

HANDICAP INFORMATION 4 - FULL HANDICAP ALLOWANCE IN MATCH PLAY

Why does CONGU® direct the full handicap difference in match play?

All the Associations affiliated to CONGU® now recognise that giving the player with the higher handicap an allowance equivalent to the full handicap difference is the most consistent with equity. In view of this CONGU® now directs that the full allowance in the difference between the handicaps be applied in singles match play.

It is wrong to say that there has been a debate on the question, because the argument for “no change” has barely been presented. CONGU® has been waiting for years for a coherent document to be shown to it which finishes with the words “... therefore the fair allowance in match play is three-quarters of the difference in handicap”. This has so far not been forthcoming.

To help to convince the doubters, this note sets out the basic arguments.

We start with the assumption that, for stroke play, the present CONGU® Unified Handicap System is accurate and fair for players with a reasonably full competitive record. All statistical investigations which have been made support this statement, and certainly it is much superior to any alternatives which have been suggested. We also assume that we want the scale of match play allowances to be fair, in the sense that each participant has a roughly equal chance of winning. This is not such a trivial statement as it might appear, because some golfers believe that the lower handicap player should actually be given the advantage. Suppose, nevertheless, that we have been charged with the task of devising the fair match play odds given our present handicapping system, based as it is on stroke-play data, and no previous assumptions. How should we proceed?

Let us think about how we would expect a match between a 6-handicapper and a 16-handicapper to go. First of all – what scores do we expect each of them to achieve if they put in an average performance? There is an annoying technical point that affects the argument. We do not actually expect a player to “play to his handicap”. The CONGU® UHS, like all other handicap systems round the world, handicaps players according to the better half of their records. The high handicappers are more erratic and therefore their average score is relatively more in excess of their handicaps than is the case for the better players. So, instead of a difference of ten strokes between their scores, we expect something like eleven or twelve. Already our analysis is tilting the scales slightly against our sixteen-handicapper.

But, for the moment, assume that in their match both players play exactly to their handicaps never having a birdie, nor a double bogey, and dropping their strokes consistently where the stroke index says they should. Playing level the 6-handicapper would have won ten holes, and under full handicap difference the match would have been all square. So where are we getting this “three-quarters” from? In real life, of course, matches don’t go like that. People take double or triple bogeys and even get birdies. We need to consider how strokes are likely to be converted into holes won, lost, or halved in match play. There are two ways in which strokes fail to be used at all. Our sixteen-handicapper might win a hole without needing his stroke or lose a hole in spite of having had one; so he might as well not have had a stroke at those holes! Actually, investigative work has been done on this- and there is a surprisingly consistent result. Just over 40% of a stroke entitlement, on average, is “wasted”. Enthusiastic enquirers can check this by interrogating competitors in club handicap knockouts. The conclusion is that our sixteen-handicapper, even if he gets ten shots, is only likely to be able to use six of them. It’s beginning to look as if even full difference is not enough.

So far this is mostly theoretical. But let us consider the real life situation. Most clubs run a handicap match play knockout competition each year with a reasonably large entry. Have a look at the honours board listing past winners. Even clubs, which use full difference, find that low Category players predominate. And whether they have changed to full difference or not they will be pressed to produce any 3 or 4 Category winners in the last twenty years.

This is even more striking when you realise that low handicap players form quite a low proportion of the total entry. You can also look at the individual results for each match in the tournament, and you will find that the low handicappers have a consistent edge. The Scottish Golf Union has done a lot of work on this. They have an excellent presentation subtitled "Myths and misconceptions", which is available on the CONGU® Website. They carried out a survey of clubs before and after the change to full difference. Before the change, the lower handicap player won 61% of handicap singles matches. After the change to full difference, the low handicapper won 55% (note that he still had an edge).

A good deal of experimentation has been done with what is called simulation. Using hole-by-hole scores from stroke play many, indeed thousands, of "pretend" matches can be run between each potential pair in the field. An objection may be raised that such a simulation is not like the real thing. But if you think about it, simulation probably actually understates the advantage, which the low handicapper has. He can control the game better, preserving his winning position at a hole when necessary. Anyway, these simulations consistently show that, even at full difference, the low handicapper usually wins. (If you want to know the horrid truth, to make it even you would have to use nearly one-and-a-quarter times the difference. Not that that is recommended!). And using three-quarters gives the low- handicapper a huge edge. The actual numerical results can be provided on request; but you can rest assured that, the more "numerical" you get, the stronger is the evidence for full difference.

It is only fair to consider counter-arguments. One common complaint just now is that "our low handicap players don't enter handicap knock-outs after the change to full difference; because the odds are against them". This is nonsense; all that has happened is that the odds in their favour have been changed from "enormously favourable" to "favourable, but not actually unfair". The problem is one of education. Another childish question is "Do you seriously expect me to give two strokes at one hole?" The answer to that is "yes"; and it happens even at three-quarters difference.

Finally, as a matter of interest three-quarters of handicap for singles appears to be used nowhere else in the world.