

# The Cardinal Rules Of Golf (Part 1)

# AVOID STUPID SHOTS

Almost all highly successful people have three or four philosophical thoughts or rules they live by daily. These simple rules have broad meaning over all aspects of their lives. They apply these rules in a repeating sequence, and their rules are flexible enough to apply to any given situation — personal, professional or anywhere in between. These rules serve as guideposts when confronted with difficult situations and decisions.

The irony is successful people who have their three to four simple rules that govern their lives off the golf course often do not have any rules they apply to their golf games. They have nothing to depend on while on the course.

They have no guideposts for the adventures they face on the course. >>

**By John Hughes** • Photos by Russell Kirk Photography



## THE CARDINAL RULE

of keeping par in play is flexible enough to allow you to adjust par for any hole given a particular situation. If you find that you just hit your tee shot out of bounds on a par-4 hole, keeping par in play would basically mean that when you tee up a second ball, the par for the hole is 6, and **all your decisions on the course should be centered around making 6, not 4 or even 5.**





## FOR THE

better-than-average player, keeping par in play means playing with “**conservative aggression.**” This requires you to keep your decision-making simple, **understand where to take risks on the course** and know when not to be heroic with shots in order to preserve the opportunity to make par on every hole.

Starting with this issue, we will begin a three-part series on the cardinal rules of golf. You can apply these simple yet profound rules to your game and see immediate, sustained success. These rules use a lot of information to distinguish and categorize variables before the actual execution of the swing, yet the sequential ordering of the variables within each rule allows for flexibility based on the situation at hand. Once you understand these three simple, yet broad rules and apply them to all aspects of your game, you will immediately lower your scores.

The first cardinal rule of golf we will discuss is keeping par in play. For the average player, this is an easy concept to rationalize but hard to apply, especially if you find yourself hitting many inconsistent shots. Whether you hit shots straight down the middle or are constantly finding yourself in awkward positions on the course, this decision-making process

reduces your tendency to make big scores and helps you understand how to play a more consistent game of golf.

In my opinion, great decisions on the course far outweigh your ability, or lack thereof, to hit a shot. Make a great decision and the odds are highly in your favor that you will commit to and execute the shot you need at any given time.

Keeping par in play means to play shots that will give you an opportunity to make par on every hole. This rule is flexible enough to allow you to adjust par for any hole given a particular situation. For example, if you find that you just hit your tee shot out of bounds on a par-4 hole, keeping par in play would basically mean that when you tee up a second ball, the par for the hole is 6, and all your decisions on the course should be centered around making 6, not 4 or even 5.

Another example is if you find yourself in the middle of lots of trees and do not

have any way of advancing the ball. You might add one stroke to par for that hole, recognizing that a bogey on the hole is a good score.

In applying the rule of keeping par in play in this manner, you are dealing more with your mindset rather than actual physical abilities. You are also coping with the circumstances you are currently trying to conquer, with the ultimate goal of returning the lowest possible score for the hole you are now playing.

For the better than average player, this concept as a mindset can help produce sub-par scores. Another way of phrasing this rule for the better player is to play with “conservative aggression.” This means keeping your decision-making simple, understanding where to take risks on the course and knowing when not to be heroic with shots in order to preserve the opportunity to make par on every hole.







## GATHERING INFORMATION

and determining the condition of your lie will help you understand whether you have other options at your disposal to **keep par as the target score.**

One of the first adaptations of this rule for the better player is to aim for the middle of each green on every hole rather than to shoot for the pin all the time. If you use this thought for all your approach shots, you guarantee yourself an opportunity for birdie.

One junior student of mine played very aggressively when I first began to instruct him. He loved to knock down pins. He believed he had a great short game and should be scoring better. He did have a marvelous short game because he was constantly using it in tight situations to save par. He never really gave himself enough opportunities within a round to have legitimate attempts for birdie.

Once he bought into the concept of hitting the middle of the green to keep par in play, his handicap improved drastically. Within one month of using this concept, he played in a major junior tournament. Even with severe climatic condi-

tions all three days, he posted a score of 6-under par for the tournament, winning the event by a whopping 11 strokes.

Other adaptations of this rule apply to the actual shot you must execute. For example, if you are trapped in a forest of large trees, are hitting a ball that is par-

prior to playing it. By asking yourself a few simple questions, you can gain the knowledge necessary to make a great decision and stay committed to the choice of shot, regardless of whether you are lying perfectly in the fairway or are experiencing any trouble on the course.

First, determine your lie. This is crucial. Your lie can sometimes be the most dominant variable in deciding what shot to play. Gathering information and determining the condition of your lie first will help you understand whether you have other options at your disposal to keep par as the target score.



Second, consider where your target is

in relation to your lie. Do you have a clear look at your target or do you have an obstructed view? How far away is the target? Is your target at a distance that is obtainable from the condition you are in, or is it too far away? You will need this information to understand what club to choose as well as how to play around the

# One of the first adaptations of this rule for the better player is to aim for the middle of each green on every hole rather than to shoot for the pin all the time.

tially submerged, have a severely uneven lie or experience any other situation that might be out of the ordinary, you need to take a deep breath and realize that par is still an obtainable score.

You must also go through a well-defined decision-making process to ensure you are committed to the shot







## ANOTHER IMPORTANT

consideration is where your target is in relation to your lie. **Do you have a clear look at your target**, or do you have an obstructed view? How far away is the target? Is your target at a distance that is obtainable from your lie? You will need this information to **understand what club to choose** as well as how to play around the obstacle you might be encountering.

obstacle you might be encountering.

Next, identify your obstacles. These are not limited to trees, water, sand or terrain, or a combination of all of these. Sometimes obstacles are your physical abilities. If you cannot hit a draw and the shot requires a draw to advance the ball as far as possible, then you have an obstacle you must overcome.

Obstacles also come in the form of not having the proper club in your bag to execute a shot or being unable to get close enough to the ball to ensure good club contact with the ball.

Another obstacle is a severely uneven lie, which causes you to place your stance and setup in compromising positions. Remember, if there are too many obstacles in your way of making a fair attempt at playing the ball forward, you could always play the ball backward or declare the ball unplayable. These two decisions have saved lots of strokes for many golfers.

Finally, evaluate your atmospheric conditions. Will the wind hamper your ability to hit the green? Is the dew on the ball so heavy that it will make the ball skid? Is it hot or cold, and how will that







## YOU MUST

evaluate your atmospheric conditions, such as if the wind will hamper your ability to hit the green. **Gathering as much information as you can about the weather conditions** will help you make the right decision on which shot to hit.

affect the distance the ball will travel? In which direction is the wind coming from? Gathering as much information as you can about the weather conditions will help you make the right decision on which shot to hit.

Once you have this information, you can now make a more informed decision regarding the real possibilities of making par, as well as what club to use, the optimal ball flight and any setup adjustments.

In making your decisions, you should rely on your instincts. Your brain and body will tell you if a decision is good or not. If you have made an uncomfortable decision based upon your ability and the conditions you face, you will feel uncomfortable.

When you face a difficult situation, think of at least three options. If you can think of at least three possible ways to play an escape shot, you are bound to pick the one that feels best to you, given all the information you gathered and your ability to hit a particular shot.

Keep in mind that you must also be committed to your shot. Being indecisive over the ball can lead to disaster. If you stand over a shot and second-guess yourself as you draw the club back, you have

no chance to execute the shot. When you are committed to a shot, your mind is clear, uncluttered and ready to execute the shot to the best of your abilities.

You probably have witnessed a professional golfer back away from a shot to re-examine his thoughts about the shot he is about to attempt. Even the best players can be indecisive. However, they have the discipline to back away when they recognize that they are confused. They clear their minds and mentally commit to the shot before they execute it.

Keeping par in play involves a host of decisions applied to each and every shot. If your present abilities do not allow you to play to the actual par rating of a hole, make your own par and keep it in mind as you go about executing each shot on the way to achieving that score.

In the next issue, we will explore another cardinal rule of golf, namely the function of the hands and how you can decrease major ball-flight errors by just holding the club correctly. ☞

---

PGA master professional John Hughes is the vice president and national director of instruction for the Advantage Golf School in Orlando, Fla. He can be reached online at [www.advantagegolfschool.com](http://www.advantagegolfschool.com).



