule a bit. With the new version the golfer who was stymied could concede the next stroke to an opponent who had laid the stymie. Thus, if an opponent's ball was close to the hole it might be best to concede the next stroke rather than be stymied.

Pete reports that the Western Golf Association abandoned the stymie rule altogether in 1921. This followed their 1917 rule change that required the player nearer the hole to putt first, a rule first used in the Western Amateur. The rule was abandoned before the final matches were played because of player protests. The revision allowed the player nearer the hole to mark his ball or play.

In 1921, the president of the United States Golf Association, Howard Whitney, met with Joe Kirkwood, Sr., who was the greatest trick shot artist of his time. Kirkwood was a long-time resident of Glenside, Pa. and the professional at the Huntingdon Valley Country Club from 1938 to 1949. Whitney watched Kirkwood demonstrate the art of negotiating a stymie. Upon witnessing that exhibition, Whitney decided that the stymie was an important part of golf.

**The stymie bounces back.** Meeting at Pine Valley Golf Club in April 1922, the United States Golf Association returned the stymie to the rules of golf as it was before 1920. The USGA and the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, the sport's foremost rules-makers, were once again in complete agreement on the rule.

In 1938, the USGA modified the stymie rule again. If the obstructing ball lay within six inches of the hole the stymied golfer could ask to have the ball marked. To assist in measuring stymies, most scorecards were six inches long. During all of these changes by the USGA and other golf associations the R&A never altered its interpretation of the rule.

**The dead stymie dies.** In 1944 the PGA of America stopped using the stymie in its championship, a match play event, and many other golf organizations were simply ignoring the rule. In 1952, after centuries of use and 30 years after Kirkwood had influenced its continued life in the USA, the stymie was removed from the rules of golf. The dead stymie was dead.



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Deseret News, January 27, 1921

## Golfers Divided On Stymie Rule

LONDON, Jan. 27.—The American golfers decision to abolish the stymie, announced in London yesterday, created tremendous excitement among British players. The important daily papers all gave prominence to the news with comment from leading golfers. Long sharp articles are printed discussing the propriety of the United States adoption of the new rule.

The leading experts are widely divergent in their views as to the desirability of the change.

"I favor the abolishment of the stymie altogether," said Abe Mitchell. "The ball nearest the hole should be putted first. I think the American rule is a good solution of the stymie difficulty."

Alex. Herd declares "There should be no interference with an opponent's ball. The stymie is old-fashioned but is part of a game which should not be abolished."

P. S. Bond is quoted as saying: "The new American idea is the best which has yet been suggested as a solution of the stymie problem, because it places in the hands of the player who is stymied the decision as to whether or not his opponent could hole in one."

Jack White's comment was: "The stymie should be kept because it gives a player an opportunity to make a brilliant shot and get himself out of difficulty."

Despite the difference of opinion among the leading British professionals, the rule has the approval of the British rules committee of St. Andrews club.

The stymie rule is long gone and little remembered. Which is a shame, because it played a significant role in the days when the head-to-head competition of match play ruled the links. Here are two examples from an uncredited 1960 United Press International article. This is most interesting because it connects the stymie to Bobby Jones' Grand Slam in 1930 and Byron Nelson's victory in the 1940 PGA Championship.

**Tolley's woe.** The article is on [page 12](#). In it, Jones speaks kindly about the stymie rule and explains how it helped him win the British Amateur in 1930 at The Old Course in St. Andrews. On the first extra hole of fourth-round play, Jones laid a stymie against Cyril Tolley, the defending champion, to close out the match. Tolley had played a poor third shot, leaving him vulnerable to a stymie.

Said Jones, "I made a very careful putt. It stopped short of the hole but shut Tolley off." Jones won the championship by defeating the Englishman Roger Wethered, 8 and 7. This was Jones' only British amateur victory. Were it not for that stymie, Jones may have fallen one win short of achieving golf's only Grand Slam.

The article also credits Byron Nelson's 1-up defeat of Sam Snead in the 1940 PGA Championship played at Hershey Country Club to the two stymies laid by Lord Byron against the Slammer. The photo in the upper right shows Nelson holding the 1940 PGA trophy.

Wouldn't it be great fun to reinstate the stymie rule for just one day? Sure, it would.

**In print.** Several articles from an online search of the stymie rule debate are on the following pages. Among the highlights:

- An article from 1922 that describes the complexities faced by the day's rules-making authorities, [page 4](#).
- In two 1937 columns, Bill Reedy, the *Reading Eagle's* greatest sports writer and editor, commented on the Berks Golf Association's position on the stymie rule. In that year's Berks Amateur Championship, Bob Dinsmore, playing on his home Berkshire C.C. course, defeated RCC's Billy Eban in the 36-hole final, 2 & 1. Dinsmore's win was his third in the first nine Berks Amateur championships. In a follow-up column, Reedy described how Dinsmore profited from stymies, [page 6](#).
- The Scottish view on the stymie is presented in this gem of an article from 1938 printed in the *Glasgow Herald*, [page 8](#).
- A 1944 article headlined, "Nertz to Stymie Rule, Says Mr. Nelson," in which Byron Nelson stated that "...the stymie rule never did me any good." [Page 9](#). Or did it? [Page 12](#).
- The headline from the *Milwaukee Journal*, April 22, 1948, sings: "Any Golf Rule Will Do but the Stymie—Never!" [Page 9](#).
- The United Press, on May 31, 1949, offers hope for relief: "400-year-old Stymie Rule May be Junked Here Soon," [page 10](#).
- A 1950 article reporting Jimmy Demaret's stymie rule complaints. The article mentions Henry Williams, who was the golf professional at Berkleigh Country Club (1951-1975) and Moselem Springs Golf Club (1975-1993), [page 11](#).
- From 1952, a report on the end of the stymie, headlined "Stymie Rule in Golf Dead Duck as of Today," a fitting epitaph for either a 400-year-old tradition or a centuries' old nuisance, depending on your point of view, [page 12](#).



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Deseret News, January 23, 1922

## Western Golf Association Fails to Negotiate Stymie Rule in Confab

**C**HICAGO, Jan. 23. The Western Golf association failed to negotiate the stymie at its annual meeting and after much discussion decided to leave the question in the hands of a committee composed of President Albert R. Gates of Chicago, vice president; C. O. Phell of the Memphis, and Director J. E. Nugent of Kansas City

It is announced that this committee had conferred with the representatives of the United States Golf association and reached an agreement on all difficulties about golf rules except the stymie. It was reported that President J. Frederic Byers, Pittsburg, of the U. S. G. A., had said his organization was also at sea on the stymie, but that it was hoped further conferences would settle the question.

The committee also reported that the United States Golf association had agreed to recommend the local rules that would comply with the advance rules promulgated by the Western association in regard to lost balls, balls out of bounds, and the cleaning of muddy balls. The Western association for the present will stand pat on its abolition of the stymie.

### Kansas City Gets Tournament.

This agreement brings the rules of golf closer to unanimity than has been the case for two or three years. Opinions expressed tonight indicated that about 90 per cent of the golfers in the Western association were opposed to the stymie.

The amateur championship was awarded to the Hillcrest club of Kansas City. The meet probably will be set for the last week in June. The open championship was given to the Oakland Hills club of Detroit, the date to be fixed.

President Talt, put in a bid for the amateur championship to be held in 1923 at White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., where the woman's national is held this year. The junior championship will be played at the Olympia Field club, Chicago.

For the first time in the history of the Western Golf association, Crafts W. Higgins was unable to be present at the annual meeting, and a telegram was read from the former assistant secretary, who is recuperating at San Antonio. On motion of Director Sam Reynolds of Omaha, a telegram of greeting and good wishes was sent to "the grand old man of American golf," who Mr Reynolds said, had done more for the game in America than any other man.

### U. S. G. A. Yields Point.

President Gates in explaining the controversy between the Western and

the United States associations on the rules, asserted that the Western had long realized that there should be uniformity in golf rules but that the Western had been unable to agree with the U. S. G. A. and the latter had been unable to get changes from the Royal and Ancient Golf club of St. Andrews.

In an effort to settle the confusion, committees had met and the U. S. G. A. had yielded in all but the stymie, by providing that local rules could be made to conform to the Western association's rules on lost ball, ball out of bounds, cleaning of balls when muddy and lifting of balls from extraneous greens. The Western agreed to abandon the rule allowing a ball to be lifted anywhere with a penalty of a stroke. This settled the controversy for the time, and was said to be a victory for the Western body as to 75 per cent of the dispute, with the stymie in abeyance.

### Controversy Reviewed.

Mr. Phell read the report of the committee that conferred with the U. S. G. A. reciting the history of the breach and promulgation of new rules by the Western last May. These rules caused the U. S. G. A. to charge had faith on the part of the Western association and brought an ultimatum for the annulment of the new code. This demand was refused and the affair had remained unsettled, the U. S. G. A. allowing local rules during the national championship at St. Louis which agreed with some of the Western rules on muddy ball and out of bounds.

The two organizations finally had named committees, which met Jan 13, and reached the agreement on all but the stymie. The Western committee felt that there should be uniformity of rules, but that the rules should be subject to changes to suit the majority of players.

It was made clear that while the stymie was still a moot subject between the two associations, the Western would keep it abolished until further notice.

After a long open discussion of the stymie, it was decided to leave the question in the hands of the committee for any action that might be necessary.



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January 20, 1924

## GOLF SOLONS WANT STYMIE RULE AS NOW

Chairman Whitney of U. S. G. A.  
Opposes Abolition Proposal  
of Golfer Editor.

NEW YORK, Jan. 9 (AP).—The United States Golf Association is definitely opposed to any change in the present rule which compels all stymies to be played. The attitude of the governing links body was revealed today by Howard P. Whitney, chairman of the rules committee, in a letter rejecting a proposal by E. Ellsworth Giles, editor of the Pittsburgh Golfer, that the stymie be abolished and the medal play rule substituted. It settles the stymie issues, observers believe, for 1924 at least.

Under the proposed change, the stymied player would have the privilege of asking his opponent to remove his ball, the opponent having the option of lifting or putting. If the stymied player did not ask for the removal of his opponent's ball and struck it, he would be penalized a stroke. This plan is undesirable, according to Mr. Whitney, because it would eliminate "what many believe to be the finest shot in golf, the short pitch into the hole." He points out that many experiments in stymie rules have been made, adding that "the U. S. G. A. decided to go back to the old form of playing the stymie as no change that had been suggested up to the present time is, in their opinion, an improvement on the old method of play."

Mr. Giles' idea, wrote Mr. Whitney, "was adopted at one time by the Western Golf Association, with the exception of the penalty strike feature and tried in one of their championships, but changed to another method before the championship had finished.

The principal point in connection with the stymie, the rules committee chairman emphasizes, "is that the U. S. G. A. should not allow the standard of skill and science of the game to be lowered and we thoroughly believe that the present method of playing the stymie is the most scientific that has ever been presented."

The Day  
New London, Conn.  
September 22, 1936

## Stymie Rule Row Stymies Golf Officials

By BOB CAVAGNARO

NEW YORK, Sept. 22 (AP)—The stymie situation still is stymied. In the secret sanctum of the United States Golf association officials and experts are trying to decide whether the pestiferous putting blockade should be abolished.

Before them they have the views of 208 contestants in the recent 40th amateur championship who were asked to give detailed reports on stymies, plus their opinions.

The result of the study probably will not be announced until the association's annual meeting next January. Even then it is unlikely association members will be given a chance to bring it up on the floor because, if custom is followed, the problem will be thrashed out in a star chamber session.

### Pressure Growing

However, the golf biggies are feeling the pressure more and more every day for the elimination of the stymie. It was retained by a close margin of votes at January's conclave. Since then the powerful Western Golf association, California and Massachusetts State associations and the northern California district have abolished it.

"Because of the agitation against the stymie we felt it was only right to make an actual fact study of the situation and see how it affected a tournament," said John G. Jackson, U. S. G. A. president.

"We have so much information on hand that it will be months before it can be boiled down to a consensus. The reports, turned in by every player, started with approach shots to the greens to the holing of the last putt."

### Players Favor Abolition

Inquiries among the players last week revealed the majority is in favor of abolishing the stymie. But official quarters still are reported to be strong for its retention.

"Personally, I'm in favor of retaining the stymie in match play golf," said Jackson.

Yet, the despised stymie was partly responsible for preventing the championship trophy from crossing the Atlantic ocean. Had it not been for a stymie, Jack McLean of Scotland and not Johnny Fischer of Cincinnati might have won the crown last Saturday.

After making a poor first putt, which dribbled several feet past the cup, Fischer, one down and three to go, laid McLean a dead stymie on the 34th green, costing the Scot an apparent win to become dormie two. Instead McLean got a half in bogey 5's.



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Reading Eagle

August 19 and September 8, 1937

## NEW YORK GOLF BODY MODIFIES STYMIE RULING

Sarasota Herald-Tribune  
April 11, 1937

NEW YORK, April 10—(AP)—The New York State Golf association contended tentatively today it was six inches nearer the solution of the troublesome stymie stickler.

While other associations over the country are arguing whether to abandon or retain the stymie, the New York body compromised by ruling that for one year in its match play tournaments a ball lying within 12 inches of the hole or within 12 inches of the opponent's ball may be lifted at the option of either player.

The present United States Golf association rule states that a ball may be lifted in match play only when it is within six inches of the opponent's ball.

Edward E. Wyman, president of the New York group, said the modification was done with the sanction of the U. S. G. A. He added that contestants in New York state tournaments will be asked for their opinions of the experiment at the end of the season.

Stressing the fact that the rule is made purely on a trial basis, Wyman explained the New York association hit on this modification after studying the change in the golf ball since the original stymie rule was made.

"The new rule is offered," said Wyman, "in the belief that the six inch stymie ruling, which has been in effect since the days of the 'gummy' ball, does not give even the skilled player a proper chance to chip the new livelier and larger ball over the ball lying the stymie and at the same time control the shot."



## Bill Reedy:

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Berks Golf Association Deadlocked  
On Stymie Rule in Local Tournaments

Sports pourri:

Objection to the stymie rule in golf, the bane of match play that has won and lost many championships, is not universal by any means . . . When members of the Berks Golf Association met the other night to discuss plans for the coming county amateur tournament at the Berkshire Country Club, a vote was taken on the stymie question for the purpose of retaining or discarding the rule in future championship events here . . . And, strange as it seems, the balloting resulted in a deadlock, with six members favoring the stymie and six protesting . . . Only one delegate to the association was absent from the gathering and it appears that he will be given a chance to voice his attitude . . . That will be a mighty important vote, deciding, as it will, the fate of the stymie when the cream of the amateurs in the county come to grips for the annual championship two weeks hence . . . Ever since Johnny Fischer won the U. S. amateur crown a year ago with the aid of a stymie in his final match, the pressure for removing the cup blockade throughout the country has been growing, but here in Berks county the opinion of the leaders is obviously divided . . . Most of the better amateur players, however, seem to object to the stymie, while the professionals are almost unanimous in retaining it in the rules.



## Bill Reedy:

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Stymie Rule Kind to Golf Champion  
Who Wanted It Dropped in Event

Sports pourri:

"I won this tournament on stymies," Bob Dinsmore jestingly remarked after winning the Berks amateur golf title for the third time in the last four years . . . He was recalling the fact that he laid stymies on important holes against Bucky Spangler in the semi-finals, and Billy Eben in the closing battle . . . But these breaks by which he profited have not changed his attitude towards the stymie rule, which he wanted shelved by the Berks Golf Association for the recent tournament, but which stayed in the books . . . Dinsmore was the victim of one stymie on the 13th hole in the championship match . . . That's where he first saw a "five" margin start to dwindle . . . Bob gave Eben lots of credit after he walked off the 17th green where the struggle ended . . . "I thought I had the match won in the 14th when I sank a long putt," he said, "but Billy came back with a longer one. He showed plenty of courage under pressure."

Pittsburgh Press, January 3, 1937

## Shall We, Or Shall We Not, Have Stymies?

By CLAIRE M. BURCKY

The United States Golf Association and several hundred thousand of its fairway fanatics are stymied by the stymie situation in the royal and ancient sport.

From Portland to Portland, and from Long Beach to Miami Beach, those who pat the little dimpled pill from cup to cup are in an uproar.

The U. S. G. A. hopes to do something about the situation in its annual meeting only a few days distant, but whatever the outcome, plenty will remain dissatisfied.

Among the officials in this section, there is divided opinion. George A. Ormiston, of Oakmont, West Penn secretary, insists the rule should be retained, but I. W. Danforth, of Oakmont, vice president of the Pennsylvania, thinks just as strongly it should go.

Aligned with Ormiston are Charlie Manning, of Shannopin, a professional, and Fred Brand, Jr., of Shannopin, an amateur.

On Danforth's side are Emil Loeffler, Oakmont professional; Jimmy O'Donnell, Churchill Valley pro;

and several others. "What is the stymie rule?" Even many golfers aren't certain of what constitutes a "stymie."

According to the rules of golf, "a player is laid a stymie if on the putting green the opponent's ball lies in the line of his putt to the hole, provided the balls be not within six inches of each other."

In medal play, the ball nearer the hole may be lifted until the other ball is played. In match play, the lifting privilege is eliminated, leaving the player to putt around or chip it over as best he can.

E Ellsworth Giles, a prominent local golf authority 15 years ago, once wrote: "Playing a stymie causes the competitor to attempt to negotiate a hazard that was not on the course when the match started."

And A. Linde Fowler, of Boston, veteran golf writer, coined this classic: "Laying a stymie is the undeserved reward of missing a putt."

The stymie rule has been a part of U. S. G. A.'s code of golf since the beginning, except for a minor revision of the rule which applied in the 1920 National Amateur championship. That year, the rule read: "If the opponent lay the player a stymie, the player may remove the opponent's ball; the op-

ponent shall then be deemed to have holed out in his next stroke." In an appended note, the rule further stated: "If the player, playing within the boundaries of the putting green, lay himself a stymie, the rule does not apply."

"The change in the rule didn't work then," said Ormiston, "and it won't work any better now. A stymie can be played, and it should be played. Any golfer with practice can become proficient at chipping his ball over the opponent's and into the cup. I once did it 12

times on a bet." A player, through his skill in putting, could lay his opponent a stymie, it might be fair. But if he's that skillful, he can sink the putt and be better off. It's all luck and as such shouldn't have a place in golf.

Young Melvin can see no reason why a player should get a clear putt to the hole, miss it, and be lucky enough to leave his opponent stymied. He cites the National Amateur final at Garden City last September, when Johnny Fischer, of Cincinnati, laid Jock McLean a



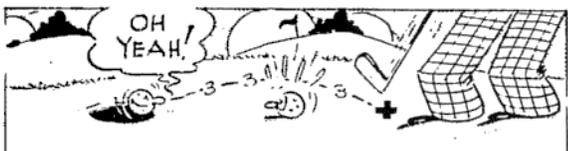
For there are almost half as many golfers in favor of the stymie as those who would kick it clear back to St. Andrews. Bobby Jones, for one, would keep it in the game, but O B Keeler, his writing friend, would junk the rule.

Here in our Pennsylvania and Western Pennsylvania districts, many are wondering what will happen, and hoping one way or the other.

Barrett Melvin, West Penn Junior and Amateur champion; Knox M. Young, Jr., of Shannopin; Jack Benson, of South Hills, and Joe Crawford, of Churchill Valley. The last three are former West Penn Amateur champions.

These are only 10 opinions in the entire district, but they just about represent the percentages in favor of and against the stymie.

Some may ask "what is the stymie rule?"



Manning believes the rule isn't unfair, as some think. He contends not more than one stymie in 100 is intentional. "The stymie helps one individual at a certain point and hinders another, but over an 18-hole match, the breaks are about even," Manning declares.

"A player shouldn't lose a hole because of a break, a virtual fluff away entirely in their meeting this month."

stymie on one of the last four holes of the match. The stymie enabled Fischer to defeat the Scot.

"A little stymie should not be such a big factor in any championship," declares Melvin.

And so, the U. S. G. A. is stymied by the stymie situation. They must keep it in the game, or throw it away entirely in their meeting this month.



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*Glasgow Herald*  
January 28, 1938

## NEW STYMIE RULE FEAR

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### TROUBLE MAY START IN WALKER CUP

NEW YORK, Thursday.

American golfing circles fear that the recent experimental change in the United States Golf Association's rules concerning the stymie may lead to a break between the U.S.G.A. and the Royal and Ancient Club of St Andrews.

There have been mild disagreements between the world's two great golf-governing bodies before—such as over the weight and size of the ball—but this is the first time that the U.S.G.A. has gone ahead and changed a fundamental rule without seeking the approval of the British body.

Trouble—if it does come—may well start during the Walker Cup matches at St Andrews this summer, it is thought in some quarters.

The American team will not be permitted to lift the ball nearer the cup if it is within six inches of the cup, as permitted in the new stymie rule, and observers fear the possibility of incidents—Press Association Foreign Special.

*Montreal Gazette*  
January 11, 1938

## COTTON CONDEMNS NEW U.S.G.A. RULE

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### British Golf Star Waxes Sarcastic Over Change in Stymie Regulation

London, January 10.—(P)—Henry Cotton, British open golf champion, today condemned the new stymie rule adopted by the United States Golf Association. The new United States Golfers' Association rule eliminates stymies when the nearer ball lies within six inches of the cup.

"The new rule is unnecessary," said Cotton. "Soon we'll be going to the United States and asking: 'What rules are you people using this year?' Pretty soon we'll be picking players to send to America according to their knowledge of the rules."

The champion said he was angry about rule changing because the British Professional Golfers' Association had just passed a rule demanding that the ball nearest the hole in medal competition be putted first.

"This is just like the new American rule," Cotton complained. "The game is wonderful just as it is and until the rule makers really find some radical change needed they should leave it alone. I can't do anything about our rule but I've got a good mind to refuse to putt when my ball is nearest the hole and be disqualified."

"The stymie is just as much a stroke as a good iron into a cross wind. Both are tough and should be left alone."



# The Golf Chronicles

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County

Number 50 • March 10, 2017



## Golf and Golfers

### WHY THE U.S.G.A. MADE THE NEW STYMIE RULE

#### Pleasing the Majority: Views of Players And Organisations

FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

"We do not agree that the stymie is opposed to the spirit of the game. On the contrary, we believe if general principles are to be given weight there are few, if any, of more importance than that the ball should be played from tee to hole from where it lies.

"Indeed, it may be said that the right to play a stroke free from interference is not so much a general principle of the game as a basis for an exception to the general principle that a ball in play shall not be lifted, and too many exceptions destroy a rule."

This is not, as one might be pardoned for supposing, a quotation from a die-hard conservative committee—typical of the St Andrews spirit of 50 years ago, but from what is probably one of the most go-ahead and progressive bodies in golf government—namely, the Executive Committee of the United States Golf Association.

#### "AS A TRIAL ONLY"

The quotation is from a special addendum to the annual report of the committee which deals entirely with the stymie question, and which functions as an apologetic for the modification of the stymie rule which the Association has brought into force this year.

The new rule—which the Association carefully points out is "to have force during 1938 and as a trial only"—lays down that on the putting green the ball nearer the hole may be lifted not only when the balls lie within six inches of each other but also when the nearer ball lies within six inches of the hole.

Obviously, to judge from the quotation, the Association, through its Executive Committee, have not rushed into a change of rule on account of unreasoning hatred of the stymie. They have, in fact, merely agreed tentatively to put forward the new rule in place of the old for three reasons.

The first is that the modern ball is far livelier than were the older balls (feather and gutta); the second is that modern greens are keener; and the third is that holes now have tins, whereas in the early days there were no tins, and there was, consequently, what Tom Morris described as "the muckle side of the hole."

#### OPINIONS CANVASSED

But the committee, in their report, go much further than a mere expression of their own reasons for the change. They point out that opinions were taken from the 64 players who qualified for the last National Amateur Championship, while practically every golfing organisation in each of the States has been consulted.

Summarising all the arguments for and against the stymie, the committee indicate that those who are against the stymie claim it to be "the undeserved result of a bad shot"; that it is an exception to the basic principle of the game that a player is entitled to be free from interference by his competitor; that certain stymies, when the ball is close to the hole, are unplayable; that the majority do not play stymies because they think them unfair and unsportsmanlike; and that the rules should reflect the judgment of the majority.

Those who favour the stymie reply that it is generally the player's own fault, and that practically all stymies are playable; that it is only one of the "bad breaks" of the game; that it adds an interesting, delicate, and spectacular feature to match-play golf which galleries always enjoy; that there is often compensation in a ball lying on the edge of the hole giving the player the chance of a "carome"; and that the general principle of non-interference is not so vital as the principle that the ball may not be touched.

Both sets of arguments have been weighed by the committee, and what probably tipped the scale in favour of change is the fact that there is, on the whole, a strength of opinion against the stymie. This majority against the stymie would not appear, however, to be nearly so great as we in this country have been led to believe.

In fact, there is a curious phenomenon reported by several organisations that the unpopularity of the stymie appears to be waning and not waxing.

The views of some of the States are interesting. Buffalo reported that there was less propaganda against the stymie; Carolina added that there were fewer complaints last year; Colorado, having abolished the stymie, found that too much lifting resulted; Utah indicated that there was very little complaint—"wailing" in their word—and gives as a reason that "players having been initiated into its use and the thrilling situations arising from it, are beginning to enjoy its part in promoting golf as a sport." Such a "discovery," I am sure, must have been overwhelming.

Reducing the "fors" and "againsts" to statistics, it is to be found that 23 of the larger associations are playing the stymie and favour its continuance. Of these, three associations have been trying out a modification of either the new rule or of the "self-stymie" rule. The associations who are either not playing the stymie or favour its abolition number 24.

#### PLAYERS' VIEWS

These are the results of the census among organisations—now for individual players. The questions asked were whether they personally liked or disliked the stymie; whether on more general principles they thought the stymie should be abolished or retained; and thirdly, if they could suggest a modification of the rule.

Of the 64 players questioned, replies are given from 22, and the voting was—against the stymie, 12; for it, 10; and two players stated that although they personally disliked the stymie they thought it should be kept.

Johnny Goodman, for example, is strongly in favour of the stymie. So is "Chick" Evans, whose answer is delightfully characteristic. "I like stymies. Match play would be dull without them. I think the stymie should remain in the game. It has successfully withstood the test of time."

Dr O. Willing is against the stymie. He claims that the man who has played the better iron shot is at a disadvantage. Jack Westland is against them too. He does not approve of lifting the ball, but regards that as the lesser of two evils.

#### FOR AND AGAINST

Other opponents of the stymie use the word "luck" a great deal, agreeing generally that a stymie is lucky and may often unfairly decide a game.

Frank Strafaci adopts a very honest attitude by declaring that he does not know whether he likes or dislikes the stymie, since he has always regarded it as "in the same category of golf problems as a ball behind a tree, a stone, or a barn."

But undoubtedly the master touch is provided by William L. Shea, whose name we perhaps do not know here.

Shea hopes it is not contradictory to dislike the stymie and still to want it retained. He dislikes it because it may unfairly decide a close match, but he adds that the fundamental principle is to get the ball into the hole without touching the ball with the hands.

"Reformers should remember," he states, "that the stymie is popular where the game originated. A friend of mine told me that they even play stymies in friendly matches in England."



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Number 50 • March 10, 2017

Milwaukee Journal, April 22, 1948

## Any Golf Rule Will Do, but the Stymie—Never!

By BILLY SIXTY

The feudin' and the fightin' between the United States and Western golf associations, which date back almost to the year they were both organized in 1899, has come to an end at last—with one exception.

The Western will have nothing to do with the stymie! No, sir! Everything else in the USGA playing code will be all right, agreed Maynard (Scotty) Fessenden of Chicago, new president of the Western, but the stymie? No thanks!

### Buried Stymie in 1921

The Western parked the ancient stymie rule in a bunker and buried it in the sand way back in 1921, and year after year USGA overtures to revive it have failed.

When the Western liberalists booted out the stymie with the explanation that "upon reaching the putting green the player shall have an unobstructed putt at the cup" they really meant it. And they still do.

Back there in 1921 the Western, in fact, did more than get rid of the stymie. It also eliminated the penalty stroke for loss of ball and out of bounds, charging distance only. A little later, always in a liberal attitude, the officials permitted lifting and cleaning of the ball on the clipped surface of the green; lifting and dropping, without penalty, if the ball lodged in a hole made by a burrowing animal.

### USGA Refuses to Yield

The USGA, manned largely by gentlemen of the effete east, refused to yield to the Western's changes until 1947 on all but the unplayable lie. The penalty remains loss of stroke and distance.

Of all the rules in question, the unplayable lie penalty, granting dropping of the ball out of an impossible location to playing position, was considered justified by Fessenden, representing the Western;

Fielding Wallace, president of the USGA, and Ed Dudley, head of the Professional Golfers' Association of America, when they held their recent peace conference.

They agreed on limiting the set of clubs to 14 for tournament play, instead of the 16 used by the pros (14 in the Western); they decided as one against ridging or ribbing iron clubs beyond a specified point, and they nodded agreement to every-

thing else that was brought up for discussion, with one exception:

The stymie!

Fessenden said "nix" on the proposal that it be revived, and Dudley seconded the motion.

Which means the stymie will not be played in the state amateur tournament July 26-31 at the Sheboygan Pine Hills club. Our golfers discarded the stymie in 1932, and it looks as if the old bugaboo will stay out—for good!

See America's NEW Outboard

August 15, 1944

## P.G.A. Abolishes Ancient Stymie Rule In Spokane Tourney

SPOKANE, Wash., Aug. 15—(U.P.)—The stymie rule, one of the hoodoos of tournament golf, has been abolished for the match-play part of the P.G.A. championships being played here, tournament chairman Fred Corcoran said today.

Corcoran said the rules committee, in one of the most drastic changes ever made in a major tournament, voted yesterday to abolish the stymie rule when match play begins tomorrow.

Jimmy Hines, chairman of the committee and a favorite in the tournament, said the seven-man body had voted unanimously to void the rule which has been observed in every PGA national championship since its inception in 1916.



## Nertz To Stymie Rule, Says Mr. Nelson

Among those who are very happy over the PGA's no-stymie rule for the championship this time is one Byron (Lord) Nelson, one of the favorites in the current Spokane competition. Mr. Nelson's chagrin over the presence of the old stymie rule is understandable when he explains:

"It is the most forward step ever taken in golf . . . the stymie rule, in my opinion, has been senseless. It has no value, except that it lends a spectacular touch. No element of accuracy is involved. It is strictly a matter of luck.

"A stymie cost me the PGA championship in 1939. At least it contributed to my defeat by Henry Picard in the finals. I lost the 36th on a stymie and it squared the match. He beat me on the extra hole.

"I had another experience in 1941 that wouldn't have happened if a no-stymie rule had been in effect. On the 38th green Vic Ghezzi's ball and mine lay side by side. They were exactly the length of a club from the hole. We tossed to see who would putt first. I won the toss.

"When I took my stance his ball was so close I brushed it with my foot. That automatically disqualified me. Ghezzi was too sporting, however, to win the match that way. I missed the putt and Ghezzi made his. If the no-stymie rule had been in effect, Ghezzi's ball would have been marked and the chances are at least even that I would have made the putt and stayed in the match with a chance to win later on. Or he might have missed his putt. Anyhow, I lost the PGA title I had won the year before.

"The stymie rule never did me any good."

Miami News  
August 18, 1944



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Number 50 • March 10, 2017

Spokane Daily Chronicle, May 31, 1949

## 400-Year-Old Stymie Rule May Be Junked Here Soon

By OSCAR FRALEY

RICHMOND, Va., May 31. (UP)—The most tattered and lawdry bit of window dressing in the game of golf today is the stymie rule, an American apology to ancient Scotland, which soon may be abolished for the first time in 400 years.

The royal and ancient society of Stam Andrews ever has insisted on the stymie rule because of a slavishness to tradition. Our fearful golfing fathers have gone along with the gag only because they didn't have the brass to cut free.

The royal and ancient to now has been the supreme court of golf. But the word is that the USGA, ruler of the sport here, soon may drop the stymie entirely.

That won't make much difference to our eight million golfers. For when you play your neighbor a match the stymie is just so much mythical nonsense. If your ball is in the way you move it. He does likewise.

### Stymie in PGA

But in the PGA tournament, currently being conducted, the American stymie rule is used. It is another apologetic bit of nonsense devised to check the stymie and still keep it in use as a sop to tradition.

The USGA decided on a compromise. So it is different in the United States from Scotland, where a stymie is a stymie no matter how close the ball or the cup. Here if a ball is within six inches of the cup in line with your opponent's ball it is moved.

The stymie long has been characterized as "the undeserved reward of a missed putt."

It is defended foolishly as a defensive stratagem, when actually golf is only an offensive game. Every man shoots his own game without the interference of a whisper.

### Used in Top Matches

But the stymie, unfair as it is, still is used in important matches like these PGA championships and alters the results so that quite often the better golfer will lose.

A few years ago the PGA, the professional outfit, had a 16 club rule and didn't use the stymie. But it catered to the USGA—and the USGA still caters to the royal and ancient.

It is about time that golf has become Americanized enough so we should be able to go on with our own rules.

Ever since a farmer fired a shot at Lexington, the United States has shown that it can get along on its own.

They are beginning to think that this is the time and not any too soon.

## BOSTON BRAVES DEFEAT PHILLIES BY SLIM MARGIN

PHILADELPHIA, May 31. (AP)—A hit batsman and three walks in the ninth inning gave the Boston Braves the run that defeated Philadelphia 7-6 today after the Phillies had knocked Johnny Sain from the box with a five-run attack in the third.

Boston	000	221	011	—7	10	0
Philadelphia	005	001	000	—6	10	2

Sain, Hogan (3), G. Elliott (4), Potter (8) and Salkeld, Rowe, Konstanty (9) and Semnick.  
Home runs: Boston—Conaster; Philadelphia—Semnick.  
Winning pitcher—Potter. Losing pitcher—Rowe.



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June 29, 1950

## Demaret Irked At Stymie Rule

COLUMBUS, O., June 29—(AP)—Disgusted Jimmy Demaret, Thursday led a mass movement against the stymie rule used in the P.G.A. golf tournament following the annual championship in which, too often, blind luck registered against better golfers.

In the finals, Chandler Harper of Portsmouth, Va., bested Henry Williams of Secane, Pa., in a battle of a couple of guys named Joe. Actually, neither man shot the type of golf which could be called the *creme de la creme* of the professional game.

The absence of the stymie rule could, and probably would, have made a terrific difference in the outcome of numerous matches leading up to the finals.

Currently, the PGA championship starts with two rounds of medal qualifying play, followed by two match play rounds of 18 holes and then 36-hole matches all the way to the bitter end. The ultimate winner figures to go 12 rounds of golf in a week of play. That's 216 holes of high pressure golf, tough enough without having to worry about your opponent rapping you in the kisser with a lucky stymie.

There has been a lot of agitation to make the whole business match play, right from the starting gun, thus eliminating the two medal play rounds and forcing the match play field to qualify at home sites. But almost all of the pros involved are against the stymie rule.

Demaret, at 40, was tired and disgusted when he was kayoed by Harper — the eventual champion — in the semi-finals.

"This is just too much golf in one week" said the colorful Jimmy as he threatened, at first, never to appear in another PGA tournament. "I think the stymie should be blasted — and I'm in favor of making this tournament four rounds of medal play.

Demaret, after a shower, said that he'd appear at Oakmont for next year's championship. He realized that this is the year's major match play event, the one and only for the pros as far as that goes, and that barring the stymie — class would tell.

Bob Hamilton, the 1944 champion eliminated in the very first round, also stood up for match play method.

"I like to play right with my opponent," he explained. "In medal play, one guy can go out in the morning sunshine and I might have to play in a snow-storm in the afternoon. It's better playing your man side by side, under the same conditions. But I'm against that stymie rule, too."

September 19, 1951

## Drop Golf's Stymie Rule

ST. ANDREWS, Scotland, Sept. 19—(AP)—The stymie is dead in match play golf, effective Jan. 1, 1952.

Elimination of the stymie is the most significant of a new international code of the game which has now been adopted by the United States and Great Britain, the two big golfing nations.

The Royal and Ancient Golf Club yesterday approved the uniform rules, previously accepted by the United States Golf Association. Other principal rules in the new code:

1. Stroke and distance will be charged on all lost ball, out-of-bounds and unplayable lies. In the past Britain's penalty has been distance only on out of bounds.

2. The smaller British ball—1.62 inches in diameter compared with America's 1.68—will be permitted in international matches.

Under the new stymie rules when one ball is in the path of another on the green, the closer ball must be lifted so the other will have a clear shot at the cup.

Under the stymie, it has been necessary to putt around or chip over the impeding ball, unless the balls were less than six inches apart or less than six inches from the cup.



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Number 50 • March 10, 2017

Schenectady Gazette, January 1, 1952

## Stymie Rule in Golf Is Dead Duck as of 1

NEW YORK, Dec. 31 (AP) —It's goodbye, and good riddance, at midnight to the stymie in golf.

At the stroke of 12, the pesky ole stymie becomes a dead duck under the new uniform code of golf.

If you've got a match on tomorrow, and your opponent plops his ball just in front of yours just when you're all set to make your first par of the week, don't burn. Just smile and tell your opponent to mark his ball, and please, get it out of the way. You'll be allowed to do it,

the angle of the shaft must point to that spot. The new rule permits use of the smaller British ball in international competitions in the U.S., and it standardizes the penalty for out-of-bounds, lost balls and unplayable balls. The penalty will be stroke and distance in all countries, instead of only distance as provided in Britain in the last two years.

Many a weekend duffer, however, won't be concerned with the lost ball rule anyway. Lots of them never charged themselves with strokes, figuring that losing a shiny new ball was penalty enough.

The abolition of the hated stymie was the major change made in the rules when the representatives of the U.S. Golf Association and the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland, got together last May. The new rules go into effect Jan. 1 and will be the same the world over.

Gooseneck putters and other trick putters used by Americans got the okay from the golfing brass. Previously the Royal and Ancient rules insisted that the shaft of a putter must enter at the heel, or end, of the blade, and that

Sunday Herald, Bridgeport, Conn.  
November 6, 1960

## Stymie Was OK By Bobby Jones

NEW YORK (UPI)—The golfing stymie has been dead almost a decade but no less a par-busting personage than Bobby Jones asserts that it should be brought back in the interest of the game.

The stymie was abolished in 1952. Since then, in match play, you no longer can block your opponent's path to the hole and it has to all intents and purposes made medal play out of man-to-man golf.

"Why this should be an essential, when the contest is man to man and head to head, I have never been able to see," Jones declares adamantly.

The stymie affected a great number of matches. Under its rule, you could stroke your ball into your opponent's path and the only relief was when the balls were within six inches of each other or within that span from the cup.

IT BECAME a part of the language, for how often have you heard the expression "I'm stymied," meaning you were blocked off or had no place to go? And it did cost Slammin' Sunny Snead the PGA championship in 1940 when Byron Nelson laid him two stymies

and won the championship, 1 up.

"The stymie usually was costly if you left yourself in a vulnerable position," Jones argues. "It was one of the most interesting facets of match play competition."

ACTUALLY the stymie, he relates in his new book "Golf Is My Game," made it possible for him to sweep to his grand slam in 1930. For he won the British Amateur that year by laying Cyril Tolley a stymie on the first extra hole to close out their match.

Tolley made a weak chip and left himself seven feet from the hole in three. Jones, only 7 feet from the hole in two, was on the same side of the pin.

"I made a very careful putt," Jones relates. "It stopped short of the hole but shut Tolley off."

TOLLEY MISSED his four. Jones got his. Bobby's "position play" had won the British Amateur and allowed Jones to advance in his ultimately successful quest for the grand

Continued on PAGE 36

• 36 SUNDAY HERALD, NOVEMBER 6, 1960

## Stymie Was OK By Bobbie Jones

Continued from PAGE 35  
slam of the British and U. S. Opens and Amateurs.

There is little hope, says Joe Dey, executive secretary of the U. S. Golf Assn., for the return of the stymie.

"That's because of a post-war trend toward relaxation of rules," Day says. "There is a tendency in all sports to soften the rules. Golf, like other sports, has made a number of noticeable changes, starting with elimination of the stymie."

TWO OF these "softening" rules changes have been allowing players to clean the ball on the green at any time and permitting the repair of

ball marks on the green before putting.

"These changes were made by demand of the players," Dey explains. "The pros were the first to clean the ball and repair ball marks. Like in any other industry, they wanted to make the work easier. You can, I suppose, make an argument for both sides."

THERE IS no doubt but what the stymie contributed a breathless quality of ever-present anticipation to match play which has gone by the boards. But mechanical golf has taken over and the stymie is as dead as the gutta percha ball. Which, in a way, may explain why there is no new Bobby Jones today.