

R&A / USGA Joint Statement on Electronic Devices, Including Distance-Measuring Devices

Introduction

As the governing authorities for the Rules of Golf, R&A Rules Limited (“The R&A”) and the United States Golf Association (“USGA”) issued a ‘Joint Statement of Principles’ on the Rules concerning golf equipment in May 2002. These principles continue to be relevant to the game and have proved invaluable in guiding the governing authorities’ actions since their publication seven years ago.

Since that time, the effects of advancing equipment technology on the playing of the game have spread beyond golf clubs and golf balls to electronic devices, especially distance-measuring devices. The R&A and USGA are aware that this subject has attracted wide-ranging comment and a number of conflicting views. History has proved that it is difficult, if not impossible, to foresee the developments in golf-related equipment which advancing technology will deliver. It is of the greatest importance to golf’s continuing appeal that such advances are judged against clearly articulated principles that are designed to preserve the integrity of the sport.

Distance Information

In an historical context, the game has seen progressive developments in the means by which distance information is available to golfers. From the days when selecting a club was a matter of human judgement, the use of yardage books and hole location sheets and reference to on-course markings has increased significantly. Most recently, the use of distance-measuring devices has become more widespread.

The R&A and USGA first allowed the use of distance-measuring devices in January 2006. Prior to this, while the use of yardage books was allowed, the use of distance-measuring devices was prohibited by Rule 14-3. The change introduced in 2006 permitted the committee in charge of a competition or course to introduce a Local Rule allowing distance-measuring devices. A very important proviso of this permission is that the device must measure distance only; it must not measure other conditions such as wind speed or direction, the slope of the ground or the temperature.

The Rules and their Purpose

While accepting this development in the provision of distance information, The R&A and USGA will remain vigilant when considering the Rules on distance-measuring devices. As with the equipment Rules, the purpose of these Rules is to protect golf’s best traditions, to prevent an over-reliance on technological advances rather than skill, and to ensure that skill is the dominant element of success throughout the game. Permitting the use of a measuring device to provide the same information that can be obtained through use of a yardage book or on-course markings is not considered to diminish the skill level required to play the game.

The R&A and USGA believe that the current practice of allowing distance-measuring devices by Local Rule remains appropriate. In the current circumstances, The R&A and USGA are not advocating that this practice should be changed and neither The R&A nor USGA plan to introduce the Local Rule at any of their championships.

A Clarification of the Rules

The emergence of multi-functional devices that can provide additional information to golfers (that could, for example, further help the golfer to determine how to make his next stroke or that could otherwise affect his playing of the game) is a relatively new development. For the avoidance of doubt, the governing bodies do not believe that it is necessary or appropriate for the Rules of Golf to allow all such devices. The following points clarify how the Rules will be applied:

1. Distance-measuring devices (i.e. devices whose primary function is to measure distance) may continue to be used only if the Local Rule is in effect.
2. When the Local Rule is in effect, distance-measuring devices must be limited to measuring distance only. The use of a distance-measuring device would constitute a breach of the Rules if:
 - The device has the capability of gauging or measuring other conditions that might affect play (e.g. wind speed, gradient, temperature, etc), or;
 - The device has some other non-conforming feature, including, but not limited to, recommendations that might assist the player in making a stroke or in his play, such as club selection, type of shot to be played (e.g. punch shot, pitch and run, etc.), or green reading (i.e. a recommended line of putt), or other advice-related matters. However, it is permissible to use such a device, during a stipulated round, to access distance information from previous rounds that has been processed prior to the commencement of the current round (e.g. a chart of all club yardages), or;
 - The device has the capability to assist in calculating the effective distance between two points (i.e. distance after considering gradient, wind speed and/or direction, temperature or other environmental factors).There would be a breach of the Rules even if all of the above features can be switched off or disengaged, and in fact are switched off or disengaged.
3. Multi-functional devices such as mobile phones, PDAs, etc (i.e. devices that are primarily communication devices, but which may have other potential uses) may be used as follows:
 - The device may be used for any non-golfing purpose (e.g. as a communication tool to phone, text or email), subject to any club / course regulations and the Rules on accessing advice-related matters – see Decision 14-3/16.
 - When the Local Rule is in effect, a distance-measuring application may be used, provided the specific application is restricted to “distance only” and the device does not have any other “non-conforming” features. This is the case even if these other features are not being used. As above, the Rules on advice-related communications (including the use of the internet) still apply.

Conclusion

The R&A and USGA have no intention to permit the use of electronic devices to go beyond the current Rules and interpretations. This means that distance-measuring devices and applications will be limited to distance information only. If a device that is being used for distance-measuring purposes has any additional features, all such features must conform to the Rules of Golf.

All manufacturers of distance-measuring products are encouraged to submit their devices or applications to the appropriate governing body for a ruling.