

Rule Tip of the Week Unmaster Phil?

Some have said that Phil Mickelson lost this year's Masters on the 240-yard par-3, 4th hole of the final round when he missed the green left and ended up taking a triple-bogey. Phil ultimately finished two strokes off the pace set by Bubba Watson and Louis Oosthuizen. The purpose of this article is to review the various Rules that were applicable to Phil's playing his ball on the 4th hole.

First of all, when Phil's errant tee shot ended up in a brushy area left of the green, per Rule 27-1c [Ball Not Found Within Five Minutes], Phil had a limit of five minutes within which to find and identify his ball. That time period did not commence until Phil or his caddie, Jim "Bones" Mackay, began to search for it.

Rule 12-1 [Seeing Ball; Searching for Ball] allowed Phil to touch and bend the undergrowth to the extent necessary for him to find and identify the ball, so long as he did not improve the lie of his ball, the area of his intended stance or swing, or his line of play. Also, Phil had to exercise care in bending away the undergrowth to avoid causing his ball to move. If he accidentally caused his ball to move by pushing aside a branch, he would have incurred a one-stroke penalty under Rule 18-2a.

Upon seeing a ball, Phil could have marked and lifted his ball for positive identification per Rule 12-2 [Lifting Ball for Identification]. However, Phil did not need to do this because he could see the identifying mark that he put on his golf ball per the recommendation in Rule 12-2.

At that point, Phil was faced with playing his ball as it lay in the bushes or deeming his ball unplayable under Rule 28 [Ball Unplayable]. Phil realized that he would incur a one-stroke penalty if he proceeded under any of the three options available under Rule 28. Hindsight is always "20-20" and most armchair announcers were probably screaming at their television sets for Phil to proceed under stroke and distance per Rule 28a. By playing again from the tee, and assuming that Phil could find the green the second time around, he would be lying three and could be expected to finish the hole with no more than a double-bogey.

The next option, that of Rule 28b, would have had Phil dropping a ball deeper in the woods behind the point where the ball lay, keeping that point directly between the hole and the spot on which the ball would be dropped. Phil quickly discarded that option as there was no open area within which to drop a ball on that line. Under the third option, i.e., Rule 28c, Phil could have dropped a ball within two club-lengths of the spot where the ball lay, but not nearer the hole. Phil elected not to proceed under this option either because two driver-lengths would not have gotten him out of the bushes, or there was a strong possibility that a dropped ball would have bounced back into the bushes.

As we know, Phil opted to play the ball as it lay, and he elected to play the shot right-handed due to the interfering undergrowth. Phil gambled that he could move the ball forward to a point where he could then flop the next shot near the hole and escape with only a bogey. Unfortunately, he barely moved the ball and was forced to play a right-handed shot again. In playing his third shot on the hole, the ball nearly hit his leg. Had that happened, Phil would have been penalized one stroke under Rule 19-2 [Ball in Motion Deflected or Stopped by Player]. Now laying three on hardpan, Phil was unable to flop the ball close enough to the hole to avoid a triple-bogey 6.

