

THE CASE FOR UNIFICATION

A perspective from Wally Uihlein, CEO, Acushnet Company

“One of the undisputed pleasures of golf lies in the comforting knowledge that all golfers around the world play the same game. Imagine the chaos that would exist if there were, as some have suggested, different Rules for professional and amateur golf or each country had its own unique code of Rules. It is the uniformity and worldwide acceptance of the Rules that allow us to compare our rounds to those of the top players and to appreciate a tournament played on the other side of the world.”

David Fay and Michael Bonallack

From the foreword to *The Rules of the Green: A History of the Rules of Golf*

The case for unification is rooted in the game’s history. In his seminal work, *The Rules of the Green: A History of the Rules of Golf*, Kenneth Chapman observed that since the first written code of rules appeared in 1744, the Rules of Golf evolved through periods of adaptation, consolidation, divergence, and eventually unification. This march to unification, where the game is played by one set of rules, has been an inexorable one with interruptions only occurring when opposing parties had a political or economic agenda.

There are two fundamental forces driving this progression to unification. The first is the essence of the game; the emotional allure that compels golfers to play and experience the same course or shot as one of the game’s greats, even if just to aspire. The second impetus is the dysfunction and instability caused by multiple sets of rules. Prior history of multiple sets of rules created widespread confusion and prompted the need for clarification and unification. The fact remains that the game’s growth, and its globalization, are inextricably linked to the idea that golfers – of all skill levels – play the same game.



For its first 100 years, the Rules of Golf provided political and economic stability as most of the newly formed golf clubs adopted the Rules of 1744. The Industrial Revolution helped facilitate golf’s first growth era. International commerce flourished and transportation improved. Golf’s first major competition, The Open Championship, was established, and for 20-plus years, contested according to the rules of the host club.

In 1895, the United States Golf Association (USGA) was formed. The USGA decided their competitions would be played according to the Rules of Golf, as adopted by the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews, while reserving the interpretation and decision making prerogative. C. B. Macdonald, winner of the 1895 U.S. Amateur Championship and first chair of the USGA special committee to “interpret the Rules of Golf,” highlighted the difference between American and British golfers in his letter to Horace Hutchinson:

“We find in America that it is necessary to have the rules more clearly defined, as people (Americans) are more inclined to play more by the letter than the spirit.” (Golf, February 12, 1897)

These differences between ruling bodies became exercises in bifurcation as separate rules applied to medal and match play, center shafted putters, steel shafts, the stymie and the number of allowable clubs.

When the great “balloon ball” experiment failed in 1931, it culminated in the R&A and the USGA having separate sets of golf ball rule specifications for the next 50 years.

The tension from this experience led to the first major collaborative decision on the road to uniformity – the adoption of the 14-club rule in 1938.

Post World War II, a meeting between representatives from the game’s major golf organizations resulted in the joint R&A-USGA Code of 1952. This marked an unprecedented and historic decision to unify the Rules of Golf. Clearly, the growth of the game for the next 30 years, its globalization and commercialization, went hand in hand with this unification.

In 2002, the R&A and the USGA accelerated the march toward unification with the landmark issuance of a Joint Statement of Principles where they announced,

“The R&A and the USGA continue to believe that the retention of a single set of rules for all players of the game, irrespective of ability, is one of the game’s greatest strengths.”

For 250 years, there has been documented progress toward uniformity and worldwide acceptance of the Rules. Yet there are new voices advocating for “Bifurcation,” arguing that the game should reverse direction for political and economic reasons.

The three most common arguments advanced by bifurcation protagonists are:

1. *“Today’s professional game does not mirror today’s amateur game.”*

While some lament that PGA Tour players aren’t playing the same game as amateurs, this is more a commentary on the skill of the professional golfer than amateurs’ desire to play a different game. Part of the fabric of the game is the relationship between the game’s best players and all golfers who play. Today’s amateur golfers maintain the same appetite to emulate the swings of of the world’s greatest players and play America’s greatest courses as ranked by *Golf Digest*.

2. *“Golf participation has matured and the adoption of different sets of rules will allow the game to renew its participation growth.”*

1990 to 2000 was the most innovative decade in the game’s history, yet during this period, golf participation in the U.S. and Europe flatlined. Golf is a game of the middle class, and golf has a demographic issue. In the Western world, today’s middle class is the same size as in the early 1990s.

3. *“Golfers just want to have fun. They do not play by the rules today and the formalization of multiple sets of rules is just sanctioning what is already reality.”*

If golfers don’t play by the one set of rules that exist today, why are two sets of rules required? If the argument is that golfers don’t play by the rules and bifurcation will help grow the game, then how will two sets of rules contribute to additional participation? The logic is flawed.



In a passage entitled “Rambling Thoughts” (*Scotland’s Gift: Golf*), C. B. Macdonald, America’s first rules expert, observed that the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews never attempted to mandate that its rules be forced upon those who played. They simply stated:

“We are going to play the game as it was handed down to us by our forefathers. We will tell you how it was handed down and we will provide you with our interpretation of the rules and endeavor to convey to you all the spirit of the game, but do as you like, much as we desire to see you play the game that has been played for some many centuries in Scotland.”

Today, more than 250 years after the first Rules of Golf were codified, the game is played by 55 million golfers in over 150 different countries. A final C. B. Macdonald quote reinforces why globalization requires unification. It is prescient given that it was written in 1927:

“Golf is a world encircling game. One of its charms is that no matter where you go, whether America, Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe or Scotland, the game is the same, with only such rules as are necessary to govern the local situation.”

History remains a wise and thoughtful teacher.