



SSS & HANDICAPPING 'STARRING' OF HANDICAPS

INTRODUCTION

- In 1983 the Council of National Golf Unions published a radically revised Standard Scratch Score and Handicapping Scheme. This new concept in handicapping was based on the system used by the Australian Golf Union and took account of all scores returned by players under Medal Play conditions. The intent of the modified scheme was to have handicaps better reflect current playing ability than in the past.
- The scheme is subject to periodic review and revision, the principal changes over the years being:
 - 1986 Revision
 - limit of 0.1 to the increase of a player's exact handicap in all categories
 - establishment of a buffer zone
 - introduction of a winter period.
 - 1989 Revision
 - introduction of a competition scratch score.
 - consequent discontinuation of the winter period (not now necessary)
 - 1993 Revision
 - introduction of a different buffer zone depending on handicap category.
 - use of USGA Course Rating System to establish SSS.
 - 1997 Revision
 - introduction, at discretion of Unions of Stableford adjustment (clause 19.8)
 - introduction of annual review of handicaps of all members.
 - 2001 Revision
 - clause 19.8 mandatory for scores returned at home club.
 - introduction, at discretion of Unions of lapsing of handicap due to failure to return a stipulated number of qualifying scores in a period between annual reviews.
- Despite these evolutionary changes there has been from time to time, criticism in golf magazines and the national press relating to perceived problems with the handicapping scheme. In 1997 the AGCS conducted, through the medium of their magazine, Golf Club Management, a particularly vigorous and sustained campaign critical of the scheme and published an article proposing that the present scheme should be scrapped and a new one devised.
- This sustained criticism was at odds with the belief of the representatives of the national unions on the CONGU SSS & Handicapping committee that affiliated clubs were, in the main, satisfied with the scheme.
- To establish, however, a more factual indication of the views of the member clubs of the SGU regarding the operation of the scheme in practice, a questionnaire was circulated to all clubs during 1997 inviting their response to aspects of the handicapping scheme that had been subject of comment in the press.

QUESTIONNAIRE

- The questionnaire was circulated to all handicapping authorities and after several reminders a response of virtually 100% was achieved. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the findings can be regarded as being representative of the views of Scottish golf.
- One of the questions asked was:
'Would you be in favour of a minimum number of medal cards being returned per annum in order to retain a handicap? If "yes" how many?'
81% responded in the affirmative and the most popular number of returns stipulated to retain a handicap on an annual basis was three.
- Comment was also invited on any aspect of the handicapping scheme the respondents would like to see amended/improved. Although this section was intended for comment on aspects of the scheme not covered by specific questions in the questionnaire, the most frequent comment was on the subject of lapsing of handicaps.

- The sentiments for the (re)introduction of lapsing were perhaps best expressed in the questionnaire returns by two well respected golf club secretaries:
 - “I would like to see handicaps lapsing more regularly if holder does not play in medals. Holder may use lapsed handicap for social golf and as qualification to play on such courses that apply handicap limits, but no-one should play in any form of competition for prizes unless they hold an up-to-date handicap.”
 - “I would certainly like to see a minimum number of cards submitted in order to retain a handicap. I currently have 680 handicapped members on file, out of which 274 have played in less than two medals.”

POST QUESTIONNAIRE ACTION

- A summary of the questionnaire findings was contained in a memo dated 18 February 1998 and circulated to all course owning clubs. There was no reaction from member clubs.
- The findings of the questionnaire were part of the SSS & Handicapping presentation given to Areas during the 1997/1998 Roadshow season. Almost universal support was given to the intention of the SGU to pursue the (re)introduction of lapsing through CONGU. Similar support was obtained at the 1998 AGM weekend presentation.
- A website news item was drafted by Scottish Golf:

‘Scottish golf clubs have given a massive thumbs up to the Standard Scratch Scheme with a staggering 95% agreeing that it produced reasonably fair and equitable handicaps. The view was expressed in the response by clubs to a questionnaire which was sent out by the SGU towards the end of last year.

“In the end the response to the questionnaire was virtually 100% and the findings, we believe, can be considered as being truly representative of Scottish golf” said the SGU’s handicapping convener.

“The outcome was that clubs endorsed, by a staggering majority, the view that the scheme produced reasonably fair and equitable handicaps.

“While the SGU can take considerable satisfaction from this declaration of support, the questionnaire did identify areas where improvement could be made and these comments will be given due consideration in future.”
- The outcome of this consultation process was that the SGU delegates to CONGU were mandated to seek restoration of ‘lapsing’ of handicaps in the 2001 CONGU handicapping scheme revision. This was achieved by the introduction of clause 17.6 which states:

‘A Union may direct that the handicap of any player, in whatever Category who fails to return a stipulated minimum number of Qualifying Scores in a period between Annual Reviews shall lapse. A handicap lapsed in this manner will not be acceptable for competition where a CONGU handicap is required but may be used for social golf and the like.’

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- In the May 1998 edition of Golf Club Management, AGCS published a questionnaire on handicapping. One of the questions was “It is thought that card submission should be mandatory. Do you agree? If YES how many cards should a player be required to submit annually in order to maintain his handicap status?”
- In the AGCS summary report the response to that particular question was that “94.2% of the returns thought that card submission to maintain ones handicap, on a twelve monthly basis, should be mandatory: of these 48.7% suggested that a minimum of 3 cards should be submitted, under competition conditions, during a twelve month period in order that a player maintain his handicap – in this respect NIL, or incomplete, returns would be unacceptable for handicap purposes.”
- It should be noted, however, that although the membership of AGCS stood at that time as 2400 only 153 replies were received. Since publishing the results of their poorly supported survey there has been very little comment on any aspect of the handicapping scheme in Golf Club Management. Comment is now focussed on the ongoing problems of national unions in providing the promised centralised handicapping system!
- The Herald newspaper until this year ran, during the golfing season, a ‘Bandits of the Week’ feature in which winners of club medal competitions with the lowest nett differential with respect to CSS, were listed. Such exceptional low winning scores are frequently a cause for criticism of the handicapping system and bring it into ‘disrepute’. At the conclusion, therefore, of the 1998 and 2001 playing seasons clubs whose ‘bandits’ had featured in the Herald were contacted with a view to establishing if, with the benefit of hindsight the exceptional scores could have been predicted or were they simply days when the individuals played beyond all reasonable expectation. The co-operation of the clubs in this matter was excellent.
- Analysis of their playing records showed that the ‘bandits’ came from one of three categories:

- players who simply had a 'daft' day and played beyond all reasonable expectation. (See Herald Parbusters (1) A to J)
- players whose record indicated they were 'improvers' and could have been, with hindsight, the subject of clause 19 reduction by their club at some stage prior to the exceptional score. (See Herald Parbusters (1) K to P)
- players who played very infrequently in competitions and whose handicap as a consequence did not reflect their current ability i.e. they were significantly over-handicapped. (This is the one of the group of players 'starring' addressed.) See Herald Parbusters (2) A to G.

The scoring records of examples of each category are attached as Herald Parbusters (1) and (2).

- An analysis was carried out at Cochrane Castle (home club of the author) at the end of the 2000 playing season to determine the handicap distribution of those members returning less than three cards that year. A chart is attached which shows that players in the higher handicap range tend to play less frequently.
- In the year 2000 a total of 312 members had played at least three medal rounds in the year. Following notice of the impending introduction of 'starring' this number in 2001 increased to 372. As a consequence the number of players who would have been 'starred' dropped from 200 to 140.
- On a historical note it should be noted that the pre-1983 scheme contained a clause "Any player, in whatever Category, who fails to return a minimum of two scores in the Handicap Year, may have his handicap suspended."
- It is also of interest to note that twenty-five years ago the handicapping scheme contained the following paragraph:
"A handicap must be earned. No player has the right to a handicap without providing evidence of his ability."
- Reasons put forward for a return to lapsing of handicaps when the subject was under discussion were:
 - Infrequent competitors with handicaps higher than their current ability have the *potential* to win internal and external competitions at the expense of those players more correctly handicapped. Players with authentic handicaps are therefore denied the success their performance deserves. (The fact that this *potential* is frequently realised is a major cause of frustration and concern to clubs and their members.)
 - Players have been known to protect high handicaps so that they can compete in events such as Pro-Ams and external mixed foursomes with an enhanced chance of landing a large prize.
 - Such players are also 'useful' partners for member/guest days and the like.
 - Single figure handicaps can be retained for reasons of pride and vanity and so discredit the scheme.
 - A low handicap can be retained for entry into prestigious tournaments denying entry to more deserving entrants.

IMPLEMENTATION / COMMUNICATION

- The decision to make the 'starring' of handicaps mandatory was taken by the SGU Executive on the recommendation of the Golf Committee.
- From the outset, however, the SGU was sensitive to the needs of the club member who either plays competitively on an infrequent basis, or not at all. It was to allow such players to retain a handicap for social golf and the like that the 'starring' option was adopted rather than a return to the pre-1983 position when handicaps could be completely withdrawn following failure to return a specified number of competition scores.
- To advise golf clubs and their members of the decision to implement the 'starring' of handicaps in 2002 a vigorous 'awareness' campaign was conducted throughout the previous twelve months. The documentation advising of the impending change and the arrangements for its introduction was as follows:
 - Document circulated to clubs summarising the principal changes brought about by the 2001 Revision. This was accompanied by guidance notes for club secretaries / handicap committees.
 - A Question and Answer article published in the Scottish Golfer.
 - A document circulated to golf clubs entitled 'Lapsing of Handicaps: Implementation.' This was accompanied by a poster intended for display on club notice boards advising players of their obligations and the need to return a min. of three scores to retain a CONGU handicap.
 - Finally a document entitled Lapsing of Handicaps (Clause 17.6): Frequently Asked Questions. This took account of questions raised by golf clubs following the issue of previous documentation.
- Copies of the listed documents are attached.

- Clubs were also granted the discretion in very exceptional circumstances, not to lapse the handicap of a member who has failed to return the required number of cards due to ill health, injury or extenuating personal circumstances.

From the foregoing it can be seen that the introduction of 'starred' handicaps was well researched, well communicated, sympathetically introduced and has been accepted by member clubs with very little adverse comment.