

Handicapping History, Part 4: The Rise of the Slope System

By USGA Staff

By the mid-1970s, the USGA Handicap System had grown and developed to oversee a nationwide network of courses and players. Despite the refinements over the decades, two related issues remained: the incompleteness of Course Ratings and the portability of handicaps.

The main issue was that Course Ratings, which are determined largely by length and are meant to reflect the skill of a scratch player, don't really address how a course would play for the average player.

Take two courses, both measuring about 6,500 yards. The first is flat and open, so the expert or scratch golfer could be expected to shoot 70, its USGA Course Rating. Due to the lack of trouble, the course is relatively easy for all players, regardless of skill level.

The second course has narrow fairways and many hazards, so its USGA Course Rating is 74.1. However, its difficulties affect the average or bogey golfer far more than they impact the scratch player. And the higher the handicap, the more the hazards and difficulties would increase their scores in the form of recovery and penalty strokes.

However, the USGA Handicap System at the time assumed that the rate of increase of scores as handicaps went up was constant, regardless of the difficulty of the course. So a player who established a 12 handicap at the more difficult course would be a much better player than a 12 handicap at the easier course. If the two were to play against each other, the match would be unfair, although the USGA Handicap System indicated that their skill levels were equal.

In 1979, the USGA formed the Handicap Research Team (HRT) to study the issue and develop a method to combat these inequities. The team members were Trygve Bogevoid, Dean Knuth, Dr. Lucius Riccio, Dr. Fran Scheid, Lynn Smith, Dr. Clyne Soley, Dr. Richard Stroud and Frank Thomas. The group's mission was to study and refine many aspects of the Handicap System, including Course Ratings. The USGA's first full-time employee for handicapping, Knuth became the senior director of handicapping in 1981.

Three years later, the Colorado Golf Association, under the leadership of HRT member Dr. Byron Williamson, was the first state golf association to test the method that came to be known as the Slope System. In 1982, the Colorado Golf Association rated all its

courses under the proposed guidelines; the following year, the association applied the new method of handicap procedures.

Five more states adopted the Slope System in 1984, and by 1987, the USGA was ready to introduce it nationwide. The USGA began the process by forming the USGA Course Rating Subcommittee; its function was to refine the Course Rating system. The subcommittee included members of the men's and women's Handicap Procedure Committees, and its chair was Joe Luyckx of the Golf Association of Michigan.

Like the system itself, the committees have evolved. In 1998, the subcommittee became a USGA committee; appointed by the USGA Executive Committee, its members are composed of volunteers from regional and state golf associations around the country and throughout the world. Six years later, the Women's Handicap Procedure Committee merged with the Handicap Procedure Committee.

The Slope System was perhaps the most significant change introduced in the history of the USGA Handicap System. In addition to new measurements – Bogey Rating and Slope Rating – for determining the difficulty of courses, players now had a Handicap Index, which would convert into a Course Handicap based on the Slope Rating for the set of tees being played.

Taking into account the length of the course as well as 10 different obstacles and other characteristics, the Bogey Rating established the score that a player possessing a Course Handicap between 20 and 24 could expect to shoot: the average of the better half of his or her rounds. The Slope Rating is a measurement of how steeply the line between the USGA Course Rating and Bogey Rating rises: the more difficult the course, the steeper the line and the higher the Slope Rating.

A player then establishes a Handicap Index using a formula that incorporates these new standards. Depending on the difficulty of the course, a player with a Handicap Index of 16.8 could have a Course Handicap ranging from 17 for a course with a Slope Rating of 113 to a Course Handicap of 23 on a course with the maximum Slope Rating of 155.

The System finally solved the problem of portability that had been plaguing handicapping for centuries. For the first time, players who establish a Handicap Index at courses of varying levels of difficulty could play against each other on a level playing field anywhere.

Since accurate Course and Bogey ratings are at the core of the Slope System, the USGA puts plenty of effort into educating raters who assess courses for regional and state golf

associations, as well as golf ruling bodies around the world that have licensed the USGA Handicap System. Since 1989, the USGA has conducted Course Rating seminars, inviting four-person teams of raters to attend regularly scheduled sessions, to better ensure that every course receives accurate ratings.

Growth of the Handicap System

As golf has become more popular around the world, the USGA has exported the USGA Handicap System to golf associations in dozens of countries. In addition, it is now easier than ever to establish a USGA Handicap Index. As was the case in Leighton Calkins' day, it is only possible to get a handicap through a golf club, as peer review remains an important aspect of handicapping.

But for handicapping purposes, the definition of what constitutes a golf club has evolved. In addition to the traditional club attached to a golf course, clubs can now be formed without real estate that can utilize the USGA Handicap System.

The growth has been remarkable. There are nearly 19,000 licensed golf clubs, representing 88 domestic golf associations and 24 international associations that are licensed to use the USGA Handicap System. The national Course Rating and Slope Database has more than 69,000 individual tee ratings.

As the game continues to develop, the USGA constantly examines the intricacies of the USGA Handicap System within the foundations established 100 years ago. For the past century, the System has been guided by a democratic ideal: Every golfer, regardless of skill level, stands on equal footing, with a player possessing a Course Handicap of 20 enjoying relatively even odds in a match against a scratch golfer. And the game demonstrates this egalitarian principle thousands of times every day at courses around the country and throughout the world.

For all the changes to the USGA Handicap System, one aspect has remained constant. For a century, the USGA Handicap System has remained a measure of a player's potential rather than a simple snapshot of actual scoring average. Based on studies conducted by the HRT, the average golfer is expected to play to his or her handicap only about 25 percent of the time.

Part of the reason for this methodology is that it makes competition equitable under varying formats. But just as importantly, the System reflects golf's unique appeal as a solitary endeavor. At its very essence, all that is required to enjoy the game are a few clubs, a ball and a field of play.

In that simplicity lies the inherent pursuit for the perfect shot – a desire to hit the ball a little farther, a little straighter. After all, golf is a game of skill, and the USGA believes there should always be an incentive for improving one's game.

For 100 years, the USGA Handicap System has provided this encouragement and has allowed players to measure their progress, shot by shot. And it will continue to do so for years to come.