

THE HACKER

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A level playing field.....

There continues to be an increasing number of women playing golf across the country. Now whilst I recognise that this opening statement will render choking fits in some of the more 'traditional' committee rooms around the country, more women playing is great for the sport. Of course how women have been received and treated in clubs is a long and old story for others to tell. Suffice to say it wouldn't surprise me if there were still some prehistoric clubs around that still firmly believe in the old acronym: Gentlemen Only Ladies Forbidden. I know of one club just miles from where I write where you could count the number of years on your fingers since ladies had their own entrance into the club, forbidden to use the main entrance. Emancipation for women in golf has been a long haul.

Yet for once the golfing authorities have been leading the way. The Council of National Golf Unions (CONGU) have led with one massive step for golf kind by actively encouraging and legislating a system whereby men & women not only play together, but compete within the same competition.

The trouble is that to do this you have to get around one problem. People playing off different tees are effectively playing different courses. But is that fair if one of the courses is much more difficult than the other? CONGU decided that it wasn't and decided to formulate a system to rebalance this difference.

The seed of the answer begins with the standard scratch score (SSS) of each course. For those of you who are not familiar with the SSS, it is the score a gender specific 'scratch' golfer is expected to shoot. To calculate this the assessors take into account various topographical and design considerations such as how long is the first cut, the rough, how wide are the fairways etc.... The result can often differ from the par of the course. For example a course off the white tees with a Par 72 may comeback with a SSS of 71 as the assessors expect the scratch male golfer to shoot one better than Par. The Ladies Golf Union (LGU) then assess the expected score shot by a lady scratch golfer off the red tees to get an SSS for the ladies course. It is possible that whilst this course may have the same Par 72 as the mens course, they decide that the lady scratch golfer would be expected to return a score one more than par - i.e. SSS 73. And here lies the secret to the system. In our example above, the 'system' is saying that it is harder for a scratch female golfer off the red tees than it is for a male scratch golfer off the white tees (of course depending on the courses the scenario may be reversed!).

Somehow you have to take this differing level of difficulty into consideration if you are to pitch both genders into battle for a single prize. Their answer was a formula that allowed for the difference in the SSS of the 'separate' courses. Therefore to continue with our example above, it is deemed that the ladies course is 2 shots harder than the mens course (Ladies SSS 73 minus Mens SSS 71). Therefore in a medal competition, for results purposes only, ladies add these 2 adjustments shots to their handicaps to lower their net score. In the first version of the system, in a stableford event the same adjustment calculation was used and the ladies returned points scores were increased by the same adjustment of 2. However this has recently been amended; the new system uses an adjustment calculated between the points each gender needs to score to play to handicap. The gender with the higher points target (i.e. easier course) may have the difference deducted from their score. In our example therefore, (whereby men have to shoot 37 points to hit handicap - one easier than par - and the women 35 - one harder than par) the mens scores could be reduced by up to 2 points (one per hole) when compiling the mixed result if they scored any points on the highest 2 stroke index holes they get shots on. (It is worth noting at this stage that these adjustments are made to the scores for results purposes only to ascertain a winner across genders, the score prior to adjustment is the one used for handicap purposes). So already we find the CONGU system lurching from one version to another, getting more complicated and confounding confusion.

My guess is that some of you are still with me and some of you are lying exhausted on your sofa's. I'll give it one more go and try and nail the CONGU thinking and reasoning down in three simple statements:

1. You must understand that the foundation of the system is that men and ladies are playing off of different courses.
2. The difficulty of each course is based on how a scratch golfer of the correct gender would be expected to play their course.
3. The difference between the difficulty of the courses is adjusted in the result of the competition.

Think of it another way; imagine a 100m race between a man and a woman. The mens 100m track is totally straight and flat but the women's rises uphill from start to finish by some 100ft. In this instance it is obvious that if you want them to be racing against each other for the same prize that some kind of adjustment to the running times must be made to allow for the fact that it is harder to run uphill compared to flat.

Hopefully by now you are with me and understand the logic and back-bone of the CONGU system.

My problem is not with the theory but the practice. At my club the adjustment between the mens and ladies courses is 2 shots, with the ladies course being the more difficult, exactly as the example I have used here. The first problem we experienced was a majority of men being unable to grasp the logic and insisting on calling them courtesy shots - however that is no reason to question or doubt the system, it is only ignorance on their part. The more surprising and practical outcome that I saw was an uncomfortable feeling from some women who won tournaments not by the score they shot but after the application of the formula of adjustment shots they (rightly) received (and with the new stableford system we will see men who score the most points in the field potentially lose the trophy by going backwards via adjustment). In effect it is a logical system that manages to produce a result that both genders seem uncomfortable with. Golf's equivalent to cricket's Duckworth-Lewis.

I understand the system, the logic is sound, but in my opinion when applied it somehow doesn't work. Surely golf should be won or lost on the swing of a club, not by the application of a formula (handicaps aside) that is desperately trying to level a playing field that has been centuries in the skewing. Some four hundred years after inception we are only just working out how to make men and women both play together and against each other.

I have my own, simpler solution. All golfers seem to accept and respect the handicap system. It allows the physical difference between a Junior and an OAP to be factored in and produce a satisfying result in a competition. The answer surely is to therefore let the same system flourish between men and women and allow the handicap system to level the playing field between the genders off the same course and same tee. I'm sure that if the sport were invented today they wouldn't think of building multiple tees on each hole. Just one white tee for all. Of course the handicap maximum for ladies would have to increase from the current 36 and a seismic change would probably be needed in their handicaps when they moved to the whites. But eventually they would settle to a handicap that reflected their ability to play the white tee course. In time we would have all players, of all abilities, ages and gender playing the same course and allowing the handicap system to determine the winner fairly, based on the shots struck.

One competition; one tee; one winner; two genders.