



Separating golf from other sports, the handicap enjoys a milestone

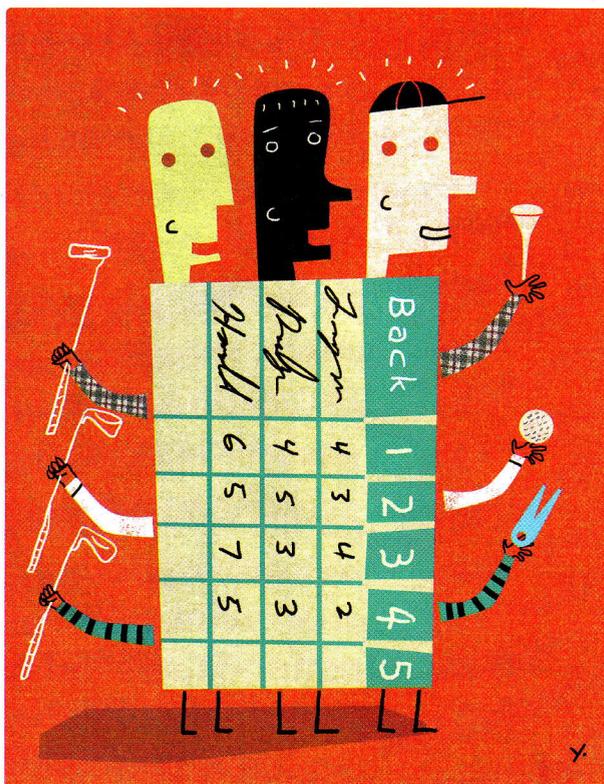
Tommy Bolt said it best. Most golf bets are won during the negotiation on the first tee. So to all the pencil-whipping golfers out there—and you know who you are—it is time to celebrate the centennial of the USGA's adoption of the handicap system.

It happened on Oct. 11, 1911, the year of the first Indianapolis 500, back when Cy Young wasn't an award but a pitcher who had just notched his 511th and final victory. The handicap system has become one of golf's great distinctions, whereby participants of different skill—whether male or female, young or old, and even from separate tees—can compete fairly and equitably.

In golf, a handicap is a measure of a player's potential. For some it is proof of progress, for others of incompetence and the deterioration of skill. It is a golfer's photo I.D., allowing admittance to local, regional and national competition.

The original concept of handicapping began with the Scots. Historians have uncovered references dating as far back as 1687. According to the USGA, the term derived from a trading game, popular in pubs in the 17th and 18th centuries, known as "hand in cap." Yet it was a group of women—the Ladies Golf Union in Great Britain—who became the first governing authority to establish a nationwide system.

In the U.S., Leighton Calkins is considered the father of the USGA handicap system. He advocated the British system of averaging a player's best three scores, and in what became the forerunner of course ratings, assigning each course a par score based on the expected score of then-reigning U.S. Amateur champ Jerome Travers. Calkins first tested his ideas at Plainfield CC in Edison, N.J., then on a larger scale with the Metropolitan Golf Association, beginning in 1905. The Massachusetts Golf Association



adopted the formula, but insisted bogey, not par, be the scratch standard.

In October 1911, while the U.S. Women's Amateur was being contested at Baltusrol GC in Springfield, N.J., the USGA executive committee discussed establishing a handicap system as a way to determine eligibility for the U.S. Amateur. According to Dean Knuth, the USGA's senior director of handicapping from 1981 to 1997, a contentious meeting ensued between members of the USGA executive committee from the Metropolitan GA and the lone committee rep from the Massachusetts GA. Ultimately they adopted a modified version of Calkins' system.

In 1912 the USGA instituted the first national handicap list for use at its 324 member clubs, naming those golfers who were eligible to enter the U.S. Amateur (6-handicap or better). "They had no inkling some day millions of golfers would use a handicap to enjoy the game and be able to play competitively with each other," Knuth says.

In its primitive days, handicapping was more art than science. Improvements have been made, perhaps none more significant than Knuth's invention in the 1980s of the slope system, a measure of how fast scores go up as handicaps go up, which made handicaps portable from club to club.

A century later, a handicap still determines eligibility for the U.S. Amateur (2.4 or less). But its import has grown. The USGA says 4.5 million golfers have an official handicap. Today, there are nearly 19,000 golf clubs, representing 88 domestic golf associations and 24 international associations, that are licensed to use the USGA handicap system. That's reason enough for the USGA to return to Baltusrol Oct. 27 and host a celebratory dinner to commemorate one of the most significant moments in golf. **GW**