HANDICAPPING GUIDELINES

Guidelines to assist handicappers to set beginners and improvers handicaps

1. Introduction

The maximum handicap for entry to an event varies according to the event. At present the normal handicap for a CA event is 20, although some are set lower*. For SWF B league matches the limit is 24. For club starting handicaps the SWF limit is 28.

*For clarification, "lower" in this document means the numerical value of a handicap, i.e. 5 is lower than 6. It does not mean a worsening of standard. The reverse applies to "higher".

This is fine, but what do those figures *mean*? What can a 24 do that a 28 cannot? When a 20 from one club plays a 20 from another, have they similar abilities? It is the purpose of this paper to address these questions.

Although I hope that the advice below will be of general use to handicappers, it is particularly aimed at the smaller club where the handicapper is often on his/her own with only a small number of players to judge.

It is impossible to have a perfect handicapping system. Even if it were so, it would mean that the result of such a match would be determined solely by chance, which would be pointless. The **practical** ideal is to set a player's handicap equal to his or her *normal playing standard*. Now if two such people play each other, the game will be mostly determined by one person playing slightly better or worse than their normal standard. Of course chance can still play a significant role!

The problem that you face as a handicapper is to determine what a player's normal standard might be, although even when you think you have found it, it changes as that player improves or worsens.

I need to say at this point that keeping track of a worsening player is rarely a problem. Few change for the worse quickly, except as the result of an accident or illness, so the automatic handicapping system (AHS) can cope with this. For this reason, only improving players are considered here.

I have divided this paper into 5 sections.

- Section 2 looks at beginners and how they can be assessed.
- Section 3 gives benchmarks for handicaps down to 24.
- Section 4 considers the assessment of improving players below 24.
- Section 5 gives a table of abilities to aid the handicapper.
- Section 6 Deals with Bandits.

2. Starting handicaps

2.1 Ability

A player's skill on the lawn determines how his or her handicap is assessed. This will manifest itself in two ways, theoretical knowledge and skill.

2.1.1 Theoretical knowledge

This is the easiest to test because it can be done off the lawn. Unfortunately knowing about something does not mean being able to **do** it! Nevertheless the knowledge has to be there or all the skill in the world will be useless.

2.1.2 Skill

Some elements of skill can be taught (how to hold the mallet, stalking the ball etc.), or gained by

practice, but innate skill is either there or it isn't. This does not mean that a player cannot improve, better tactics and careful play will get results. However, judging skill is more difficult than judging theoretical knowledge and can only be done by observation.

<u>2.1.3 Equating ability to a handicap</u>

The guidelines that I give here are not fixed in stone, but they should be circumvented with care. It has to be said that there will be some players who simply cannot grasp the game but still enjoy playing. These players should NOT be lowered just because they have played for a long time. You are doing them, their opponents and yourself a disservice by doing so.

Generally, however, a beginner's handicap is likely to be lowered fairly rapidly as the basics of the game are grasped.

<u>3. Handicap Benchmarks</u>

<u>3.1 Starting Handicap of 28</u>

It is assumed that initially the player has little or no knowledge of the game. See 3.4 if this is not the case.

Depending on the club and the time of joining, the newcomer will receive some basic instruction. The person or persons giving this instruction are well situated to assess ability. They should be able to advise the handicapper when a starting handicap can be given.

Note. Although not strictly to do with the subject, it is worth noting that for beginners (and improvers), doubles with an experienced partner is an invaluable learning experience. The experienced partner can also help the handicapper in his task.

To be given a starting handicap and play games at club level, the player should be able to demonstrate that he/she can:

a. Strike a ball cleanly, run a hoop from a mallet head distance in front, play reasonable croquet stokes (drive, stop, roll and take off) and play a continuation stroke.

b. Describe verbally how a game starts, the hoop order, what is meant by a break, how a game finishes and how bisques are used.

<u>3.2. To progress to 26</u>

All of 3.1.

Be able to demonstrate that he/she can:

a. Play a game without continual supervision, use simple safety tactics (ie not do too many stupid things), and

b. Describe verbally court etiquette (eg double banking)

The progression to 26 should be fairly rapid for those showing any aptitude for the game. It should not normally be necessary to wait for the AHS to trigger the change except where there is doubt as to the player's speed of improvement.

<u>3.3 To progress to 24</u>

All of 3.1 and 3.2.

Be able to demonstrate that he/she can:

a. Play a game without supervision (this does not infer that no rules advice can be sought, rather that the player should not be completely unable to play due to lack of knowledge) and

b. Describe verbally when a referee should be called and the basic faults that can be committed, how a timed game finishes and what Wharrad turns are, what a shortened game means,

This is the point at which the player may be exposed to B league matches. As before, progression for competent players should be fairly rapid, but he/she must be able to play in a match without being a burden on the team or opponents.

3.4 Beginners who have some knowledge of the game

Quite often, people join a club having had some previous knowledge of croquet. The amount and value of that knowledge will have to be assessed and an appropriate handicap given. The handicapper should not be afraid of making a realistic assessment because the AHS plus that person's performance will make the necessary adjustments if that assessment is not quite accurate.

Be careful, sometimes a persons belief in their ability is based on a version of croquet that few would recognise!

4. Handicaps below 24

It is rather more difficult to assess ability as a person starts to play in more competitive games. Partly this is because the various parts of more advanced play such as peeling, 3 and 4 ball breaks, leaves etc., are not all learnt in the same order by different players. Similarly, tactical skill is often learnt piecemeal and is not easy to assess. Nevertheless, for small clubs, where a player might take two or three years to play enough games to trigger an AHS change, some guidance is needed. Below are some of the things for the handicapper to consider, together with their pros and cons. **Beware!** The result of a single game is only an indicator of performance, despite what the loser might say or think!

4.1 Number of bisques left standing

As I say above, a single game is only a pointer, but if a player is regularly winning with bisques standing, then a change is indicated. The change ought to be at least one more than the average number of bisques left. The handicapper should not be afraid to make a fairly strong cut, because a player who is improving this fast will soon compensate for the cut.

4.2 Results

Normally, results are a matter for the AHS even if the player only plays one or two games a year. This is particularly so if the wins are not by large amounts and/or there are some losses.

Where, however, a player has had a number of really good wins, the handicapper should consider if an early reduction is warranted. Unlike 4.1 such a reduction should not be harsh, merely an early change to the next trigger point.

4.3 Observation

This can be directly by the handicapper, or a report from another observer. However, the report of a losing opponent should be considered with great care! Normally, observation should be used as a pointer, not a trigger, for change. An exception to this is if a change has been indicated by other means and the observation is of a confirmatory character.

Another method of observation is to play a game with the person in question. This is fine if the game is in the normal run of things but if the player knows they are under observation, the result may well not be that of a normal game due to nervousness.

4.4 Comparison

It is vitally important to try and stabilise a clubs handicaps. If this is not done, players who play outside the club will have a different standard to those who do not. The result will be a seesaw of handicaps as these two types of player compete at club level. Comparison of a player's results against an opponent whose handicap is known to be accurate can often be used to set the standard for other players. If a wide discrepancy exists the handicapper should consider a general raising or lowering of club-only players. The club's committee should be informed and must support the handicapper if she/he can prove his/her case.

4.5 Demonstration of ability

As is stated earlier, ability and tactical knowledge improve piecemeal in players. Thus a person can be very good at hitting in but incapable of taking advantage of that hit in. So how can the handicapper judge whether a player of, say 18 handicap ought to be a 16 or 14? Sections 4.1 to 4.4 will give many clues, not forgetting also that the AHS will work well in many cases.

All this is, however, of little use in a small club where perhaps most of the players are incorrect, resulting in difficulties in play outside the club. (Note. This can also happen in larger clubs where a group of players who never play outside the club can drag other members up or down because they never keep cards and seldom get looked at.)

So what can be done if all other methods have been exhausted? The handicapper can, by observation, reports or by actually running tests, make an assessment by noting what a player can or cannot do.

In the next section is a table of moves and tactics in croquet and the suggested level of handicap needed to successfully undertake them.

5. Indicators

The following chart is designed to help handicappers assess a player's ability. For each attribute, the player should be successful when undertaking it either as a test or by observation. Successful means being able to do it regularly i.e. better than 50% of the time. We have often heard "He/she did a seven hoop break without bisques. A handicap 18 shouldn't be able to do that!" Indeed not, if that player can regularly do it. A single purple patch is not a reason for change - but it should be noted.

WARNING! Being able to do just one thing from the table is not a reason for a change, the player should be able to do several (but not necessarily all). The most common example of this is a 4-ball break of a number of hoops - how often does the player do it - can they construct the break or does it only happen when the opponent gives them one?

Notes

This chart is only intended to consider handicaps between 24 and 10. Below that the player should have reached a level (unless a bandit, see section 6) where the AHS should operate. If several attributes in the table below suggest a handicap less than 10 (shown as <10) then consultation with an experienced handicapper is required.

HANDICAPPING GUIDELINES

* I H/C = INDICATED HANDICAP

ATTRIBUTE *achieved 50% of tries*	I H/C*	COMMENTS
(a) Approaches a hoop in a croquet stroke and runs it	22	From in front, up to 2 yards
Makes roquets over 3 yards or more	22	
Makes more than 1 hoop in a turn with bisques	22	
Makes roquets over 5 yards or more	20	
Plays accurate drive shots over different distances	20	Up to length of lawn
Approaches a hoop in a croquet stroke and runs it	20	From behind, up to 2 yards
Makes straight rushes of 5 yards or more	18	Balls initially 18 inches apart
Makes a 4-ball break of 4 hoops with up to 3 bisques	18	Remember "regularly"
(b) Approaches a hoop in a croquet stroke and runs it	18	From the side, up to 2 yards
Plays accurate stop shots over different distances	16	Up to 20 yards
Plays accurate roll shots over different distances	16	Up to 15 yards
Plays accurate take-offs over different distances	16	Up to lawn diagonal
Makes a 4-ball break of 4 hoops without bisques	16	
Makes a 3-ball break of 4 hoops with up to 3 bisques	16	
Picks up the 4th ball in a 3-ball break with bisques	16	
Makes a 4-ball break of 8 hoops with up to 4 bisques	14	
Makes straight rushes of 10 yards or more	14	Balls initially >1 yard apart
Achieves (a) and (b) above and gets a rush afterwards	14	
Makes cut rushes of 5 yards or more	12	Balls initially >1 yard apart
Makes a 4-ball break of 8 hoops with up to 2 bisques	12	
Makes a 3-ball break of 4 hoops without bisques	12	
Makes a 3-ball break > than 4 hoops with bisques	12	
Makes a rover peel and finishes	10	
Makes a break of > 10 hoops with up to 2 bisques	10	
Makes a 10 hoop break or more without bisques	<10	

Picks up the 4th ball in a 3-ball break without bisques	<10	
Regularly makes 3-ball breaks without bisques	<10	

<u>6 Bandits</u>

Let me say from the start; bandits will always be with us and they will always be a problem. The automatic system is too slow and handicappers have to have the wisdom of Solomon to assess a bandit's current ability. Furthermore, as soon as a handicap is set, the player continues to improve and is a bandit again!

So can nothing be done? Well, yes. With care, a handicapper can tread that fine line between upsetting other players who are 26'ed and demoralising the bandit by too savage a cut.
This can be done by looking not just at the bandit's current form but at his or her **<u>rate of improvement</u>**.

By seeing how much the bandit has changed over, say a month of play, the handicapper can estimate where he/she will be in another month. A change may then be given. After another month the rate can again be assessed and so on. A slowing down of the rate will indicate that either the player is reaching a plateaux or the system is catching up.

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