Most golfers have a bone or two to pick with the Rules of Golf.

“The Rules seem unfair!” Under the old Rules, for example, if you moved your own ball during a search you were penalized, but if another player moved your ball while searching they didn’t get a penalty.

“The Rules are too complicated.” That’s true, but also somewhat expected. Since there is one set of rules that governs the play of a game that is played outdoors, with a round ball, on a natural field for which there’s no standard size, in any kind of weather, either in match or stroke play, in groups of 2, 3 or 4, some complexity is warranted.

“Why can’t I find the answer in the Rule book?” Given that there were 34 Rules (and sub-Rules), over 1,200 Decisions on the Rules of Golf, plus Definitions, Notes, Exceptions and Appendices, it truly took an expert to consistently find the answers to Rules questions, especially in rare situations.

All of these reasons, and more, have led to the latest revision to the Rules of Golf.

History of Changes to the Rules of Golf
The Rules are constantly reviewed and changed by the governing bodies (the USGA and the R&A). For the past few decades the code has been revised every four years. Examples of these revisions are dropping from arm’s length and shoulder height, implemented in 1980; allowing a player to mark, lift, clean and replace his or her ball on the putting green, first allowed in 1960; and imposing the 14-club limit in 1938.

In addition to the regular revision cycle, the governing bodies have undertaken fundamental revisions – where they step back and review the rules from top to bottom – four times in the past: in 1899, 1934, 1952 (when the USGA and R&A unified the Rules into a single code) and 1984.

Modernization, not Simplification
The latest major revision, which went into effect worldwide on January 1, 2019, is the result of a seven-year effort to evaluate the Rules in several key ways. Could they be modified to promote playing the game at a faster pace? Could the language used in the Rules be simplified and yet maintain a balance between simple and fair? Could the code be written in a plainer style that made the Rules easier to understand and made translating more accurate? Could the Rules be aligned better with the player’s instincts of what to do?
To address pace of play, the revised Rules reduce the search time for a lost ball from five to three minutes, allow an alternative procedure by local rule for a lost ball or a ball out of bounds, and remove the penalty for hitting the flagstick with a ball played from the putting green.

Simple rules are not always flexible enough to produce a fair outcome. For example, “always play your ball as it lies” is simple enough but doesn’t help if your ball is at the bottom of a pond or can’t be found in tall grass. So now Rule 9.1a says, “You must play your ball at rest on the course as it lies, except when the Rules require or allow you to play a ball from another place on the course.” It’s still simple yet allows a player to continue playing the hole if his or her ball isn’t found or recoverable.

It’s fairly easy to imagine the enormity of the task of translating the Rules into many languages, especially when the Rules language can be arcane. So, for example, *casual water* has given way to *Temporary Water*; *through the green* is now called the *General Area*; and a player now *drops again* rather than *redrops* if necessary. (Throughout this article words and phrases that are italicized and capitalized are Definitions in the Rules.)

Most players instinctively believe that a dropped ball must stay in some prescribed area. Under the former Rules that was sometimes true but sometimes not. Under the new Rules a dropped ball must always come to rest in the defined *Relief Area*; if it fails to stay in the *Relief Area* it must be dropped again. The new relief procedure, including new concepts of dropping from knee height, a *Reference Point* and *Relief Area*, also are now consistently implemented whenever a player is taking free relief or penalty relief anywhere on the course.

**Structure, Organization and Presentation**

There are now 24 Rules of Golf; previously there were 34. In addition to consolidating similar Rules together – for example, combining the Rules covering *Movable Obstructions* with *Loose Impediments* into a single Rule - the new Rules also incorporate several hundred of the former Decisions either into the Rules themselves or into the Definitions.

The new Rules are presented in three different bound editions. “The Player’s Edition of the Rules of Golf” is written in the second person, contains the Rules and the Definitions, and is formatted to fit easily into your golf bag. Some infrequent situations are omitted, but you are referred to the full Rules for those rare instances. The “Rules of Golf” is intended primarily for tournament officials. It contains not only the full Rules and Definitions but also an index to help find the appropriate Rule quickly. The “Official Guide to the Rules of Golf” contains the full Rules and Definitions, plus the Interpretations of the Rules, Committee Procedures, Model Local Rules, and modified Rules for players with disabilities.

In addition, all three editions are available in the USGA Official Rules of Golf app, available for free for both iOS and Android devices.

**Highlighted Changes to the Rules**
It is certainly beyond the scope of this article to present every change to the Rules, but here are a few select changes that you’re likely to encounter in your day-to-day play:

- Time to search for a lost ball has been reduced from 5 minutes to 3 minutes.
- When dropping a ball, you now must drop from knee height, not shoulder height. A dropped ball must first strike the Relief Area defined in the appropriate Rule and must come to rest in that area. Under the new Rules a ball is always dropped in a Relief Area, rather than on a specific line or spot on the course.
- Penalty Areas – formerly known as water hazards – are treated like the rest of the course in that not only can you ground your club and move loose impediments, but you can also take penalty relief outside the hazard if you wish.
- Most Penalty Areas are defined by red stakes or lines. However, some Penalty Areas will be marked yellow to preserve the integrity of the hole. At Columbia, the creek in front of #2 green and the pond at #16 are yellow Penalty Areas.
- The entire left side of holes #2, #3, and #4 – from #2 tee all the way past #4 green – is now a red Penalty Area. If you know or are virtually certain that your ball is in this area you may take relief under Rule 17.
- The Golf Committee has adopted the Local Rule allowing for an alternate procedure for a ball that is lost or out of bounds. In short, the player estimates where his or her ball lies and can drop within two club lengths of the edge of the fairway, no closer to the hole than the ball’s estimated location, for a total of two penalty strokes. You may also proceed under stroke and distance if you choose. Please see the diagrams about this Local Rule posted at the Pro Shop.
- You can now fix nearly any damage on the putting green, including ball marks, spike marks, animal damage, and old hole plugs. You cannot repair natural defects or aeration holes.
- There is no longer a penalty for striking an unattended flagstick with a ball played from the putting green.
- You can now move loose impediments in bunkers, but there is still a penalty if your ball moves as a result. You can now touch the sand in a bunker with your hand or your club as long as you are not testing the bunker. However, you cannot touch the sand immediately in front of or behind your ball with your hand or club.
- Most accidental acts are no longer penalized. For example, double hits and a ball hitting a player after he or she makes a stroke at the ball no longer result in a penalty. A player who moves his or her own ball during a search is no longer penalized. And a ball accidentally moved by the player on the putting green is always replaced without penalty.
- If you have marked, lifted and replaced your ball on the putting green and it is moved by accident or by Natural Forces you must replace your ball on the spot without penalty.
- However, if your ball on the putting green moves as a result of Natural Forces before it has been marked it must be played from its new position.
- You now can substitute a ball when taking free or penalty relief.
• Player conduct is now part of the Rules. Specifically, Rule 1.2 requires that players always act with integrity, be considerate of others (by playing at a “prompt pace”, for example), and take good care of the course.

Learning the New Rules
There are many resources to help you learn the new Rules. Two of the best are the USGA Rules of Golf app and the Player’s Edition of the Rules. The app is available at no cost from both the iOS and Android app stores, and the Player’s Edition is available from the USGA for just the cost of shipping.

The USGA’s Rules Hub web site (http://www.usga.org/content/usga/home-page/rules-hub.html) contains the full text of the Rules, Definitions, and Interpretations as well as videos and quizzes. The USGA’s YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/TheUSGA) also has dozens of helpful videos.

If you would like to study the Rules in depth most Rules experts advise beginning with a thorough reading of the Definitions, as these are the basis for understanding what a Rule actually says. For example, the old Rules included water hazards and bunkers as “hazards”. The new Rules separate them into separate Definitions (“Penalty Area” and “Bunker”) and Rules (Rules 17 and 12, respectively), because they are now treated so differently from one another.

In the USGA Rules app Definitions are italicized in the body of the Rules and are linked directly to the Definition itself, which is a very helpful feature.

What the Future Holds
As with any top-to-bottom overhaul there are bound to be some hiccups along the way. The ruling bodies have already issued several clarifications to the new Rules, including several in February which addressed concerns about how the prohibition against certain caddie positioning under Rule 10.2b was being applied. We’ll almost certainly see more discussion and possible additional clarifications as the golf season in the northern hemisphere gets fully under way.

There is no reason to think that the ruling bodies won’t resume their regular schedule of revisions and updates, perhaps even on an accelerated schedule for the next few years.

While the Rules have gotten a facelift, the game remains the same. It is still a game of integrity and honor; you are still expected to monitor your own play and call penalties on yourself. And the two fundamental principles of the Rules remain unchanged: play the course as you find it and your ball as it lies.

Above all, have fun playing this ancient and lovely game.