

Relief from Movable Obstructions: In/On vs. Against/Near

(Movable Obstruction, anything artificial/manufactured that can be easily moved.

*See Rule 24-1 a and 24-1 b *)*

The Rules of Golf are very specific, but cover almost any known situation. As a result sometimes they don't seem to make common sense. The following story is just such a case, yet when you consider it carefully there is a reason for the different procedures.

Meg and Jo are approaching Santa Teresa's #6 green. Meg's approach stopped in the rough and ended up on a golf towel dropped by an earlier player. There it sat in the middle of the towel. Does Meg get relief?

Jo's approach landed short of the right side of the green and rolled into the steep side of the bunker, but was stopped by a rake just inside the bunker. Does Jo get relief?

The basic answer to both questions is yes, because both the towel and the rake are Movable Obstructions. However, in lifting the rake the ball will surely roll down the slope of the bunker ending up in the middle of the bunker, a much better location than where it was against the rake. Likewise, Meg will have to lift her ball in order to remove the towel. Does the ball being moved make a difference? Do the women still get relief?

The answer in both cases is yes, they get relief, BUT *they must proceed in very different ways*. Meg lifts the rake, and as expected the ball rolls to the bottom of the bunker. She must now **place** the ball back where it was before the rake was lifted. If it again rolls away (as it most surely will) she must again try to place it in its original spot. If it rolls a second time, she then must **place** the ball in the nearest spot in the bunker where it will stay put. This is probably near the base of the slope, but not all the way down to the flat bottom of the bunker.

Now it is Jo's turn. She is allowed to lift her ball and remove the towel, but then she must **drop** the ball as nearly as possible to where it lay on the towel. (The usual rules about dropping apply here: no nearer the hole, not more than 2 club lengths away, etc. See Rule 20-2-c for full details.)

Why should one have to **place** the ball and the other **drop** the ball? What is different about the two situations? Simply this: Meg knows exactly where her ball was and can put it exactly back. Jo has an idea, but does not know exactly what the condition was where the ball would have been. If she lifted the towel and found both a bare spot and a grassy spot about where the ball would have been, she would have a choice if allowed to place the ball. But Golf Rules rarely, if ever, give you a choice ahead of time unless a penalty is involved. By dropping the ball, Jo has no more control over where it ends up than she did when she hit her approach shot.

By the way, the two locations could have been reversed with the rake being out of the bunker but barely keeping the ball from rolling in, and with the towel in the bunker, and the procedure would be the same. Meg would still have to place the ball, and Jo would have to drop the ball (and hope the bunker wasn't so soft the ball would make a dent).

* If you read the actual rules, be very careful. Both are so similar that it is easy to miss the difference.

24-1-a starts: "If the ball **does not lie in or on** the obstruction. . . ." [this assumes it is touching or near]

24-1-b starts: "If the ball **lies in or on** the obstruction . . ." [this assumes it is actually in or on]

Finally, it is worth reading the whole rule as it covers more than the incidents in the story above.