

MATCH PLAY

By Brent Kelley (About.com:Golf)

Match play is one of the main forms of competition in golf. It pits players one against another, rather than one against the field as in stroke play. Opponents compete to win individual holes, and the player who wins the most holes wins the match.

Match play can be played by two individuals, one on one, and that is known as Singles Match Play. Or teams of two players can square off, with Foursomes and Fourballs the most common formats for team play.

KEEPING SCORE IN MATCH PLAY

1-up, 2-down, 3-and-2, 5-and-3 ... dormie, halved, all square ... what does it all mean? This article explains how scores are kept in match play, and what all those numbers mean.

At root, match play scoring is very simple: Golfers compete hole by hole, and the golfer who wins the most holes wins the match.

But match play competitions can create some scores that novices might not be familiar with, scores that may look odd or use terminology unfamiliar to beginners.

Basics of Match Play Scorekeeping

Simple: Win a hole, that's one for you; lose a hole, that's one for your opponent. Ties essentially don't count; they aren't kept track of in the scorekeeping.

The score of a match play match is rendered relationally. Here's what we mean: Let's say you've won 5 holes and your opponent has won 4. The score is not shown as 5 to 4; rather, it's rendered as 1-up for you, or 1-down for your opponent. If you have won 6 holes and your opponent 3, then you are leading 3-up, and your opponent is trailing 3-down.

Essentially, match play scoring tells golfers and spectators not how many holes each golfer has won, but how many *more* holes than his opponent the golfer in the lead has won. If the match is tied, it is said to be "all square."

Match play matches do not have to go the full 18 holes. They often do, but just as frequently one player will achieve an insurmountable lead and the match will end early. Say you reach a score of 6-up with 5 holes to play - you've clinched the victory, and the match is over.

What the Final Scores Mean

Someone unfamiliar with match play scoring might be confused to see a score of "1-up" or "4 and 3" for a match. What does it mean? Here are the different types of scores you might see in match play:

- 1-up: As a final score, 1-up means that the match went the full 18 holes with the winner finishing with one more hole won than the runner-up. If the match goes 18 holes and you've won 6 holes while I've won 5 holes (the other holes being halved, or tied), then you've beaten me 1-up.

- 2 and 1: When you see a match play score that is rendered in this way - 2 and 1, 3 and 2, 4 and 3, and so on - it means that the winner clinched the victory before reaching the 18th hole and the match ended early.

The first number in such a score tells you the number of holes by which the winner is victorious, and the second number tells you the hole on which the match ended. So "2 and 1" means that the winner was 2 holes ahead with 1 hole to play (the match ended after No. 17), "3 and 2" means 3 holes ahead to with 2 holes to play (the match ended after No. 16), and so on.

- 2-up: OK, so "1-up" means the match went the full 18 holes, and a score such as "2 and 1" means it ended early. So why do we sometimes see scores of "2-up" as a final score? If the leader was two holes up, why didn't the match end on No. 17?

A score of "2-up" means that the player in the lead took the match "dormie" on the 17th hole. "Dormie" means that the leader leads by the same number of holes that remain; for example, 2-up with 2 holes to play. If you are two holes up with two holes to play, you cannot lose the match in regulation (some match play tournaments have playoffs to settle ties, others - such as the Ryder Cup - don't).

A score of "2-up" means that the match went dormie with one hole to play - the leader was 1-up with one hole to play - and then the leader won the 18th hole.

- 5 and 3: Here's the same situation. If Player A was ahead by 5 holes, then why didn't the match end with 4 holes to play instead of 3? Because the leader took the match dormie with 4 holes to play (4 up with 4 holes to go), then won the next hole for a final score of 5 and 3. Similar scores are 4 and 2 and 3 and 1.

RULES DIFFERENCES IN MATCH PLAY

The rules for match play and stroke play differ in key ways, the most basic being the very way the two types of golf are played. This article explores some of the differences; large and small, in the rules for match play and stroke play.

Golfers watching or, especially, playing match play need to be aware of the differences in the rules between match play and stroke play. Some of the differences are major, some are minor and some involve a different type of penalty when rules are broken.

Here is a rundown of some of the most important differences in the Rules of Golf for match play:

The Way It's Played

In this sense, match play is a whole different game than stroke play. In stroke play, golfers accumulate strokes over the course of 18 holes. The golfer with the fewest strokes at the completion of the round wins.

In match play, each hole is a separate competition. The player with the fewest strokes on an individual hole wins that hole; the player winning the most holes wins the match.

The stroke total for 18 holes simply doesn't matter in match play. Stroke play is more a player vs. the course approach; match play is directly player vs. player, or side vs. side. There is one opponent you must beat, and that's the opponent you're facing in the match you're playing right now.

Conceded Putts

In friendly rounds of golf, golfers often ask for and give "gimmies," very short putts that one simply picks up rather than holing out. Gimmies, needless to say, are illegal under the Rules of Golf, but many recreational golfers use them anyway.

In match play, however, conceded putts are perfectly legal. Your opponent can concede a putt to you at any point, whether it's 6 inches from the cup or 60 feet. But conceded putts almost always come, of course, on very short putts.

Conceded putts should only be offered, they should never be requested. That's why in some match play matches you'll notice a golfer lingering over a very short putt - the golfer is hoping his opponent will tell him to just pick it up.

Fellow-Competitor vs. Opponent

This is a semantic difference. In stroke play, the golfers you are playing against are your "fellow-competitors." In match play, the golfer you are playing against is your "opponent."

Hit That One Again

There are several scenarios in match play where a transgression might result in your opponent canceling your shot and requiring you to replay it; whereas in stroke play, the same transgression would result in a 2-stroke penalty or no penalty at all.

A few examples:

- **Playing out of turn:** In stroke play, order of play is a matter of etiquette. If you hit out of turn, it's a breach of etiquette, but there is no penalty. In match play, if you hit out of turn your opponent can require you to replay the shot in the proper order. And if your first shot was great one, you can bet that you'll be replaying.
- **Hitting from outside the teeing ground:** In stroke play, teeing off from outside the teeing ground (the teeing ground is between the tee markers and up to two club lengths behind the tee markers) results in a 2-stroke penalty. In match play, there is no stroke penalty, but your opponent can cancel your shot and require you to replay it.
- **Hitting an opponent:** In stroke play, if your ball hits a fellow-competitor or his equipment (if it is accidentally stopped or deflected by same), it's rub of the green. In match play, you have the option to replay the shot.
- **Hitting a ball at rest on the green:** In stroke play, if your putt strikes another ball on the green, you get a 2-stroke penalty. In match play, there is no penalty.

The Big Penalty

In the rule book, just about every section concludes with a warning: "Penalty for Breach of Rule." If a golfer fails to follow the proper procedures set forth in the rules, he will incur a penalty in addition to any penalties set forth in that rule.

That penalty in stroke play is usually 2 strokes, and in match play is usually loss of hole.

Example: Let's say a player violates one of the tenets of Rule 19. There will likely be a penalty spelled out for that violation. But the golfer compounds his error by failing to follow the proper procedure for continuing play (maybe he doesn't assess himself the proper penalty; maybe he drops incorrectly; etc.) spelled out in that rule. The big penalty kicks in: 2 strokes in stroke play, loss of hole in match play.

Better Late than Never

In stroke play, disqualification is the result if you miss your tee time. In match play, you can show up late and still play ... as long as you make your match by at least the second tee. You'll have forfeited the first hole, but you can pick up the match on No. 2. If you fail to make it by the No. 2 tee, you're disqualified.

The differences between match play and stroke play, where they exist, are elucidated in the Rules of Golf. If there is a difference, that difference will be spelled out in the applicable section. So browse through the rule book to learn more about match play rules.

MATCH PLAY STRATEGY

Many golfers love match play for its different strategies. Golfers have a lot to consider when playing match play, and this article goes into the different strategies and tactics that are employed.

In stroke play, the golfer plays against the golf course and a large field of other golfers. In match play, the golfer plays directly against one other golfer (or one side).

Your opponent is right there next to you. You get to see exactly how well or how poorly he is playing, and he gets to watch your game, as well.

That makes match play a different ballgame, literally and figuratively. And, in ways large and small, it changes the way golfers approach the match.

Here is a look at how strategy and tactics can change in match play:

One on One

Match play adds nerves and gamesmanship to golf. Both are likely to increase, because the one player you must beat is right there next to you. Take a lead and you're likely to feel more relaxed. Fall behind and you're likely to feel much more pressure.

Match play is usually played more aggressively than stroke play from the very first shot. You want to put the pressure on your opponent early, then keep it there.

But there are certainly times when it's best to be conservative, and some golfers believe the best initial strategy is to play your normal game until someone wins a hole. That approach is akin to giving your opponent a chance to make a mistake. Most believe, however, that falling behind early is too big a risk, and so aggression is called for from the first tee.

A player with a lead will generally play more conservatively; a player trailing will usually become more aggressive. Either way, match play requires that you react to your opponent's successes and failures.

Reactionary Golf

What do we mean by reacting to your opponent's play? The object in match play is to win individual holes. If your opponent hits a fantastic shot, that forces you to try to hit an equally good shot.

If your opponent chunks a shot into a pond, that gives you an opening to play safe. In match play, it doesn't matter if you take 8 strokes to play a hole ... if your opponent is taking 9.

Your decisions on the types of shots to play are directly related to your standing in the match (ahead or behind?) and on the hole (sitting pretty or in pretty bad shape?).

On the Green

The way that match play affects a golfer's strategy is perhaps best showcased on the green.

Let's say you've got a tricky downhill putt. In stroke play, you would be very careful not to run the putt way past the hole, because in stroke play, a high score on an individual hole can ruin the round.

But in match play, how aggressive you are with this putt depends on how things stand on this one hole. If your opponent has already holed out and your putt is to halve the hole, you must be very aggressive with the putt. If you run it 10 feet past, it doesn't matter - the hole is lost whether you miss by 10 feet or 1/10th of an inch. If your opponent has a short, easy putt remaining, you must try to make the putt - but you must temper your aggressiveness just a little bit. There's always a chance your opponent will miss his short one, and you want to be able to make your comebacker.

If your opponent has an equally difficult putt remaining, then be more careful with your putt. Running it way past the hole, leaving yourself a difficult comebacker, is a bad play when a halve is otherwise the most likely outcome of the hole.

Conceding Putts

You should go into your match expecting to have to make every putt. Don't expect your opponent to concede anything - be prepared to hole out everything. Your opponent may, in fact, offer concessions at various points, but you must be mentally prepared if he doesn't.

By the same token, you must decide how to approach concessions for your opponent. Of course, offering your opponent a concession increases the odds of his conceding some of your putts, too. Fail to concede an early short putt and your opponent may not concede anything to you.

But what do you know about your opponent? Is he a good putter? Bad? It matters. A great putter is probably going to make those short putts anyway. So pick a distance - say, 2 feet - and, at least early in the match - concede any putts within that distance.

But if your opponent is a terrible putter, make him putt everything outside 6 inches.

Some experts at match play believe you should concede every short putt early in the match. If it meets your length criteria, concede it. Why? So you can *stop* conceding later in the match at a critical juncture. Say the match is all square on the 17th hole, and your opponent faces a 2-footer with a little break. You've conceded every 2-footer today, but this one you're going to make him putt. The fact he hasn't had to make any of these in the match to this point increases the odds he'll miss this one.

Of course, at no point do you want to concede a putt when you believe there's a realistic chance that your opponent will miss it to give you a win or a halve, and only rarely would you concede a putt that gives your opponent the hole (if the putt is 3 inches, yes; 2 feet for the win, no).

On the Tee

You always want your tee shots to be long and down the middle. But in match play, when you are first to tee off, it becomes even more important to find the fairway. A poorly hit tee shot is an opening for your opponent; a well-struck tee ball puts more pressure on your opponent.

If you are trailing in the match, however, you may have to be aggressive with your tee shot regardless - you might be forced to grip-it-and-rip-it and hope for the best.

If your opponent hits first from the tee, his shot impacts your decision. If he hits a lousy tee ball, then maybe the best thing for you to do is hit 3-wood or a long iron to better the odds of keeping your ball in the fairway. You can be more conservative when your opponent has made a mistake.

If your opponent cracks a terrific drive, then you'll feel pressure to try to match it.

The Hero Shot

You're standing in the fairway, 210 yards from the green. You can get the ball to the green, but 210 yards is right at your limit. And you must go over a creek fronting the green in order to do it. Do you go for the green? Or do you lay up?

Depends on how you stand on the hole and in the match. If you're ahead in the match, maybe it's not worth the risk. If you're 2-down and the match is on the 14th hole, maybe you have no choice but to risk it.

Then again, how does your opponent stand on the hole? If he's in a bad spot, then perhaps the hole is winnable without trying the hero shot.

How Many Holes are Left?

Always consider your options in the light of how you stand both in the match and on the particular hole. The closer you get to the 18th hole, the more aggressive you'll need to become if you're trailing.

Likewise, carrying a lead late in the match gives you the option of playing more conservatively. But that can change quickly if your opponent puts together a couple great shots.

Balancing Act

Match play is a balancing act. You must balance the need to be aggressive enough to win individual holes against the situations at hand - where do you stand in the match? How do you stand on the hole? How does your *opponent* stand on the hole?

And you must control your nerves. Don't get cocky when you're ahead. Always assume your opponent is going to make his putt, or put a good stroke on that approach to the green.

And don't panic if you fall behind early. You'll need to make something happen, but that doesn't mean trying every low-percentage shot that presents itself.

It's easy to see why match play is the type of golf that many prefer to play.