

# Understanding Rule 15

## Is it a wrong ball or a substituted ball?

by Lorraine Thies

One of the more difficult rules to understand is Rule 15 – Wrong Ball and Substituted Ball. The USGA and R&A wanted to clarify the difference between the two concepts to avoid confusion on the players’ and officials’ parts. The issue-at-hand was to avoid the multiple disqualifications the old wording seemed to

create because players misunderstood the meaning of the Rule.

What’s the difference? The distinction is important. When a “wrong ball” is played, the result is loss of hole in match play or a two-stroke penalty or disqualification in stroke play if the mistake is not corrected before teeing off on the next hole. In the case of a “substituted ball,” if the rules permit substitution, no prob-

lem and no penalty – but if the rules don’t allow substitution, the player incurs a loss of hole penalty in match play and at least a two-stroke penalty in stroke play.

The key to knowing the difference is in understanding the definitions and realizing that every word within the definition has an impact on the intent.

**To avoid the dreaded wrong ball penalty, clearly identify your golf ball.**

**Wrong ball:** A wrong ball is any ball other than the player’s ball in play, provisional ball, or second ball played under Rule 3-3 or Rule 20-7c in stroke play and includes:

- another player’s ball,
- an abandoned ball, and
- the player’s original ball when it is no longer in play.

NOTE: Ball in play includes a ball substituted for the ball in play whether or not the substitution is permitted.

**Substituted ball:** A substituted ball is a ball put into play for the original ball that was either in play, lost, out of bounds or lifted.

Here are some key questions to ask yourself:

Was the ball you struck the same ball with which you made your last stroke?

If not, did you **take an action** to put another ball into play by re-teeing, dropping, placing or replacing a ball?

Did the rules permit you to substitute a ball for your original one? If you don’t know, it’s better to play a second ball in stroke play just in case.

The answers to these questions can work as guidelines to get you to the right answer.



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**Before you take an action on the course, such as put a new ball in play (left) or hit a ball in the vicinity of another, ask yourself a few questions to make sure you are doing it correctly.**

Let's look at a few examples (consider all situations to be stroke play):

**Situation #1:** Player A and B both hit their tee shots in the fairway and in the same general vicinity. After Player A makes his second stroke, they discover that he has actually played Player B's ball. Is this a wrong ball or a substituted ball?

**Ask yourself:**

Did player A make a stroke at his original ball? **NO**

Did player A take an action to put another ball into play? **NO**

- the ball he struck was already on the ground. He did not drop it, place it, or replace it.

**Answer:** Player A has played a ball that was not substituted and was not his ball in play. In this situation, he has hit another player's ball (see definitions), which is a wrong ball.

**Situation #2:** Player A and B are on the

putting green following their tee shots on a par 3 hole. Player B lifts his ball and puts it in his pocket. After he holes out, he discovers that the ball he replaced on the green was not the ball he started the hole with. Is this a wrong

**Ask yourself:**

Did player B finish the hole with his original ball? **NO**

Did player B take an action to put another ball into play? **YES**

- he marked and lifted his original ball. He substituted another ball when he replaced it.

Do the Rules of Golf permit him to substitute a ball in this situation? **NO**

- when he marked and lifted his ball on the putting green he was required to replace the original ball.

**Answer:** Player B has taken an action (i.e. he marked and lifted his original ball) which took it out of play. He then placed another ball into play. He has substituted a ball, which becomes the ball in play (see definition). Since he was not following a rule that allowed substitution he incurred a two stroke penalty. Remember the key here is that the player took an action to put another ball into play.

**Situation #3:** On the next hole, player A pitches his ball onto the green. It comes to rest on Player B's line of play. Player B, who is just off the green, marks player A's ball (with his authority) and tosses it to the side. Player A holes his ball from where it lays on the green instead of replacing it where player B marked it.

**Ask yourself:**

Did player A make a putt with the same ball with which he made his previous stroke? **YES**

Was player A's ball in play when he made a stroke at it? **NO**

- once a player marks and lifts his ball, that ball is out of play until replaced.

Did player A take an action to put his ball back into play? **NO**

**Answer:** Since player A made a stroke at his ball, which had been taken out of play, it is a wrong ball (see definition).

This is, indeed, one of the more difficult rules to understand. By asking yourself a series of questions, and understanding the key elements, you can get to the right answer and save yourself from disqualification.

If you would like some assistance on applying the rules of golf or would like to schedule a rules seminar at your club, contact the AGA office at 602-944-3035 or 800-458-8484. ■