Toward Uniform Handicapping

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The USGA GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM recently completed its first year of existence. It is interesting to review its provisions and the reactions of district, State and sectional associations.

To refresh memories, GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM standardizes handicaps on the normal play of the average scratch golfer. The course-rating procedure is based on what we believe to be the average score a scratch player will make for every ten times he plays a given hole or course without making any poor shots or extraordinarily good shots, under conditions existing during most of the playing season.

Table A was designed to produce handicaps which reflect a player's inherent ability. The gauge of this ability consists of the player's ten best scores out of 50 to 100 rounds under normal conditions. By applying a player's ten best scores to Table A under the appropriate course-rating column, we produce a handicap which is a numerical comparison of the player's ability with that of the average scratch golfer. If we have correctly evaluated the ability of the average scratch golfer, we have established a standard on which all systems should be based.

Basic Handicaps Only

Handicaps produced by the USGA system are "basic" handicaps, which reflect a player's inherent ability. Such a handicap should remain relatively constant over several years, whether the individual plays frequently or not. It should indicate a caliber of play which can be recaptured by conscientious practice after inactivity.

Some sections have been operating, and seem to prefer, "current" handicaps. These are opposed to "basic" handicaps in that they are designed to reflect the at-the-moment state of a player's game. They show at any time during the year whether a player is on or off his game. Although current handicaps are referred to in GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM, no methods of calculating them were suggested.

Handicaps produced by Table A are for use in stroke play only. For match play singles it is recommended that the higher-handicap player receive an allowance of 85 per cent of the difference between the stroke-play handicaps. GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM includes a Table B for those who prefer to issue match-play handicaps only.

Preferences of Associations

During the last year questionnaires were sent to about 150 men's golf associations in the United States. Eighty-eight replies were received. Thirty-eight associations indicated that they neither issue handicaps nor recommend any specific system. The fifty others, which either issue handicaps to players or recommend a system for use by their member clubs, have the following preferences:

	Issue Hdcps.	*Recommend Handicap System*	*Total*
Number of associations...	26	24	50
Prefer:			
USGA system	13	17	30
Chicago District system.	3	4	7
Own or other systems...	9	3	12
"Basic" handicaps	11	5	16
"Current" handicaps ...	11	9	20
USGA table A.....	11	10	21
USGA table B.....	1	1	2
Own or other tables.....	6	3	9

The figures make several points worthy of further note:

1. Almost half of the associations which replied are taking no interest in handicap matters. They thereby miss a great opportunity to further the interests of golf in their localities.

2. GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM appears to be by far the most widely used and recommended handicap system.

3. Current handicaps seem to be favored by more associations than basic handicaps.

4. USGA Table A appears to be the predominant table now in use.

Courtesy Boston Herald

William O. Blaney

The outstanding preference for the USGA system and Table A was somewhat beyond our expectations for the first year. It certainly shows that a national standard system was needed and desired by a great many associations.

The fact that many associations have expressed preference for a system producing current handicaps leads me to believe that GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM should be expanded to include a procedure for their calculation, and this has been my recommendation to the USGA Executive Committee.

Basic handicaps were favored when our new system was being devised because their computation required a minimum of effort by handicappers and they seemed ideal for gauging a player's eligibility qualifications for championships and important tournaments. On the other hand, current handicaps, in spite of requiring considerably more bookkeeping, have the advantage of following the ups and downs of a player's game. They tend to give him a more nearly even chance in handicap competitions, whether or not he is playing well at the moment.

Single Base Required

A system of current handicaps, however, should have the same standard foundation as our basic system, so that the two types will be uniformly related. In this way, the scoring records used to figure a player's current handicap will contain sufficient information for his basic handicap if ever needed.

If this procedure is followed, it will be possible for sections partial to current handicaps to follow the suggestion of one association that current handicaps be used for club and local tournaments and basic handicaps be used for State, sectional and national events. If a clear distinction between the two types can be established in players' minds, this suggestion might have considerable merit.

Some associations favoring current handicaps are using USGA Table B, or some similar table of their own, to produce handicaps at a level close to the basic handicaps produced by our Table A. This is wrong and may lead to elimination of Table B from future issues of GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM. If a club or an association prefers a system which produces current handicaps, the system should have the same foundation as the nation-wide standard.

If a player's current ability is to be judged by his 10 best scores out of his last 13 rounds, it should be anticipated that his handicap will be substantially higher than a basic handicap based on his 10 best scores out of 50 to 100 rounds. A current handicap should never be lower than a basic, as a player's 10 best scores from 50 to 100 rounds will be the same whether they were made in the last 13 rounds or spread widely throughout the 50 to 100 rounds.

If a current system attempts to produce handicaps more nearly in line with basic handicaps through altering the handicap table, it will be inconsistent with the intent of current systems, namely, to handicap players on the at-the-moment state of their games. Such a procedure also would be breaking away from an accepted standard and would be leading back to the handicap

chaos the USGA attempted to eliminate through GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM. If a player is off his game, he should expect his current handicap to be raised so as to reflect the true difference between the at-the-moment state of his game and the ability of the average scratch player.

Uniform Course Rating

While our course rating procedure appears to meet with universal approval (no adverse criticisms having been received), I do not have much information on who is doing the rating in various sections. In order to have definite relationship between the ratings of courses in any one locality, State or section, we urge that the association having jurisdiction set up a rating committee to rate all courses. If more than one association covers the same territory, a joint committee should be formed. Only thus will the actual rating procedure have uniform application, and the final ratings should show how the playing difficulty of any one course compares with all the others. If the rating is left to the individual clubs, different interpretations of the rating methods will produce unrelated final ratings.

Associations issuing handicaps doubtless have rated or will rate the courses of their member clubs. Associations not issuing handicaps but recommending the USGA handicap system should be prepared, and should advise their clubs that they are prepared, to rate courses of clubs desiring to install the USGA system.

Associations not issuing handicaps and not recommending any system can perform a distinct service to golf if they will form rating committees and offer to rate courses of clubs wanting to use the USGA system.

Generally speaking, the greatest difficulties in installing or operating any handicap system are: (1) uninterested and lackadaisical handicap chairmen, and (2) inability to obtain full scoring records from all players.

The first can be overcome in most cases if the club or association, when appointing a handicap chairman, will give more serious thought to the capabilities and conscientiousness of the individual. The second difficulty has been with us a long time and probably will stay for some time to come. The finest handicap system in the world will be inadequate with insufficient scoring information. Players who turn in few scores are the ones who cause trouble.

I have studied many systems and have yet to find one with a satisfactory method of obtaining all the scores of every player. If anyone knows of a way to overcome this difficulty, please send in the details for our consideration. If any good ideas are received, a future issue of the JOURNAL will carry an article outlining the best features so that others may benefit.

It has been suggested that handicaps based on the USGA system should be required for entrance into USGA championships, as a means of establishing the system country-wide. It was not our intention when issuing GOLF HANDICAP SYSTEM to force it on any club or association. We merely hoped it would become the standard base for all systems. With that accomplished, we would know that entrants into USGA championships would be meeting our eligibility qualifications. In other words, we prefer that clubs and associations establish our eligibility qualifications by voluntarily adopting the USGA handicap methods.

We again invite constructive criticisms of the USGA system. We do not claim that it is perfect, but we believe everyone realizes the desirability of national standardization, and we hope proponents of other systems will be willing to do some giving and taking so the goal may soon be achieved. We urge all readers to help promote education and cooperation among players, clubs and associations.