

REPORT ON SOUTH WEST FEDERATION HANDICAP CONFERENCE

SUNDAY 20TH MARCH 2005 AT NAILSEA CROQUET CLUB

The conference started with a welcome address by Cliff Jones, Chairman of the South West Federation and Chairman of the CA handicap committee. He thanked everyone for coming and said that he was pleased that Don had agreed to take on this co-ordination role.

Don Gaunt, South West Federation handicap co-ordination officer then gave an introduction to the conference, its purpose and the day's programme. He also explained his role, that of co-ordination. He was not there to dictate policy but rather to see that policy was correctly understood and applied throughout the Federation. He introduced the topics for the day and how they would be discussed. He highlighted some common misconceptions: that handicappers had no powers to adjust handicaps outside the automatic system; that just because someone had won a game easily, their handicap was wrong; that 14 point and full bisque games did not count.

He made the point that there is no such thing as a perfect system. However, almost any system that rewarded success and penalised failure would eventually balance out ability. The main problem was how quickly it would do that. Too fast and it could be discouraging, too slow and it could lead to banditry. The CA automatic system is a compromise and like all compromises it has problem areas. **This is why handicappers still play a vital role in ensuring that handicaps are adjusted when such problems arise.**

He made the interesting observation that if the perfect system existed and player's ability could be completely matched, the result of any game would be solely due to chance, not skill! Although such a system could not exist it did mean that the better a system was, the more effect chance had on the result.

The conference then moved on to the three syndicate exercises.

1, What should a club handicapper know? This considered what knowledge a club handicapper should possess in terms of how to assess ability, limits of responsibility and monitoring duties.

There were a number of points on which all syndicates were agreed.

- i. Handicappers should have;
 - A. A good working knowledge of the game (but not necessarily the ability to play it!).
 - B. Read and fully understood the current issue of the CA guidelines.
 - C. Completely understand how handicap cards are filled in (including advanced and 14 point games).
- ii. Wherever possible, the club handicapper should be someone who regularly goes to the club.
- iii. He/she should be readily accessible.
- iv. There was considerable support for a book of games played and results to be kept.

Other points raised by one or more syndicates were;

- A good knowledge of beginners and their progress, particularly potential bandits.
- How to devise tests to establish ability.
- Regular checking of cards.
- The ability to be tactful when changing handicaps.
- Be aware that players can be erratic – a purple patch may not indicate a permanent improvement.

2 Beginners handicaps. This looked at how to allocate handicaps to new players, what that should be and what process should be used to adjust handicaps as basic skills are learned.

The most significant point to come out of this discussion was the feeling that all clubs should start their beginners at the same handicap. Where there was disagreement, was in what that value should be. A straw poll held by DG showed roughly a 50-50 split between 24 and 26. Many thought that the CA should issue mandatory instructions but DG and CJ pointed out that it was not in the CA's power to do so. However CJ did say that the CA guideline was for 24.

Club cards as well as CA cards (where appropriate) were also held to be a good idea. The general consensus was that club cards should be used as guidance for the handicapper rather than as an automatic system (not of course applicable where this is the only card).

Additional points made were;

- Where a club started above 24, players should not play in the B league until they reached the CA's 24. This was not universally agreed.
- The setting of initial handicaps and subsequent improvement should make use of "Principles of Handicapping" by Bill Lamb.
- Run a beginners only tournament with the club handicapper observing.
- Club handicap cards should include all competitive games. Again there was some disagreement because players often used friendly games to try things out.
- Use full bisques.
- Many, but not all, felt that beginners should only play on short lawns.

3 Handicap harmonisation, which considered differences between club abilities and how to overcome them, training for club handicappers, complaints and appeals procedures and player awareness of the limitations of any handicap scheme.

There were not as many concrete suggestions from this discussion. This might have been due to syndicate fatigue, but discussion showed that in fact delegates were very happy with the present level of training and procedures. Several people expressed complete satisfaction with the way that their problem had been dealt with.

There was, however, a lively discussion regarding the small club problem where just a few players continually played each other, sharing out their points. The net result was that good players ended up too high and steady players too low in their handicaps. DG said that he was very willing to help in this situation, as indeed he was in any other similar problem.

Other points that were brought out were;

- It is important that club handicappers should liaise and discuss with other club handicappers.
- Handicap committees should have a range of abilities. Not unanimously accepted.
- Recognition that a single federation match result, like a single game result, was an indicator rather than absolute proof.

There was a brief general discussion on international handicaps, also on bisques in small lawn games. CJ would look at this latter point.

The conference finished at about 4.0 with general thanks to DG for organising the event and to Nailsea Club for hosting it and providing an excellent lunch.

Addenda

15 clubs and about 25 people attended.

A few clubs that could not attend sent letters beforehand. Below is a summary of their main points where not already covered above.

John Barber from Broadwas said that they run a season-long tournament where players gain points for breaks in a game e.g. a three hoop break gains 1 point, four hoops gain 3 points etc. (The scale used and whether bisques may be used can be decided by the club – DG). The points gained would be entered onto a chart as would a breakdown of the breaks in the “day book” of results.

W Simpson from Broadwas said that they have three levels of handicap for beginners – a starting handicap, a provisional handicap after a few months and a definitive handicap at the end of the year. Only then does the player use a card for automatic changes.

Alison Thursfield of Cheltenham says that their handicappers will offer advice to small club members at Cheltenham handicap events. She makes the point that Cheltenham player’s handicaps are likely to be pretty close to the national average because of their exposure to a large number of visitors (this will of course apply to other large clubs in our federation – DG).