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Overview and Implementation of approved SAGA Handicap changes

Introduction

Changes to the SAGA Handicap System have been approved by the SAGA in the past three years. Some of these were implemented by NGN, others not. The recent large changes in handicaps experienced by some golfers were due to the premature implementation of the Exceptional Performance test. To ensure that the next monthly run, on 31 July, does not cause similar misunderstandings, this communication describes all the factors that contribute to the computation of handicaps.

The Purpose of a Handicap

As you are aware a handicap is intended to provide a means for players of unequal ability to compete on a more or less even basis. A handicap should reflect the ability of a golfer to play the game, and not the average performance. This means that more focus must be placed on a player's good rounds, rather than simply applying a 10 out of 20 formula. The reality is that low-handicap golfers tend to play on - or near their handicap - with their good rounds typically being up to five strokes below their handicap. High-handicap golfers tend to have much larger variations in their scores. A high-handicap golfer may not have many rounds below handicap, but when it occurs the round may be as much as 10 strokes below handicap. All of the elements of the handicap calculation described below are designed to manage these aspects in a balanced fashion.

Bonus for Excellence

This element is similar to that found in the USGA Handicap System, the principle being that a slight degree of additional stretch should be incorporated in a player's handicap. The factor is 0.96, meaning that the exact handicap (derived from the best 10 scores) is reduced by 4% for all golfers. This has already been applied for all handicap computations done by the SAGA Handicap System, but will not have been applied at clubs still running the old NGN system: This should be fully implemented from 31 July.

Calculated (or Dynamic) Rating

Because weather conditions, or course setup, can have a dramatic effect on the average net score, we have introduced a calculation that will adjust the course rating from the base Standard Rating (SR). This can be seen in the score records for any player as SR and Course Rating (CR). At present the CR will normally equal the SR, but in future these values may differ. The variance currently allowed from the SR is one below to four above. So a course with a SR of 71 may have CRs varying from 70 to 75. Importantly, these adjustments may only take place a few days after the round is posted, if at all. It is important that each club has the correct values for SR loaded for each tee-colour they have (for example Yellow, White, Blue and Red) as these are used as the starting point for the CR.

Interim Revision

The Interim Rating has been operative since July 2007, but has been suspended in our new system for both June and July, while we assimilate all clubs. The principle is that if your net score is three or more less than the Par of the course being played, then the handicap is immediately recomputed. It does not mean, as per a common misperception, that the handicap will immediately be reduced by one or two strokes.

Validity of Scores

Approved in March 2009, only scores recorded in the previous full 12 calendar months are considered for handicap purposes. Older scoring history will be maintained for players that play infrequently, but the number of valid (or “considered”) scores may reduce below 20. Should this happen the number of rounds used for the handicap calculation gradually reduces from 10 down to one, which happens when a player has just five valid rounds.

Less than Five Valid Scores

There may be circumstances where the player has more than 20 scores available, but less than five of them fulfil the 12 month requirement as above. In this case we cannot compute a handicap as the minimum number of scores needed is five, so the handicap will be converted to “n/a” until such time as the player has at least five valid scores on the system, at which point the player’s handicap will be recalculated and reinstated.

What causes a Handicap Calculation (or recalculation)

Several situations will cause a handicap calculation. They are:

1. The standard monthly handicap run, which is done on the last day of the month, and only considers scores up to and including those played three days before the end of the month. This run is done automatically by the SAGA Handicap System and clubs no longer have (or need) a facility to do this themselves.
2. Interim Revision, described above. This uses all scores currently available, including the one just entered that caused the Interim Revision.
3. When the number of valid scores equals five. We will then automatically compute a handicap; as soon as the minimum number of valid scores is captured on the system (currently five).
4. Number of valid scores below five. Once we detect that only four valid scores are available, we will suspend the handicap until the minimum required is reached.
5. Manually invoked handicap re-computation of a single player’s handicap by a club. This may be necessary where the club has made changes to a player’s scoring history, including the allocation of penalty scores (see below).
6. Where a club has pegged (or frozen) a player’s handicap for any reason and the end date of the pegged handicap has been reached.

Penalty Scores

In order to encourage players to enter their scores promptly, the penalty score concept was introduced in July 2007. In essence a player has a 72-hour window to enter a score for a round played. This window starts at 19:00 on the day played and ends exactly three days later at 19:00. Originally this was designed to allow players some latitude when playing on a Friday or Saturday to enter their score a few days later, perhaps because the terminal previously used was unavailable. We anticipate that the availability of the SAGA Handicap Terminal will be substantially better than the previous system and once this has been proven, we may review the time allowed to

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enter a score. The rationale is that a player should enter a score immediately, especially if it may decrease a player's handicap.

The new SAGA Handicap Terminal has been displaying a message that scores entered more than 72 hours after play may/will result in a penalty score allocation. In common with other handicap calculation components this has been suspended for June and July, so all golfers are encouraged to ensure that all outstanding scores, including all those more than a week old, are promptly entered before 30 July. From 1 August these will be treated as Penalty Scores.

Exceptional Performance

Detailed analysis has revealed there are some players whose 10 scores used to compute a handicap are fairly similar with perhaps a three to six variance from best to worst. There are others who exhibit a completely different pattern, with a large variance from best to worst. These tend to be the players who turn in a 45-point Individual Stableford score. The handicap manual includes a section which allows a club to alter the gross scores of players according to a formula applied to Better-ball scores. Those clubs that utilised the facility found that it worked well, but many clubs ignored the facility. The Exceptional Performance test was designed to achieve a similar result to the manual process that clubs can still use, but automate the calculation so that there is a uniform approach across all clubs. It was this test that was prematurely introduced for clubs whose handicaps were computed by us up to and including 9 July. It has been temporarily suspended until 31 July, when a gradually phased-in approach will be implemented, which should result in lesser reductions in handicaps. The Exceptional Performance test examines the second lowest score in a player's valid set of scores. Where this particular differential is three or more less than a player's current handicap, then a lesser number of scores is used to compute a handicap. In simple terms a player is allowed to have one really good round in the last 20 and no action is taken. It is when another good round appears and a handicap calculation is triggered that the Exceptional Performance test is performed. Our modelling has revealed that approximately 90% of all golfers will not be affected by the Exceptional Performance test once the complete system is operating properly and all aspects of the Handicap System are fully operational.

Club Discretion Regarding Handicaps

Clubs have always been empowered to adjust a player's handicap up or down by two strokes, such adjustment to be done for a limited period only. When the system is fully operational from 1 August a club may set a handicap up or down by 25% from the player's current handicap. When the period set by a club for a particular member ends, the player's handicap will revert to normal calculation rules. In exceptional circumstances a club may approach the SAGA, who will be able to adjust a player's handicap outside this defined percentage.

Continuous Improvement

The SAGA continually monitors the performance and effectiveness of the Handicap System on a bi-annual basis. Possible alternative calculation methods are continually assessed and if they have merit and applicability to golfers of all abilities and competitive focus, they are reviewed for possible inclusion.

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SAGA Handicap Committee