

# THE HACKER

## # 11 (March 2011)

### Bandits...

Bandit. A strong and provocative word in the world of golf. And yet, if you were to pick up and thumb through your dictionary at home I doubt you would find mention of this great sport of ours, let alone a description that could come close to invoking the passion this word can produce in the bar at your club.

More than likely you would read the normal blurb of robbers and outlaws in lawless areas. If you're lucky it may touch close to home with mention of persons being proficient at something at the expense of others.

But almost certainly no four letter word - g\*\*f! Strange then that us golfers use this word so often and with such meaning and yet the great and good successors to Samuel Johnson haven't bothered to mention us?

So why do we use it with such readiness and zeal? Firstly the accusation is always aimed at the smoking bandito masked under a heavy cloak of sarcasm and banter. But beware the smiling accuser. He may look jocular with one arm on the bar, the other balancing a G&T, but the hatred is real. Oh OK so to call it hatred is a little strong, perhaps bitterness is more appropriate. Either way, the sentiment is very real and it doesn't just fester in solitary hearts. It breeds and multiplies in the wider membership. With a pack mentality they hunt down, expose and besmirch the latest spur-wearing Mexican to stray into their patch, until their handicaps have been cut down to a level where they can no longer win so much as a jumping bean. Of course then everyone claims them to be the salt of the earth and they are welcomed into the collective bosom. And therein lies a problem.

The CONGU handicap system as it stands produces three consequences. The first is to cut players who return scores better than their handicaps (this can be quite aggressive for higher handicap players who could see their handicaps reduced by as much as 0.4 [0.5 for the highest category ladies] for each shot better than handicap). Secondly it protects players handicaps from rising if they don't quite play to their handicap but manage to score within the so-called 'buffer-zone'. The third & last is to pay lip service to increasing your handicap if you play below not only your handicap but also your buffer zone. However this increase is limited to just 0.1 for each round you do this and a dreadful run of form would mean that your handicap moves upwards at the speed of a creeping glacier. You could play for months and months in competition and find that you still haven't crossed the next threshold to get a measly one shot back in your armoury.

Let us not forget that this is a tried and trusted system that is normally accepted without so much as a cursory glance to its fairness and appropriateness. However I feel it is deeply flawed and this system itself is the breeding ground for the bandit haters.

This is because having given it a bit more thought I actually don't believe it is the hatred or even bitterness I mentioned earlier in the heart of the accusers. It is envy. Envy because their time as a bandit has long had the sun go down on it. Instead the member has been consigned to an after-bandit lifetime of mediocre scores restricted by the straight jacket of the handicap system.

When most people take up golf and join a club they are either new to the game or returning from a long lay-off. They put in their three cards for their initial handicap and then the bug bites (or re-bites) and they play and practice like mad. They improve; fast. Great scores come firing from their ivory handled pistols and the handlebar moustache starts growing thickly on their top lip. Such a character simply cannot blend into the clubhouse cacti. What starts as a whisper as they walk by swiftly grows to a cacophony.

But worry not members, the wheels of the handicap system will start to turn. And turn they inexorably do, until the new member has been neutered and their golfing prowess and success has been reduced to your miserable level. Give it a couple of years and this 'new' member will hit the dangerous state of mind of so many others - apathy. If you look that up in your dictionary it will tell you all about lack of interest, enthusiasm or concern. Once you find your level in golf - whether that be scratch or 24 handicap - you take up camp within the buffer-zone. Your handicap barely moves. The handicap system is skewed to cutting and its nirvana is to give you a handicap that means you play to net par at your best. Is it any wonder

then that you start looking under rocks and valleys to sniff out the bandits who are streaking across the course recording scores that, if the handicap system has done its job properly, you are unable to produce.

The sentiments of the system are admirable, to try and level the playing field so that improving players do not continually win. And to this end it works, the trouble is there is always a new chaps-clad player riding onto the horizon. The problem is that they are trying to level the playing field by raising up just one end so that all players fall to the lower end. Surely it would be much more interesting if they designed a system that adjusted both ends of the field. If you are playing badly you should go up quickly so that you can compete. This would totally re-invigorate competitions and the massed ranks of members who, mostly accurately, bemoan that they cannot win before they've even struck a ball.

Well what if you play 3 shots worse than your handicap and suddenly find 0.9 added to your handicap (for a Cat 3 player)? And if the only time you didn't move was if you hit smack on handicap? Other than that if you play 1,2,3 or 4 shots worse than your handicap then you go up 0.1, 0.2, 0.3 or 0.4 for each shot respectively depending on your handicap category. It would probably need to be capped to a 4 shot upward adjustment at most (so any worse than 4 over handicap only carries the same 4 shot incremental increase). Playing better than handicap would remain as it is today with no cap on the reduction.

This would mean that your handicap would constantly be in flux, rising and dipping with form, always keeping the scent of glory within your reach.

I know many will cry foul at the potential for some players to 'throw' numerous rounds to get their handicaps up high for some big competitions. Frankly if they can be bothered let them. I believe the positives would far outweigh the negatives. We must release the disenchnated golfers from their prison of mediocrity. Change the system, give out the mail order catalogues and let's us all place our orders for some new spurs and sombreros....