

The USGA, in conjunction with The R&A, introduced "common-sense" rules for 2026, focusing on elite golf, with key changes including a reduced penalty for unknowingly moving a ball (one stroke instead of two), free relief for balls in any unrepaired pitch mark in closely mown areas, expanded relief from obstructions near greens (Model Local Rule F-5), and allowing use of club components as replacements for damaged clubs, plus new local rules on ball distance for elite play. These updates aim for fairness, clarity, and faster play, with PGA Tour implementation starting in 2026.

- **Accidental Ball Movement**: A one-stroke penalty (instead of two) if a player unknowingly causes their ball to move and doesn't replace it, based on reasonable belief.
- **Pitch Mark Relief**: Free relief for a ball embedded in any unrepaired pitch mark on closely mown grass, not just the player's own.
- **Damaged Clubs**: A player can use a club damaged during the round, even if by anger, and can replace a damaged club using a spare component (like a head) without it counting as a 15th club.
- **Internal Out of Bounds (IOB)**: IOB is limited to shots from the teeing area only.
- **Expanded Relief (Model Local Rule F-5)**: Committees can allow two-club-length relief from specific ground under repair (GUR) near the green, like microphone holes, similar to relief from immovable obstructions.
- **Ball Distance (Model Local Rule)**: A new proposed Model Local Rule allows elite competitions to use shorter golf balls, impacting only top-level play, not recreational golf.

Other Clarifications & Updates

- **Penalty Areas**: Committees can mark any penalty area as red for lateral relief and eliminate opposite-side relief for red penalty areas.
- **Bunker Play**: Relaxed rules on touching loose impediments/sand and allowing unplayable ball relief outside the bunker for two penalty strokes.
- **Equipment/DMDs**: Distance Measuring Devices (DMDs) are allowed unless a local rule prohibits them.

These changes, approved by the USGA and R&A and implemented by the PGA Tour starting in 2026, aim to make the game fairer and reduce penalties for technicalities, with the USGA providing resources like workshops and an app for learning.