

Handicap Systems in Clubs

Introduction

In clubs with a single section, and where the standard is very mixed, a handicap system may be desirable, in the interests of equity, and providing all participants with a chance to win.

Balance & Seeding

The first and most obvious way to ensure equity, short of a full-blown handicap system, is to seed the competition carefully. This is not always possible on an ordinary club night, but can easily be implemented for major competitions, especially where pre-entry is required.

The seating arrangements should be prepared to ensure that pairs are stratified, and equally spread, throughout the competition. For example, the following categories might be created, using the players' grades as evidence of their ability.

Highest Tier – All Masters and Strong Intermediate As

Middle Tier – Remaining Intermediate As and Strong Intermediate Bs

Lowest Tier – Remaining Intermediate Bs and All Novices

Every pair should meet an equal number of pairs from each of the above groups. In a single session event, for example, each pair might meet one-third of the Highest Tier, one-third of the Medium Tier, and one-third of the Lowest Tier pairings. In multi-session events, this can be repeated. Note that seeding does not require meeting all pairs, which may be impossible in a large field, but it will give balance within the competition.

Handicaps & The Concept of Par

Where full-blown handicapping, as opposed to simply seeding, is required, the first concept that needs to be understood is that of Par.

The Par score is the average winning percentage score in the relevant club. Obviously, this will vary depending on the particular club. In the average club, it tends to be around the 62% mark. The Par score will tend to be lower in very strong clubs where there is a majority of Master players, and will probably be higher in very mixed clubs containing some very strong pairs and a majority of novices or Intermediate Bs. If a handicap system using a Par score is intended, each club must decide on the Par based on historical results within the club.

Calculating the Handicaps

Once the club Par has been established, each player's handicap is then determined by comparing their actual average gross (i.e. with no adjustments) score against the club Par. For example, if a member has an average gross of 52% over the previous 8 weeks, 20 weeks, or year (based on how far back you wish to go), and the club's Par is 62%, then they would have a club handicap of +10%. If another player had an average gross score of 44%, they would get a handicap of +18%. If all players played precisely to their average performance on any given night, then their handicaps would bring everyone a net (i.e. handicap-adjusted) score of 62%.

though of course this would be very unlikely in practice, as some will perform better than normal and others play below their norm for various reasons. This is why we frequently get net scores much higher than 62% in practice. Clearly a scratch pair (with no handicap adjustment, so by definition the strongest pair in the club) would have to perform better than their normal 62% if they were to win the net (handicap-adjusted) competition. Where handicaps are being used, the main prizes should be awarded on the net (handicap-adjusted) basis – this is after all the purpose of using handicaps; the club may also choose to give a category prize to the pair or team with the best gross (unadjusted) score.

Sample Handicap System – Pairs Events

For pairs events, the following handicap system might be used:

All handicaps are expressed as percentages. The minimum percentage shall be 0% and the maximum 22%. The handicap of a partnership shall be 50% of their combined handicap – e.g. two twenty handicappers playing together would get 50% of 40, so 20%, and a partnership of an 8 handicap and a 14 handicap would get 50% of 22, or 11%.

The maximum score possible on the night is the “top” multiplied by the number of boards played. This total is calculated as follows (assuming an eleven-table Mitchell): $22 \times 10 = 220$. This is the maximum score that would be possible if you scored an outright top on every board. This notional figure is multiplied by half of the combined handicap of the pair as outlined above, to give them the advantage of their handicap.

So, for example, John and Mary are partners. John’s handicap is 14 and Mary’s is 11. Their combined handicap is 25 and their applied handicap is thus 12.5%. If their gross (unadjusted) score on the night is 121 MPs out of 220 (55%), then their net (handicap-adjusted) percentage score would be $55\% + 12.5\%$, so 67.5%; or, in Matchpoint terms, 12.5% of 220 (so 27.5 MPs) would be added to their actual score of 121 MPs, to give a handicap-adjusted score of 148.5 MPs (or 67.5%).

For major competitions in the club calendar, clubs may find a big increase in attendance. This usually comes from the higher handicap category and it may therefore be advisable to use 33% of the combined handicaps rather than 50% as used on ordinary nights. This is a matter for the club to monitor and decide.

Sample Handicap System – Teams Events

For teams events, handicaps might be applied as follows:

Calculate the total team handicap in Victory Points (VPs) on the following basis.

Masters	0 VPs
Intermediate As	0.5 VPs
High Intermediate Bs	1 VP
Low Intermediate Bs	1.5 VPs
Novices	2 VPs

For example, two low Intermediate B players and two Novice players form a team. The B pair would get 1.5 VPs each and the Novice pair would get 2 VPs each. If this team played a match against a team of Masters (who get no handicap benefit), then the team would add 6 VPs to the actual result achieved in the match. So if the gross (actual) score in the match was a loss by 5/15, the net (handicap-adjusted) score would be 11/15. If their next match was against a team of exactly the same grades as themselves, then the handicaps will cancel out, and the result will be the actual score achieved in the match.

Each club can make adjustments to the schema outlined above based on the general standard in their club. The rationale for handicaps within clubs of mixed ability is (a) fairness, and (b) that more players have the chance to win, which should result in higher playing numbers.