



ENGLISH GOLF UNION

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Handicapping for Singles Match Play

CONGU and the English Golf Union now directs that Clubs use full difference in handicap in singles match play.

There has always been a school of thought that holds that the terms of match play should leave the better player with some advantage. But even if, in the old days under previous schemes, that was thought to be reasonable, the changes, which have been made over the years to the CONGU system have tilted the balance even further against the higher handicap player.

It is not perhaps generally realised the extent to which handicaps in the higher categories have been affected. Their buffer zone has been increased and the reduction for each stroke under the CSS is greater than for the lower categories.

As far as stroke play is concerned these features are a deliberate part of the system because the scores returned by high handicap players are of greater variation than those of their more skilful colleagues. If this were not taken into account there would often be a high category competitor returning a score in the low sixties.

The way the CONGU system works is that a typical Category 1 player is expected to play to about 2 strokes above his handicap on an average day; whereas a Category 4 player can expect a shortfall of 6 or 7. Put in another way, a player who averages 28 over the CSS will probably find that he has a handicap of 21 or 22.

When CONGU handicaps, which are in the main derived from stroke play, are used for setting the terms of match play it is not surprising that the better player has the advantage. The question is this: how big is that advantage and what should be done about it?

The obvious way to start is to examine the results of club handicap match play competitions. One rarely sees double figure handicappers on the match play honours boards and study of the detailed match results on a round by round basis should reveal a predominance of wins by the lower handicapper. Even those Clubs that have applied the full difference for many years find that high handicap winners are still the exception.

Exercises have been run simulating many thousands of matches using a computer model providing random scores based on the probability of players of varying abilities recording scores on each of the 18 holes from two under par to four over par. The results whether using three quarter or full allowance show a marked preponderance of low handicap wins, obviously more so using three quarters allowance.

It is sometimes objected that these simulations are not like real life. If anything real life is worse for the less competent performer because, when the pressure is really on, he has less control over his actions than his opponent. Disregarding unused strokes in matches that do not go the full distance, another telling point is that, taken overall, an average of one in three strokes are not needed in a match either because the hole is won without the stroke or lost in spite of receiving it. Indeed this is probably the single most important reason why high handicappers have such a poor match play experience. They just don't use the strokes they are given.