

Handicapping: The Basics

What is the Purpose of the USGA Handicap System?

The purpose of the USGA Handicap System is to make the game of golf more enjoyable by enabling golfers of differing abilities to compete on an equitable basis.

What is a Handicap Index?

A USGA Handicap Index indicates a golfer's skill and comes in the form of a number taken to one decimal place. A USGA Handicap Index compares a player's scoring ability to the scoring ability of an expert amateur on a course of standard difficulty.

How is a USGA Handicap Index Established?

To establish a Handicap Index, a player posts his/her scores along with the appropriate USGA Ratings to compile a scoring record. A Handicap Index is computed from no more than 20 scores. The Handicap Index is intended to reflect the player's potential and is thus based on the best scores posted for a given number of rounds. Ideally, a handicap index is computed based on the best 10 of the last 20 18-hole rounds. However, an initial handicap index can be established based on a minimal of 5 18-hole rounds.

To establish a handicap you must:

- Play your best round possible for each round of golf played, and
- Post every acceptable round played (according to USGA rules)

It is not acceptable to only post select scores toward your handicap. To establish a valid handicap, all scores must be posted. There are even special rules for how to adjust your score if you do not complete all holes. If you pick up on a hole, you are supposed to record the score you "most likely" would have made. That score, however, must not exceed your "Equitable Stroke Control" limit (see below).

When a hole isn't played, you should record a par plus any handicap strokes you would have received. All scores where you have played at least 13 holes should be posted.

How is a Handicap Index Generally Used?

A USGA Handicap Index travels from course to course, as well as from one set of tees to other sets of tees on the same course. A player's handicap index determines the number of strokes a player receives depending on the difficulty of the course he/she plays. A handicap index is converted to a Course Handicap for competition on a particular course.

Each Course has a Course handicap Table which converts the USGA Handicap Index to a Course Handicap based on a conversion formula. This conversion process is what makes handicaps "portable" and what insures equity between players. Once all handicap indexes are converted to a course handicaps for the particular course, the number of strokes a player gets depends on the format or the type of competition (ie. Individual Stroke play, Match Play, Best Ball, etc..) There are different handicap allowance rules depending on the type of game being played.

Once the number of strokes a player gets is determined, the next question is where do you get the strokes. Each hole has a handicap allocation number. The hole with handicap #1 is the hardest hole or the hole where you are most likely to need a stroke. The hole with handicap #18 is the hole where you are least likely to need a stroke. In a case of net match play, if player number 1 has a course handicap of 20 and player number 2 has a course handicap of 15, player number 1 will get 5 strokes. These 5 strokes will be given to player number 1 as 1 stroke each for the holes with handicap numbers 1 thru 5. Assume, on the # 1 handicapped hole player number 1 scores a 6. Player number 1 will get to subtract the one stroke handicap for this hole and record a net score of 5. If player number 2 scores a 5 they will tie the hole.

In net stroke play events the process is simpler. Each player would simply deduct his or her Course handicap from the final actual gross score when the round is finished.

Definition of Terms Used in Establishing Handicaps

USGA Course Rating: USGA's mark that indicates the evaluation of the playing difficulty of a course for scratch golfers under normal conditions based on yardage and other obstacles that affect their scoring ability. The more difficult the course for the scratch golfer, the higher the Course rating.

USGA Slope Rating: An evaluation of how much more difficult the course is for those who aren't scratch golfers. Each course is rated from each set of tees for both the scratch golfer and the bogey golfer. The Course rating reflects the difficulty of the course for the scratch golfer. The course rating and slope rating together reflect the difficulty of the course for non-scratch golfers. The greater the difference between the scores of the scratch and bogey golfer on a certain course, the higher the USGA slope rating. A golf course of 'standard' playing difficulty has a USGA slope rating of 113. The lowest slope rating is 55 and the highest slope rating is 155. The higher the slope rating, the more difficult the average golfer will find the course.

Slope is what makes your handicap portable. Converting your USGA Handicap Index to a Course rating is based on the course slope rating. You get more strokes on a course with a higher slope; on a course with a lower slope you receive fewer strokes.

Scratch Golfer: A scratch golfer is an amateur player who plays to the standard of the field of stroke-play qualifiers competing at the Mens/Womens U.S. Amateur Championship site. A male scratch golfer can hit tee shots an average of 250 yards and can reach a 470-yard hole in two shots. A female scratch golfer can hit tee shots an average of 210 yards and can reach a 400-yard hole in two shots.

Bogey Golfer: A male bogey golfer has a USGA Handicap Index of 17.5 to 22.4. He can hit tee shots an average of 200 yards and can reach a 370-yard hole in two shots. A female bogey golfer has a USGA Handicap Index of 21.5 to 26.4. She can hit tee shots and average of 150 yards and can reach a 280-yard hole in two shots.

What is Equitable Stroke Control?

Equitable Stroke Control (ESC) keeps an exceptionally bad hole from changing your Handicap Index too much. ESC is used to adjust scores back into the normal range. ESC sets a maximum number that a player can post on any hole depending on the player's Course handicap. For Handicap purposes, you are required to adjust your hole scores when they are higher than the maximum number you can post. There is no limit to the number of holes on which you can adjust your score.

Equitable Stroke Control Limits:

<u><i>If your 18 Hole Course Handicap Is</i></u>	<u><i>The Maximum Score on Any Hole Is:</i></u>
9 or less	Double Bogey
10 through 19	7
20 through 29	8
30 through 39	9
40 and Above	10