

Learn rules, etiquette before you swing club

Before you go out on the course, says teaching pro Barbara Puett, it's important to understand that "golf has a long tradition of policing itself. It's the only game where you are your own referee. Therefore, it's your responsibility to know the rules and learn the etiquette."

That understood, it's time to make a golf date:

▶ You must reserve a tee time just like you make a reservation at a restaurant. And while you're at it, check on the dress code. Most clubs will let you wear sneakers but require shirts with collars and Bermuda-length shorts.

Also, if you don't have clubs, now's the time to reserve a set.

▶ Be on time or lose your reservation. Even better, arrive 30 minutes early to give yourself time to warm up on the driving range.

▶ When you arrive at the course, check in at the pro shop but leave your clubs outside at the drop area. It will be marked. In your bag, have a putter and a few clubs (you're allowed 14, according to U.S. Golf Association rules), balls, tees, a scorecard and a coin —

to mark your ball on the green.

▶ Once you begin to play, Puett says, "The No. 1 thing you need to (do) . . . is keeping up and knowing when it's your turn. No one really cares how anyone is playing if they are keeping up."

▶ If you are on a putting green, remember your high school geometry about the shortest distance between two points, the points in this case being your partner's ball and the hole. "Don't ever step on that line," says Puett. "Step over it, go around it, anything but on it." Watch your shadow, too.

▶ Always replace your divots. Don't just lay them down; tamp them into the dirt. Repair all marks made when your ball lands hard on a green.

▶ If you hit a ball into a bunker, enter it on the low side. And after you take your shot, always rake the sand.

▶ One practice swing is enough. Take your extra swings on the driving range. "Bobby Jones hit his ball within three seconds after he addressed it," says Puett. "Try to do the same."

— Carol Herwig