

What Is a 'Provisional Ball'?

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A "provisional ball," often shortened just to "provisional," is a second golf ball played by a golfer who believes his first ball (the [stroke](#) he just played) may be lost (but not in a [water hazard](#)) or [out of bounds](#).

Official Definition in the Rule Book

The USGA and R&A, golf's rule-making bodies, provide this official definition in the [Rules of Golf](#):

"A 'provisional ball' is a ball played under [Rule 27-2](#) for a ball that may be lost outside a water hazard or may be out of bounds."

Which doesn't expand on what we already said above, so let's ... expand!

Say you hit your drive and, whoops, it's way left, deep into woods. You think, "I'll never find that ball, it's probably lost." The penalty for a [lost ball](#) (or a ball hit out of bounds) is stroke-and-distance. The "and distance" part means that - if you are strictly adhering to the rules - after walking forward and searching for your ball, and confirming that it is lost or OB, you'd have to trudge all the way back to the spot of that previous stroke and play another shot.

Or, before you go forward to search, you can play a provisional ball. The purpose of the provisional, really, is saving time: Now, after hitting the provisional, if you go forward and search and can't find that first shot, well, you've already put another ball into play. You don't have to trudge back and re-play the shot, because you've already hit that provisional.

Rule 27-2 Covers Provisional Balls

In the rule book, provisional balls are covered by Rule 27-2. There are three sections under Rule 27-2, and you should read the full rule for the full details. But here is the gist of the rule:

a. Procedure

- Provisionals are played only when a ball is likely to be lost or out of bounds, not when a ball is likely to be a water hazard.
- You must announce to your playing partners or [marker](#) that you intend to play a provisional before hitting again.
- You must play the provisional before you or your partner goes forward to search for the first ball.

b. When Provisional Ball Becomes Ball in Play

- You keep playing the provisional until you reach the spot the first ball is likely to be. Continuing to hit the provisional ball past that point renders the first ball lost and the provisional ball is the ball in play (make sure to add the penalty stroke for the lost ball).

- If you confirm the original ball is lost (outside a water hazard) or OB, the provisional is the ball in play (again, add that penalty stroke!).
c. When Provisional Ball to be Abandoned
- If you find the original ball - it is not lost nor out of bounds - then you must abandon the provisional and play the first ball.
- If you become convinced that the original ball wound up in a water hazard, then you must abandon the provisional and proceed under [Rule 26-1 covering water hazards](#). Again, this is just a summary of Rule 27-2, [be sure to read the full rule](#) for more detail.
But What If Your Stroke with a Provisional Ball Is a Great Shot?
Imagine you play a provisional ball, then when you walk forward to look for that errant original ball you do find it. But it's in a terrible spot. Meanwhile, that provisional ball is sitting out there in the middle of the fairway, in perfect position.
Can't you just keep playing the provisional ball? The short answer is no, as the summary of Rule 27-2 above should have made clear. (The exception is if the original ball is found but is out of bounds.) However, we have another article that goes in-depth into this question and some different scenarios, such as refusing to search for the first ball at all:
- [Can you keep playing a provisional ball even if you find the original one?](#)
Also known as: Provisional, provisional shot, playing a provisional, hitting a provisional
Usage examples: "That ball might be out of bounds, so I'm going to play a provisional."
"You might want to hit a provisional ball, not sure if you'll find that first one."

Rules of Golf - Rule 27: Ball Lost or Out of Bounds;

Provisional Ball

By [USGA](#)

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27-1. Stroke and Distance; Ball Out of Bounds; Ball Not Found Within Five Minutes

a. Proceeding Under Stroke and Distance

At any time, a player may, *under penalty of one stroke*, play a ball as nearly as possible at the spot from which the original ball was last played (see [Rule 20-5](#)), i.e., proceed under penalty of stroke and distance.

Except as otherwise provided in the Rules, if a player makes a [stroke](#) at a ball from the spot at which the original ball was last played, he is deemed to have proceeded *under penalty of stroke and distance*.

b. Ball Out of Bounds

If a ball is [out of bounds](#), the player must play a ball, *under penalty of one stroke*, as

nearly as possible at the spot from which the original ball was last played (see [Rule 20-5](#)).

c. Ball Not Found Within Five Minutes

If a ball is [lost](#) as a result of not being found or identified as his by the player within five minutes after the player's [side](#) or his or their [caddies](#) have begun to search for it, the player must play a ball, under penalty of one stroke, as nearly as possible at the spot from which the original ball was last played (see [Rule 20-5](#)).

Exception: If it is known or virtually certain that the original ball, that has not been found, has been moved by an [outside agency](#) ([Rule 18-1](#)), is in an [obstruction](#) ([Rule 24-3](#)), is in an [abnormal ground condition](#) ([Rule 25-1](#)) or is in a [water hazard](#) ([Rule 26-1](#)), the player may proceed under the applicable Rule.

PENALTY FOR BREACH OF RULE 27-1:

Match play – Loss of hole; Stroke play – Two strokes.

27-2. Provisional Ball

a. Procedure

If a ball may be lost outside a water hazard or may be out of bounds, to save time the player may play another ball provisionally in accordance with Rule 27-1. The player must:

- (i) announce to his opponent in match play or his [marker](#) or a [fellow-competitor](#) in stroke play that he intends to play a [provisional ball](#); and
- (ii) play the provisional ball before he or his [partner](#) goes forward to search for the original ball.

If a player fails to meet the above requirements prior to playing another ball, that ball is not a provisional ball and becomes the ball in play under penalty of stroke and distance (Rule 27-1); the original ball is lost.

(Order of play from teeing ground – see [Rule 10-3](#))

Note: If a provisional ball played under Rule 27-2a might be lost outside a water hazard or out of bounds, the player may play another provisional ball. If another provisional ball is played, it bears the same relationship to the previous provisional ball as the first provisional ball bears to the original ball.

b. When Provisional Ball Becomes Ball in Play

The player may play a provisional ball until he reaches the place where the original ball is likely to be. If he makes a stroke with the provisional ball from the place where the original ball is likely to be or from a point nearer the hole than that place, the original ball is lost and the provisional ball becomes the ball in play under penalty of stroke and distance (Rule 27-1).

If the original ball is lost outside a water hazard or is out of bounds, the provisional ball becomes the ball in play, under penalty of stroke and distance (Rule 27-1).

Exception: If it is known or virtually certain that the original ball, that has not been found, has been moved by an outside agency ([Rule 18-1](#)), or is in an obstruction ([Rule 24-3](#)) or an abnormal ground condition ([Rule 25-1c](#)), the player may proceed under the applicable Rule.

c. When Provisional Ball to be Abandoned

If the original ball is neither lost nor out of bounds, the player must abandon the provisional ball and continue playing the original ball. If it is known or virtually certain that the original ball is in a water hazard, the player may proceed in accordance with [Rule 26-1](#). In either situation, if the player makes any further strokes at the provisional ball, he is playing a [wrong ball](#) and the provisions of [Rule 15-3](#) apply.

Note: If a player plays a provisional ball under Rule 27-2a, the strokes made after this Rule has been invoked with a provisional ball subsequently abandoned under Rule 27-2c and penalties incurred solely by playing that ball are disregarded.

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