

Inside the ropes: Some information on the USGA Handicap System

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The purpose of the USGA Handicap System is to make the game of golf more fun by enabling golfers of different playing abilities to compete against one another on an equitable basis. However, a golfer's USGA Handicap Index is predicated on playing on a course with a valid USGA Course Rating and Slope Rating. Without course and slope ratings, there would be no way for players to determine their relative skills.

The USGA Course Rating System is rather complex and can be confusing at times, but the system ultimately boils down to three numbers for each set of tees: the course, bogey, and slope ratings. The course rating is an evaluation of a course's difficulty for scratch golfers under normal course and weather conditions. Most people are used to seeing the course rating and slope rating on their scorecard or handicap computer, but the bogey rating is not listed in these locations. So how does a rating team determine course, bogey, and slope ratings?

There are several variables considered when the LGA rating team sets out to establish these figures. The first and most significant variable is yardage. The measured length of the hole is only part of the equation. The rating team takes into account five factors that will dictate the effective playing length of a hole: How far does the ball roll? Are there any changes in elevation? Are there any forced lay-ups or doglegs? Is there any prevailing wind? Is the altitude of the course 2,000 feet above sea level or higher (this is not much of an issue for us here in Louisiana)? Each of these factors would affect a course's playing length and require an adjustment to the measured length of the hole.

In addition to the effective playing length of a course, there are 10 obstacles that are evaluated on each hole. Nine of these obstacles are physical and the other is psychological. The nine physical obstacles include: topography, fairway, green target, rough and recoverability, bunkers, out-of-bounds and extreme rough, water, trees, and green surface. Each of these obstacle factors is rated on a scale of zero to 10, depending on their relation to how a scratch and bogey golfer would play the hole. To avoid subjectivity, the values assigned are taken from tables in the USGA Course Rating Guide.

When an LGA rating team sets out to determine the values for each factor, they do so for two people: the scratch golfer and the bogey golfer. The scratch golfer is defined by the USGA Course Rating System as one who has a course handicap of zero on any and all rated golf courses. The bogey golfer is defined as one who has a course handicap of 20 (24 for women) on a course of standard difficulty. Each hole is rated using different criteria for each golfer. After the obstacle values are gathered, the LGA is then able to compute the course rating (or scratch rating) and the bogey rating for each set of tees. Once this is done, the slope rating can be calculated by taking the difference between the bogey rating and

the course rating and multiplying it by 5.381 (4.24 for women) and rounding to the nearest whole number.

To put all of this into context, let's say that the LGA rating team determines that the men's course rating for a set of tees is 70.4 and the Bogey Rating is a 96.1. What this means is that if a scratch golfer were to complete 20 rounds from this set of tees, we would expect his 10 best scores to average around 70.4. If the bogey golfer were to complete 20 rounds from this set of tees, we would expect his 10 best scores to average around 96.1. Based upon this difference of 25.7 strokes between the two ratings (96.1 minus 70.4 equals 25.7), a slope rating of 138 would be issued (difference multiplied 5.381 for men).

Now let's say that the bogey rating remained at 96.1, but the course rating was higher, let's say 72.6. In that instance, the new slope rating would be 126 (96.1 minus 72.6 multiplied by 5.381 equals 126). As you can see in the second example, the golf course is more difficult for the scratch golfer and was of the same difficulty for the bogey golfer, but the slope rating decreased. This illustrates the point that you can't tell the difficulty of a golf course simply by looking at slope.

So now that we know how USGA course ratings and slope ratings are computed, how does the LGA come up with the allocation of handicap strokes at my golf course?

Well, it is a common misperception that the LGA allocates handicap stroke holes for its rated courses. The rating of your golf course will have no effect on which hole is more difficult nor does the individual handicap selection process affect your overall index. The allocation of handicap strokes is the responsibility of the club and can be accomplished by keeping a few things in mind: A handicap-stroke hole is a hole on which a player is entitled to apply a handicap stroke or strokes to their gross score. The idea behind handicap-stroke allocation is to provide an equal playing field for golfers of different handicap levels. A handicap stroke should be assigned to a hole where it most likely will be needed by the higher-handicapped player against a lower-handicapped player. Difficulty in making a par on a hole is not a true indication of where an extra stroke is needed.

Once the USGA course ratings and slope ratings are computed, golfers have a few options for determining their course handicap from a set of tees. The first way is by using a little math. A player's course handicap is determined by multiplying their USGA Handicap Index by the slope rating and then dividing that number by 113 (slope of a course of standard difficulty).

The next two options are a little less exhausting! Once the LGA rates a golf course, they send the club rating certificates with their new USGA course ratings and slope ratings. In addition, the LGA sends Course Handicap Conversion Tables. With these tables, you can find your course handicap by matching your USGA Handicap



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