

Consider the facts: Virtually all golfers are terrible.



DID SOMEONE SAY Mulligan?!



What if the sacred Rules of Golf are all wrong?

Just asking that question may be links heresy. It feels as wrong as whispering in Sunday School that the Ten Commandments need improvement.

But please—listen for a moment.

Golf was dreamt up by the Scots or the Vikings or the Dutch sometime too long ago to remember. Invented by men who could not break 120 on their best day, these blokes were so bored that they decided to tromp around in the long grasses and weeds near the sea with their dogs looking for rabbit holes, then knock beach pebbles into those holes with their walking sticks. These same unhappy men then decided to make “rules.” And keep score. The rest is history.

But what if golf’s creators got it all wrong? What if the Rules of Golf, which we consider almost holy, are fundamentally flawed?

Consider some facts. Virtually all golfers are terrible. Golf is too hard. This is a scientific statement, confirmed by the National Golf Foundation, which states that fewer than five percent of golfers break 80, only 26 percent break 90, just 55 percent break 100, and a full 45 percent cannot break 100. Indeed, 11 percent of all golfers cannot break 120! Almost no one breaks “par”—a term loosely used to describe what a golfer should actually do.

Indeed, those who break par (known as “plus handicaps”) are so rare most people have never even met one. PGA Tour guys are rarer still. Only about 400 people on the planet are good enough to make a living playing golf. No wonder people like me went to law school. Imagine a world where only

400 lawyers could make a living—heaven, maybe? Neither Tiger Woods nor Jack Nicklaus, the two greatest of all time, has ever broken 60 in competition. That means birdies are rare. Pars are rare for most people. Bogeys are solid golf. Double bogeys are normal.

Thus, let me state the obvious: Under the current rules, golf is way too hard.

The sweet spot on a club is the size of Tom Thumb’s fingernail, and that sweet spot is at the end of a very long club, almost four feet long for drivers. The clubhead must travel on a long journey that starts with the golfer staring at a little white ball while wearing a coat and tie (you’ve seen the old photos) or other street clothes with spiked shoes. The golfer wraps the long club around his head to generate enough power to return the club on that journey back to the white sphere, hoping to hit the back of that ball, if it can be found again at all.

Only those who have spent their entire life mastering this skill can do it well—and in a sad paradox, those expert golfers are the most miserable of all. Eventually, almost all expert golfers hate the game. A perfect swing is just too hard to repeat. Once you have felt the sweetness of your hands on a perfect shot, you want it again, but it has flown away to the clouds, gone forever. The search for that feeling can last decades.

In summary, golf is sadly full of angst—fear, even terror at times. Perfectionism is prevalent. We play a game requiring an almost impossible athletic move to send a tiny ball toward a slightly larger hole with no second chances allowed.

ARTICLE BY TIM PHILPOT | HUSBAND, ATTORNEY, GOLFER, REVOLUTIONARY

Golf—that's right, the very game itself—needs a mulligan.

The term is a familiar concept. It is also currently illegal, at least under the Rules of Golf. People like Bill Clinton and Donald Trump get away with it because they run the world itself. But for everyone else, employing a mulligan is the practice of weak players with no true appreciation for the sanctity of the game. In essence, it is denounced as cheating.

But listen, my friends. Mulligans are common in other sports.

In baseball, you get three strikes before failure. Swing and miss twice—not a problem. You can hit foul balls for eternity, if you like.

In football, you get four tries to make a first down. In fact, the first down is often just a setup for the real play. Quarterbacks can throw it out of bounds and be called smart for doing so.

In tennis, you get two serves. You are almost encouraged to miss the first one. You can softly doink the second one if the bomb doesn't work.

In bowling, you get a second chance called a spare. All spares and you're considered a superstar, the equivalent of a two handicap in golf.

In track and field events, javelin and discus throwers get six attempts. High jumpers and pole vaulters get three tries over the bar at every height. Failure is expected if you wish to be great.

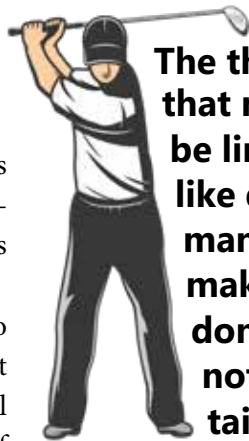
You get the point.

So why not golf? Why not mulligans? Real ones. Legal ones. Even tournament golf.

Typical "scrambles," played only in the United States as far as I can tell, are a version of mulligan golf. And they are popular because bad golfers can enjoy the game. It is perfectly legal to forget the myriad of bad shots that

take place constantly, and only play the best shot.

Even the current handicap system is seriously flawed. It is certainly functional—but it also leaves no incentive to get better. Mediocre players are rewarded for being mediocre. The current system just gives a bad player a free stroke (or two). He does not need to earn it. It is a gift.



The thinking goes that mulligans must be limited, sort of like donuts. Too many mulligans will make you fat. One donut is okay but not two, and certainly not three.

Ol' Joe with his 16 handicap is gifted 12 strokes over Po' Bob with his 4 handicap. Bob has worked his whole life to play good golf and establish a legitimate 4. And his reward? Losing every day to his buddy Joe, who can't putt or chip and hits it 205 yards with his biggest wallop. Joe has never had a lesson ever and has no intention to get better. He loves being a 16. And he loves spending Bob's money.

Even Jesus might ask Joe, as he did the man at the pool of Bethesda, "Do you want to get well?" And Joe would look up and say, "No, thanks, I am a happy 16!"

And thus, I want to present a new and improved game.

What if Joe got no free gift strokes? Instead of free strokes, what if Joe got mulligans instead—a second chance? A golfer's spare. A golfer's second strike or third down. What if Joe got 16 mulligans and Bob got four?

Before you sneer or laugh, remember, the Rules of Golf were not handed

down at Mount Sinai. They came from losers wandering around in the gorse bushes of Scotland, not from the burning bush that spoke to Moses. They did not come carved in stone. They came from tired old men who could not play a lick but were trying to figure out how to win, even though their "spoon" club went 125 yards max.

And though a lesser argument, perhaps, we cannot forget that almost no one plays by the rules anyway. "Gimmies" are common. "Breakfast balls" are routine. Winter rules are played in July. And "lay one down—we know it's here somewhere" happens often among friends. Even the pros play "lift, clean, and place" after a little rain has fallen.

Truthfully, "real golf" is played only with a pencil in hand, attested by a competent scorekeeper, and entered into the system as a real round of golf. All putts are holed. All rules are followed. A record is kept. That is real golf, and we all know the truth: most people hate it!

It is time to change, and I have a proposal. But I am a lawyer, and I'm still hearing the arguments. Some of you are saying, "We already have mulligans."

Pish!

You give them on the first tee only, because you've all raced there from your conference calls on the way to the course. After that, the grace disappears. Every shot counts and every putt is holed, other than the reluctant deferences to tap-ins.

"No," you say, "I'm more generous than that. You can take your mulligan on any tee you want. Any time, one time." One time? You're like the stingy geezer married 50 years who says to his wife, "I told you I loved you when I married you. If anything changes, I'll let you know."

Even if you're more gracious than this, offering a mulligan on each nine or two for the round, anywhere you'd like, too many of you add conditions: No mullies on par-3s. No do-overs for putts. And no two-in-a-row deals. The thinking goes that mulligans must be limited, sort of like donuts. Too many mulligans will make you fat. One donut is okay but not two, and certainly not three. After all, we are serious golfers.

Have we heard enough from the Hnaysayers? Let's hope so, because here's what I have in mind: one mulligan for each handicap stroke. Call it revolutionary if you want, or simply the natural evolution of things. I don't care. But think about it.

What if the player got one mulligan on every hole where he has an extra stroke on the scorecard—not just on the tee shot but on any shot? Back to Ol' Joe with his 16 handicap: He would get mulligans on 16 holes. That's 16 second chances, not an automatic gift stroke on the scorecard.

It's far more strategic, because you have to decide where to use it. Bad drives would allow a mulligan drive, but then you have to play the rest of the hole with no mulligan in your back pocket. Or you can save it. Don't like your second shot into the bunker? Just drop a ball and hit the next one on the green. Happy enough with the drive and the approach to the green? Now you may have a mulligan putt, allowing you to get a read from the first one.

You see, the stroke must be earned in play, not casually given on the scorecard. Even purists can appreciate this. No more: "Six/net five." Only a real score, aided by a mulligan.

By the way, it's up to you. Do you have to play the mulligan? Not in my version of the game. Instead, it's like

that scramble game with buddies: choose your better shot and play on.

The good news is, you don't have to stop there. I've been experimenting broadly. You might call it my lessons in the boundaries of grace. Here are two more versions that might forever change the way you play.

One Mulligan on Every Hole. Forget the handicaps. Why not one mulligan on every hole for every player? All players immediately get better. Limiting the mulligan to the drive only on the first tee, or once a round, or only on your stroke holes just whets the appetite. You'll only satisfy this yearning with the full-blown one-per-hole on any shot you choose. Golf becomes fun. The bad shots can truly be forgotten—like our sins in God's wastebasket.

When my friend Steve birdied the second hole, he began to believe. After a while, even his first shots improved, because there was no pressure on the first one with that mulligan in his back pocket.



It may change your opinion of me to know that I am not only a lawyer. I have also been a volunteer coach with the University of Kentucky men's golf team. That's D1, baby. These kids include state champions and they generally play to about +3 or +4 handicaps. I am a 6. But give me a mulligan on every hole, and I often beat the kid. (Limit me to a mulligan on the appropriate stroke holes, and it comes out virtually even every time.) My normal

78 becomes a 69 or so—which keeps me competitive with the kids. And best of all, shooting 69 with the mulligans feels a lot better than shooting 78 with all the revered Rules of Golf.

"Nice birdie" is a nice sound when walking off the green—even if it was done with a mulligan putt. Even better, actually.

The Ultimate Mulligan. Nothing compares with the sheer joy of the Ultimate Mulligan. One mulligan for every shot! Why not? Hit two shots every time unless you are satisfied completely with the first, which only seems to happen on tee balls (a long drive down the middle of the fairway will always suffice) or holed shots. No mulligan is needed for putts or chips that find the hole. It's like playing a scramble by yourself. Now you can be the dream teammate you've always wanted!

The glory of this system is immeasurable. Golf becomes wonderful, sublime, just plain fun. Eight handicaps routinely break par. Golfers who shoot 110 break 90. Scratch golfers shoot tour quality numbers. A 67-year-old man like me routinely shoots his age. The good man inside every golfer is released onto the golf course like a fragrant whiff of April flowers at Augusta.

Most people have no idea how good they can be. They have resigned themselves to being bad. They have a number in their head that has defined them for too long. Ask a typical golfer his handicap and you will hear, "I'm a 22," said with embarrassment. Or, "I am a bad 9," meaning "I can barely break 90 right now." Or, "I am a 2 that can't beat anybody," from someone frustrated that he mostly shoots a lot of 80s but shoots even-par just often enough to keep his handicap low. Even a "zero" answer might be disappointing for someone who dreamed of a career on

the PGA Tour. So in short, a mulligan on every shot erases all that negativity.

Testimonies abound. My latest disciple is Steve from Southern California. He loves golf. Don't ask me how, but he seemed perfectly happy with his 22 handicap when we met for golf recently. He is usually trying to break 100. His enemy is the century mark. Steve is an engineer who loves to keep score, meticulously recording every lousy stroke. His personality is not made for mulligan golf. So when I suggested it to him on a recent vacation in Ojai, California, he didn't seem too interested. He still believed it was cheating. To his Christian conscience, it seemed right that a bad drive, and a poor second, a lousy chip, and three putts should be a double bogey on the easy par-4 first hole.

But he reluctantly agreed to try the Ultimate Mulligan. I had to remind him, time and again on the first few holes, "Don't forget, you get another shot." So another ball was thrown down and sure enough, his second shot was almost always better. And when he birdied the second hole, he began to believe. After a while, even his first shots improved, because there was no pressure on the first one with that mulligan in his back pocket.

When I showed him the 39 on his front-nine scorecard, he saw the light: Indeed, there was a good golfer living inside him. It had just never been publicly acknowledged or encouraged. As we concluded the eighteenth hole and added up the scores over a drink, Philpot, with his 6 handicap, hit almost every green and shot 63, eight under par; Garrison, with his 22 handicap, shot 80, just nine over par. He hadn't broken 90 in decades.

We played in under four hours. We held up no one. We wasted no time hitting from bunkers or chipping out

from the woods. We were often putting for birdies instead of chipping for pars. My 63 was better than his 80, and that felt way better for us than my 80 being better than his 96.

Listen, you can bring me your objections, but it would only show that you haven't been paying attention.

Slow play: Not a problem. The time it takes to hit the mulligan shot is minimal compared to the time wasted in searching for balls, chipping out, raking bunkers, and making double bogeys. It takes a lot less time to shoot 80 than 96, even if you hit some extra shots to get there. It gets even better if the high handicap "bogey man" plays with old balls he can afford to lose. Way too much time is squandered looking for Pinnacles. I currently have 500 balls in my garage looking for a home in the woods or the bottom of a pond. They'd be much happier there than next to my Shop-Vac.

Competition: Serious players and gamblers may object that mulligan golf takes away the edge. If anything, it ups the ante because now good shots win, instead of bad shots lose. The choked three-footer on eighteen becomes rare, replaced by a great second shot to birdie the last hole. The competition does not change—just the scores, which are universally better. Way better. Matching mulligans to handicaps works well in match play, for sure, but also works in medal events. A full medal tournament could be played with the net scores being eliminated. And there is no guarantee that your strokes (mulligans) would actually help your score. Unlike your net score freebies, you still have to earn these.

Finally, you can tell me it feels like cheating. But why? We don't play by the Royal and Ancient Rules anyway. The typical group at my club says,

"Pick it up," "That's good," and, "Tee it up in the fairway today, boys, it's wet out there." The woods are treated as an unmarked lateral hazard. So, why should mulligan golf be cheating—especially if *everybody did it*?

Does Tom Brady feel like a failure for throwing an incompleteness? Does Roger Federer feel like he is cheating when he misses his first serve? Did Michael Jordan think he was cheating when he missed, got the rebound, and dunked it? Or what about Joey Votto, who swings and misses twice, then laces a single up the middle? The first base coach pats him on the butt, the announcers proclaim what a "tough out" he is, and the Reds pay him \$18 million to hit lots of foul balls and singles.



Ultimate Mulligan golf is my future. At 67, I shoot my age almost every day. It's because the Best Me makes lots of pars and birdies. Bogeys are rare. For the first time in ages, I like myself again. The Me who shoots 75 on a good day and 88 on a bad day is easy to hate. The Best Me who shoots 63 is really easy to like.

So, if you find yourself hating not only golf but you... if you have been thinking about putting your clubs in a yard sale... try the Ultimate Mulligan first. There is a good golfer living inside you. Go find that player! 🏌️

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