



**2008
MEMO !**

TO ALL PLAYERS,

The article below certainly has merit, so much so, our league rules are being amended to allow for conceding putts by our opponents. Since our leagues area combination of both match and stroke play, it should be used with discretion as it can affect:

- individual low net
- team low net
- fewest putts
- skins
- handicaps

It should not be used where an Albatross, Eagle, Birdie, or Par is involved, or if it makes a difference in who wins the hole or the match.

Sincerely,

Bud Arbore
Founder

Gimme, Gimme, Gimme!

Does piteous begging have a place in golf? Judging by the behavior of my playing partners, the answer is clearly yes.

From **November - December 2007** Travel and Leisure Golf by Merrell Noden

Close your eyes and you can almost hear the pleading. It doesn't take much to transform my golf buddies into a group of shifty-eyed beggars, each of them desperate to hear the words that will mean they don't have to make a short putt.

Of course, they are rarely so brazen as to actually ask out loud to be given a putt. Then again, they don't need to. By now, all of us know the numerous time-honored, face-saving ways to elicit those blessed words: "That's good," or "You can pick that up." The simplest method is the pointed, pitiful look that says, ever so eloquently, "Guys, I'm begging you: I don't have a clue whether this is going left or right." Remember in Shrek 2 how Puss in Boots could make his eyes so irresistibly big and round and plaintive? On many greens, I seem to be utterly surrounded by Puss in Bootses.



Steve

Jim

Bryce

Mitch

Then there's the slow-motion walk up to a tricky three-footer, in which each step gets dragged out, painfully, in order to give an opponent every opportunity to recall the many joys of giving. Or, for the mathematically minded, there's the reminder that on some previous green someone else was given a putt that was twice this long—at least! And if all those happen to fail—though they rarely do—there's always the direct approach, the one pioneered so brilliantly by my friend Joe. Determined not to be ignored or misunderstood, Joe actually cups a hand behind his ear and leans in toward us, the better to hear the blessed words. Underfed organ-grinder monkeys are subtler than Joe.

That said, it almost always works. Even the most hard-hearted among us have a tough time ignoring these not-so-subtle pleas, partly out of real sympathy but mainly because we know darn well that a hole or two later we may be in need of exactly the same dispensation.

Gimmies are among the grayest of golf's gray areas. Forbidden, of course, in serious stroke play, they are a cherished and respected part of match play and most friendly games, and it's not hard to see why. For starters, they are a practical compromise, saving backs and time. (Though I wonder how much time they really do save. The putts that are legit gimmies are so short that it really doesn't take long to tap them in. Looking for just one lost ball will take more time than all the gimmies in a round. If a putt needs to be lined up and fretted over . . . well, it probably isn't a gimme in the first place.)

It's hard to ignore these not-so-subtle pleas, mainly because we know we may soon need the same dispensation.



But gimmes serve a loftier purpose, too. Basically, they help us rise above our baser instincts. However competitive we might feel toward our playing partners, however determined we might privately be to crush their very souls, we know that on the golf course we are all supposed to be gentlemen, and that means we must honor the conventions of friendly competition—it matters not whether we win or lose but how well we bond with our friends. Gimmes help us to maintain this sunny illusion. They are mnemonic devices, reminding us to play nice.

And it mostly works. Look at what is surely the most famous gimme of all: the Concession, Jack Nicklaus's decision on the very last hole of the 1969 Ryder Cup to pick up Tony Jacklin's marker rather than make him putt a two-footer. "I don't think you would have missed that, Tony," Nicklaus remarked. "But under these circumstances, I would never give you the chance."

Wow! That gimme has rightly passed into golf lore as one of the finest examples of sportsmanship in a sport that prides itself on them. But it made Sam Snead, the team captain, furious. The Slammer's feelings about gimmes were on record: "Keep close count of your nickels and dimes, stay away from whiskey, and never concede a putt," he once said.

A cynic might also have pointed out that Nicklaus conceded that putt knowing full well that in the event of a tie—which is what the Concession produced—the Cup would stay with the defenders, the United States. Still, the glow from such a gesture lingers a lot longer than any single playing feat could. (When at the 1987 Ryder Cup Larry Nelson and Bernard Langer agreed to go good-good on one green, Nelson was chided by his captain, Jack Nicklaus. Nelson had a pretty good comeback: "Jack, I remember you giving a putt on the last hole in 1969. I thought we were out here to have a good time.")

The way people react to gimmes tells us something about them. My occasional golf partner Robert Wright, a writer who presumably knows a thing or two about ethics, having taught a graduate seminar on the subject at Princeton last year, is impressively resolute in turning down most of the gimmes he is offered. "No," Bob will say firmly. "I could definitely miss that."

I don't doubt that he could. But I think Bob is missing the whole point of gimmes, their potential for civilizing us. What surprised me was to learn that when Bob refuses my offer he is actually breaking the rules.

It's right there in **MATCH PLAY Rule 2.4**: "A concession may not be declined or withdrawn." Beyond that, the Rules of Golf, which can seem so comically thorough in all the bizarre scenarios it anticipates, has little to say about gimmes, leaving their use up to the discretion of the players: "A player may concede his opponent's next stroke at any time provided the opponent's ball is at rest. The opponent is considered to have holed out with his next stroke and the ball may be removed by either side." This reminds me of the most ingenious use of the gimme concept that any of my buddies has ever attempted. My friend Steve, who came to the game late but quickly made himself a respectable golfer, labored for his first few seasons under the misconception that a putt that was "given" did not have to be counted. Much as we admired Steve's imagination, it was hard work disabusing him of this notion.

It's not just hackers like Steve and me who have their antennae up looking for gimmes. The pros do it, too. Watch the eyes of the guys playing in the Ryder Cup. They don't want to have to putt a tricky two-footer any more than you do.

It's amazing how much ill will can be generated by what is supposed to be a magnanimous gesture. You may not remember the 1957 Ryder Cup, but it was the only time from 1933 to 1985 that the British team won the event. Early in their singles match, Irishman Christy O'Connor lagged to a matter of inches, at which point his opponent, Dow Finsterwald, walked off the green without saying a word. Assuming the putt had been conceded, O'Connor picked up. Only on the next tee did he learn that it had not been conceded. That hole went to Finsterwald, but the fuming O'Connor seemed to draw inspiration from the incident and went on to win the match 7-6.

There's a lot of leeway surrounding gimmes, and a master of gamesmanship like Walter Hagen knew how best to exploit that leeway. Hagen would concede all early putts and then, at crunch time, ignore his opponent's pleading glances, finding something ever so interesting to study way down the fairway. At the PGA Championship in 1927—when the format was match play—Hagen went to the thirty-sixth tee one down to Al Espinosa. Up to this point Hagen had been the very soul of generosity, conceding every short putt Espinosa faced. Now, needing only to sink a three-footer to halve the hole and win the match, Espinosa looked expectantly over at Hagen, who just smiled at him and went back to chatting with the gallery. Espinosa missed the putt and lost the match on the next hole. The following day Hagen used precisely the same ploy to beat Joe Turnesa in the final.

Of course, there is very little on the line in the friendly games I play with my buddies. The most we stand to lose is bragging rights for the drive home. Even so, we felt the need to standardize our definition of a gimme. For a time, we required all putts for par or better to be holed. I never understood this: Why should Steve's three-footer for bogey be conceded when my two-and-a-half-footer for par wasn't? At the end of the round all we ever tally is our total score, in which each of those putts counts exactly the same. I suppose our arrangement was an acknowledgement of the awkwardness of asking a friend to risk missing a meaningless short putt for double bogey.

When a putt matters, a handy way to ask that it be holed is to say, "Sorry, that's just outside the Circle of Friendship." Some courses in Korea and China standardize that demarcation for club tournaments with a white line encircling the hole, eighteen inches from the cup; any putt inside it is given automatically. Another way to define that circle is the well-known yardstick of "the leather." Anything "inside the leather" is good. This seems to me like simply making the hole bigger. (But not a lot: Have you noticed how short "inside the leather" really is?) Competing in the 2005 Seve Trophy—a team event pitting Great Britain and Ireland against the rest of Europe—Ian Poulter actually used this very yardstick, angrily hooking the head of his putter into the cup to demonstrate to his two Swedish opponents the pettiness of making him putt out an eighteen-incher. Later in the match Poulter ordered his partner not to concede a similarly short putt. So much for playing nice.

Naturally, you and I don't want our friendly games to descend to that level of animosity. My once-a-week round with my buddies means a lot to me. I suppose that what I really want is to have it both ways: to win while patting myself on the back for being so generous. That's not asking for too much, is it?