

Why Do We Cheat?

ACCORDING to a shocking new Duke University survey of nearly 15,000 everyday golfers, 95 percent of us knowingly break the USGA Rules of Golf nearly every round—whether we’re foot-wedging balls from bad lies or scraping up four-footers and saying, “That’s good.”

Golf is about honor. How can almost every amateur have a cheatin’ heart? Because in their mind, it’s not cheating. “Say you drive it into a creek but didn’t know the water was there until you reached it,” says Scott McKenzie, the Duke student who headed up the study. “You tell yourself you wouldn’t have lost the shot had you known the creek was there. So you drop, no penalty. That’s cheating, and it’s indicative of how golfers talk themselves into breaking the Rules. The study found that time and again, in your mind you deserve that drop.” It goes deeper. We also want to protect our self-image of being, say, a single-digit handicap, so we shave a stroke here and there to turn that 81 into a 79.

McKenzie is fascinated by the nuances of how we rationalize Rule-breaking. For example, the less direct contact a player has with his ball, the more likely he is to cheat. “Say you’re behind a tree,” McKenzie says. “Few golfers will pick up the ball and move it to a better spot. That crosses a line. But they’ll move the ball with the clubface, or kick it, and get the exact



A stunning 95 percent of everyday golfers use the trusty foot wedge, shave strokes off their card, or otherwise knowingly break the Rules of Golf.

same outcome: an illegally improved lie. Or a guy will knowingly write down an incorrect score on a hole but will almost never erase a [correct] score that’s there and replace it with a better one. Why? To erase what’s written goes against the natural state of things. Cheating seems black and white. A rule is a rule. But the mind sees it more discreetly. We see shades of gray.”

THE CHEAT SHEET

The 5 most acceptable kinds of cheating, according to golfers in the study:

1. Asking a player what club he used before you tee off
2. Accidentally touching your ball during a practice swing, then replacing it to its original spot with no penalty
3. Taking a first-tee Mulligan
4. Not taking a penalty when, while grounding your club, the ball moves
5. Moving your ball a foot or two out of a divot onto the fairway

The 5 most immoral kinds of cheating:

1. After feeling you played well, you don’t like your final score, so you change the final number
2. You physically pick up your ball from behind a tree and place it in the fairway, which gives you a clear path to the hole
3. After failing to find your shot in the rough, you drop a ball from your pocket and tell the group you found your original ball
4. Intending to avoid a creek you know is there, your layup finds water—and you take a free drop
5. You kick your ball from behind a tree to the fairway, giving yourself an unimpeded shot at the green

“Rational lies: So many golfers cheat because to them it’s not cheating.”