

The New Handicap System

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CREATION of the USGA JOURNAL meets a definite need for a medium of general distribution pertaining to the many matters constantly confronting golfers. The Handicap Committee welcomes the opportunity of using the first issue to present further information on the USGA "Golf Handicap System," a new handicap and course rating system for men adopted and released by the United States Golf Association in December, 1947. This article assumes that readers are familiar with "Golf Handicap System."

Handicaps in golf are intended to equalize the abilities and inabilities of countless players. If a perfect system could be created, any player of a given handicap could play against any other player of similar handicap on a neutral course without giving or receiving odds. Unfortunately, such a system has not yet materialized. As our booklet states, "Handicapping is an inexact operation, more of an art than a science," and, human nature being what it is, we cannot expect to approach perfection until all participants enter into the game in the spirit its creators intended for it.

Up to the present, golf in the United States has been played under so many different handicap systems that the various ideas and methods embodied therein add up to an amazing total. For this reason, the USGA appointed a committee to study the situation and adapt the best features of the many systems into a master system that might meet with the universal support of its member clubs and the various district, State and sectional associations. Last year's Handicap Committee, under the chairmanship of Richard S. Tufts, brought this period of investigation to a close by issuing the master system recommended in "Golf Handicap System."

The new system is designed for use by any or all clubs or associations, whether private or public, and, if adopted as a uniform standard, it will permit a 15 handicap golfer to visit another club or State, or travel clear across the country, and find

that he is a 15 handicap player wherever he goes, instead of a 12 handicap player here and an 18 handicap player there.

When the USGA Handicap Committee was in the throes of devising the "Golf Handicap System," much was said for and against both the "basic" and the "current" types of systems. Both types have been in use extensively and each has its advantages. We finally decided on the "basic" type, designed to determine a player's inherent ability to play golf, primarily because of its simplicity and also because it meets what we consider the fundamental purpose of a handicap system; namely, to answer the question, "How good a golfer is Joe Jones?"

There is no reason, however, why our "basic" system cannot be used as the foundation of a "current" system by clubs and associations which are willing to take on the details and extensive bookkeeping necessary to disclose at any time the prevalent, or "at-the-moment," state of a player's game.

The Starting Point

If a club or association wants to use a "current" type of system, we would appreciate its using our course rating methods and handicap tables as the foundation, so that, when necessary for comparative or eligibility purposes, the records can be used readily to compute a player's "basic" handicap. We make this request because a "current" type system might prove unfair to a player whose inherent or "basic" ability would make him eligible for a national or sectional tournament but whose "current" handicap at the time entries closed happened to be over the eligibility limit because his last 10 or 20 scores were a little higher than usual, for one reason or another.

One of the first problems confronting an association adopting our system undoubtedly will be to find a starting point. It is our suggestion that a small course rating committee of not more than six or

eight individuals be appointed to determine as nearly as possible the playing ability of the "theoretical scratch golfer" described on page 4, paragraph 4, of "Golf Handicap System." This is most important, as the entire handicapping structure is dependent on a correct interpretation of this playing ability. In cases where neighboring associations have had more experience with our rating methods, it would be well to call on them for assistance in more accurately establishing this factor. Once the committee has arrived at this point of beginning, its members should then rate the more popular courses in the district.

As a guide to rating committees, a brief review of methods used successfully by the Massachusetts Golf Association might be helpful. Individuals assigned the task of rating a given course play the course in company with the club's professional and/or one of the club's low handicap amateurs. From these local players, the committee can obtain knowledge of the parts of the tees most commonly used by club members during times of maximum play. They can also find out whether the wind and other playing conditions on the day of rating are the conditions most prevalent during the playing season.

While playing the course, each individual privately assigns a fractional rating to each hole. It is advisable *not* to discuss the ratings of each hole during the round, as the opinions of one individual might tend to bias some of the others. The human element will cause a difference of opinion as to the rating of any given hole and it will be rare when all members of the committee unanimously agree on any one rating. Experience has proven that each rating committee member will give a higher rating to some holes than the majority of the other members, but he also will give a lower rating to other holes. These higher and lower ratings should average out and, therefore, discussion during the round is of no great advantage.

At the conclusion of the round, all members should total their individual hole ratings and compare said totals with the other members. If all totals fall within the limits of one course rating figure, such as between 69.5 and 70.4—the limits for a 70 course rating—there can be no question

that the course rating to assign to the course is 70. If, on the other hand, the totals should fall within the limits of more than one course rating figure, a hole-by-hole review of the rating should be made, the individual hole ratings should be assigned by majority opinion, and the total of these majority opinions used for the final course rating.

When comparing individual hole ratings, if any hole is rated identically by all members of the rating committee, or by almost all members, that hole should be set up as a typical example of that fractional rating classification, so that it can be referred to by individuals subsequently rating other courses.

In this connection, we recommend that associations adopting our system establish a set of typical examples for their own use taken from courses in their association.

As a word of precaution to clubs and associations at elevations well above sea level, adjustments should be made in the course rating procedure when it is known that a drive with a 200- or 225-yard carry at sea level will travel greater distances through the air in the thinner atmosphere.

The question has been asked as to why a player whose 10 best scores have an average equal to the course rating is not given a zero, or scratch, handicap. (Under our handicap Table A, such a player is given a 2 handicap when his scores are made on courses rated between 66 and 76, inclusive.)

The reason is obvious. Every player is much more familiar with his home course and most likely plays it at least two strokes lower than other courses of similar rating with which he is less familiar. Therefore, in our opinion he would not be a scratch golfer. Put another way, course rating is the score a scratch player should average for every 10 times he plays the course without any poor shots or any unusually good shots. Naturally, this average will be higher than the average of his 10 best rounds.

"Golf Handicap System" being new this year, some method should be devised for clubs and associations not having sufficient scores on which to base permanent handicaps to provide temporary, or provisional,

handicaps. Also, such a method then will be available in future for players who are new at the game or who have not previously been handicapped.

It is our suggestion that when the record of a player contains fewer than 50 scores, the best 20% of his available scores be averaged, multiplied by 10, and the resulting figure used to assign the player a provisional handicap. For example: 20 scores available—the best 4 (20% of 20 scores) average 77.2 strokes—move decimal one place to the right (77.2 becomes 772)—apply 772 to handicap Table A and assign the player (assuming his scores were made on a course rated 70) a handicap of 9.

It is possible that the requirement of a player's best 10 scores selected from a period covering at least 50 rounds of golf may work a hardship on some clubs or associations which do not keep very complete scoring records or which are geographically located where it is impossible for most golfers to play as many as 50 rounds during the season. Our committee is open to suggestions that will provide for the use of fewer than the 10 best scores or for the period of play to cover less than 50 rounds.

The fact that 50 scores are not available or cannot be obtained from the players, even though the average golfer in the locality plays 50 or more rounds during the year or season, is not a particularly valid reason for changing the basic requirements for allocation of handicaps. If a player completes as many as 50 rounds during the season, whether or not he turns in his scores, he should be handicapped on the basis of his 10 best scores, as our handicap tables are designed to calculate his playing ability under such conditions.

It will be noted that there are two handicap tables in our booklet, Tables A and B. Table A is the one we prefer and the one we believe will provide a more accurate basis for handicapping. Table B was included for use by associations that have been using match play handicaps exclusively in the past and might not want to make such a complete change-over to stroke play handicaps, with the 85% differential for match play. Table B has been formulated to produce handicaps as near as possible to 85% of the stroke play handicaps produced by Table A.

USGA Handicap Chairman



Courtesy Boston Herald

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Handicapping, being the inexact operation that it is, requires the full cooperation of the Course Rating and Handicap Committee members, the club handicapper, and, most of all, the players themselves. It is only natural that the more information the handicapper has to work with, the better job he can do in assigning equitable handicaps. Therefore, every golfer interested in fair playing conditions—and any golfer not so interested should not be playing the game—should make every effort to turn in all his scores, good or bad, so that a fair estimate of his playing ability may be established and a proper handicap assigned him.

In conclusion, may we take this opportunity to ask that our system be given a fair trial. Everyone will agree that a standard handicapping system for country-wide use is needed. Ours is the first real step in that direction, and if, after a fair trial, there are features of it which you do not approve, we will be glad to entertain your constructive criticisms.