

Rule Tip of the Week Looking Deeper

The more you study the Rules, the more you come to realize that they are all linked and work together to resolve any conceivable situation on the golf course. The adjacent photograph illustrates the importance of knowing the Rules.

Initially, you see that the player's ball has come to rest adjacent to a tree root. Looking deeper, you realize that the area surrounding the ball is covered by plastic netting. Looking even deeper, with the aid of a tee, you discover that there are other tree roots situated just beneath and behind the ball.



Let's examine each of these items in reverse order of discovery. For the hidden roots, Decision 13-2/27 [Probing Near Ball for Tree Roots] advises that it is permissible for a player to probe the area around his ball with a tee or the like to see if his club would strike a root in the course of making a stroke. Such probing is permitted provided the lie of the ball, area of intended stance or swing or the line of play is not improved (Rule 13-2) and the ball is not moved (Rule 18-2).

Decision 33-8/8 [Local Rule Providing Relief from Tree Roots] tells us that interfering roots do not qualify as an abnormal ground condition. Therefore, there is no relief without penalty from these roots.

The manmade plastic netting is there to protect and promote the growth of grass. By Definition, the netting is an immovable obstruction because it cannot be removed without causing damage. The applicable Rule for relief from this netting is Rule 24-2 [Immovable Obstruction]. This Rule affords the player relief without penalty from an immovable obstruction when a ball lies in or on the obstruction, or when the obstruction interferes with the player's stance or the area of his intended swing. In this case, the plastic netting interferes with the lie of the ball, the player's stance and the area of his intended swing.

At this point, it would appear that the player is entitled to free relief from the plastic netting under Rule 24-2. However, looking deeper into this Rule, you encounter the Exception that states, in part, "*A player may not take relief under this Rule if ... interference by anything other than an immovable obstruction makes the stroke clearly impracticable ...*"

When it comes to golf, everyone is different in terms of size, strength, and ability. Thus, what may be "*clearly impracticable*" for one player, e.g., a high-handicapper, may be relatively easy for another player, e.g., a Tour player. Therefore, it is necessary to look even deeper, this time into the mind of the player! Given the situation in the photograph, the question to be answered honestly by the player would be: "*If the plastic netting was not there, how would you play the ball?*"

If the player answers, "*I wouldn't play the ball due to the nearby roots*", then the Exception takes over because the player has reasonably determined that interference from the roots makes the stroke clearly impracticable. However, the player could then proceed under Rule 28c [Ball Unplayable] incurring a one-stroke penalty by dropping away from the roots within two club-lengths of the spot where the ball lay, but not nearer the hole. If the dropped ball then ends up away from the roots, but still on the plastic netting, the player could subsequently obtain relief without penalty from the netting under Rule 24-2.