

Golf Digest +



LOW NET by Sam Weinman

Enough about me, let's talk about my Handicap Index

My favorite example of people not understanding handicaps is from the golf tournament I organized on my wedding day. Working through the pairings the night before, I was trying to account for the new boyfriend of an aunt—I'll call him Harry—who said he wanted to play, but wasn't very good.

When I asked Harry his handicap, he said he was around a 15.

"That's not so bad," I said.

"Well, your handicap is your strokes above 100, right?" Harry asked.

I ended up slotting Harry into another foursome.

Most golfers have a better grasp of the concept, but you'd be surprised by how many avid players are guilty of misconstruing what a handicap (or [Handicap Index](#), more on that later) is meant to represent and how it works. In fairness to Harry, wherever he is, his problem was not in being bad, but in not understanding how a proper handicap could help even a struggling golfer like him.

You don't write [a newsletter called Low Net](#) without embracing the benefits of this system. You should as well, for several reasons: because it can level the playing field in competition, because it provides a universal metric for golfers to chart their progress, and because it even helps protect against the Harrys of the world from hockey-pucking the ball all over the course until sunset. I still aspire to holding my own against my scratch and plus golfer friends without needing a few strokes a side. But at least for now there's a way to keep both sides engaged without tying a hand behind their backs.

THE LONG GAME

Four Golfers Compete to See Who Can Make The Biggest Stride
in Lowering Their Handicap Index Over Time

PRESENTED BY **USGA**

EXPERTS

MAY 2024

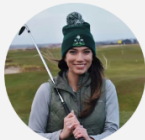


LUKE KERR-DINEEN
Senior Editor

CURRENT
HANDICAP:
.8

BALL STRIKING:	SHORT GAME
A-	D-
PUTTING:	MENTAL GAME
B+	C+

NOTES:
Cautiously optimistic
after a productive
offseason. But will it
hold up on the course?



MADDI MacCLURG
Editor

CURRENT
HANDICAP:
6.3

BALL STRIKING:	SHORT GAME
B+	B
PUTTING:	MENTAL GAME
A	C+

NOTES:
Looking to maintain
good habits I formed last
season and get my
competitive edge back.



SAM WEINMAN
Editorial Director

CURRENT
HANDICAP:
11.3

BALL STRIKING:	SHORT GAME
C+	B+
PUTTING:	MENTAL GAME
B	B+

NOTES:
Offseason work hasn't
produced immediate
results, but still encouraged
about progress.



GREG GOTTFRIED
Digital Producer

CURRENT
HANDICAP:
N/A

BALL STRIKING:	SHORT GAME
C+	D
PUTTING:	MENTAL GAME
C+	B-

NOTES:
Just signed up for an
official GHIN, hoping
not to embarrass
myself.

All of this serves as a backdrop for why three colleagues— Luke Kerr-Dineen, Maddi MacClurg, Greg Gottfried—and I agreed to [a season-long project called The Long Game](#) in which we will provide regular updates on our progress, and how it's reflected in our Handicap Index. You might think it's a shameless ploy to justify playing more golf, to which I say, yes, it's definitely that, too. But it's also a chance to clear up some [handicap misconceptions](#). Among them:

Handicap Index vs. handicap: I am guilty of using both interchangeably as well, but they're different. My Handicap Index—currently 11.3—is the number that I can take everywhere, and is adjusted by the scores I post. But it turns into a handicap on specific courses based on their difficulty. For instance, my 11.3 index becomes a 13 at my home club.

Neither number is a scoring average: Harry was wrong in thinking a handicap is your average score above 100, but also in thinking of it as an average at all. Rather, it's a measure of your potential, or what the USGA calls your “demonstrated ability”. [The World Handicap System](#) only accounts for the best eight of your 20 most recent scores, and even then, it throws out the real disasters. Which brings me back to Harry again.

There's a limit for your bad: The handicap system wants Harry home for dinner, which it ensures by determining when he should just pick up on a hole and enter a score of net double bogey (if he has a course handicap of 36 and gets two strokes a hole, the highest score he can take on a par 4 is a four-over par 8). This is good for Harry in that it puts a cap on his worst holes, it's good for the other people on the course who are waiting for him to hole out, and it's good for making sure his handicap is accurate. Remember, the system is meant to gauge how well you can play, not what happens when you spiral out of control.

You don't need to play 18 holes to enter a score: A family commitment sent me late to the golf course the other day. I joined my group on the 7th tee, which you might think rendered the ensuing 12 holes meaningless in the eyes of the World Handicap System. In fact, I can now enter a hole-by-hole score for incomplete rounds of 10-17 holes in which I just leave the holes I didn't play blank (you can already post a nine-hole score). The handicap algorithm takes over from there, reinforcing the important point that any golf better is still better than no golf. Even Harry should know that.