First of a two-part series on the USGA's C

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The USGA Course Rating System affects your MGA/USGA Course Handicap... here's what you need to know about how the system works for you.



#### ourse Rating and USGA Handicap Systems

USGA

The USGA Course Rating System

United States of Proceeding

2006-2007

#### NEGOTIATIONS NORMALLY begin on the first tee for the number of 'handicap strokes' each of your playing partners will be accorded. It's a key moment, the consequences of which may likely tip the scale in determining the bragging rights for the day's round.

Yet some golfers lack an understanding of the foundation for these negotiations the USGA Course Rating System, which is the standard upon which the USGA Handicap System is built. In short, Course Ratings affect the calculation of your MGA/USGA Course Handicap. What follows is a brief history of golf's rating and handicap systems,

how the MGA rates the courses you play and — perhaps most importantly in terms of the first tee — an explanation of how USGA Slope Ratings affect your Course Handicap. [Part 2 of this series — a broader treatment of the USGA Handicap System — will run in MassGolfer's Spring 2007 issue.]

Equitable rating and handicap systems for players of differing abilities are a unique aspect of the game of golf... read on to ensure that you always receive the full number of handicap strokes to which you are entitled.

**)** BY MAXWELL M. CAREY

#### CHARTING A COURSE

With clipboards in hand, three members of the MGA's Boston regional course rating team survey the characteristics of The Country Club's 8th hole (Championship Course): (from left) George Lambert, Dick Chagnot and Boston regional course rating team captain Arthur Phillips.

BRIAN SMITH



#### How We Rate A Brief History of the Fair Game

### "An Equitable Basis"

"THE PURPOSE OF the USGA Handicap System is to make the game of golf more enjoyable by enabling golfers of differing abilities to compete on an equitable basis. The System provides fair Course Handicaps for players regardless of ability, and adjusts a player's Handicap Index up or down as his game changes."

[Excerpt from the USGA Course Rating System Guide.]

Golfers may take the phrase "an equitable basis" for granted these days. But during golf's early history, flaws in regulating the game made handicapping an

inequitable art form, not a quantitative science. Enter the USGA Course Rating System and the USGA Slope Ratings. These two ratings have become vital in accurately calculating a golfer's handicap for any given course — that is, a Course Handicap (see pages 20-21).

Course Ratings measure how tough a course is for a scratch player, while Slope Ratings are an evaluation of the relative difficulty of a course for players other



MGA course raters evaluate characteristics of each golf hole.

stocks — for example, "a stock may be above or below its normal or par figure." When Young Tom Morris scored two strokes over par for three rounds (36 holes) to win the championship, the term stuck.

1890s: The Concept of Bogey — another measure for scoring difficulty of a golf course — becomes popular. 'Bogey' was the expected score of Colonel Bogey, a fictitious low handicap golfer who usually made 4 on long par-3 holes and 5 on long par-4 holes but other-

wise played nearly flawless golf. Bogey scores usually ranged from 76 to 80 on most courses during this period.

*Early 1900s: The First Course Rating System* is developed by the Ladies Golf Union (LGU), the governing body for ladies' amateur golf in Great Britain and Ireland. Robert Browning said of the LGU in *A History of Golf:* "Their biggest achievement was the gradual establishment of a

than scratch. Using Slope Ratings, a golfer's handicap established at one course is adjusted for another course. The result: handicap portability and equitability.

The search for an equitable basis handicap system has evolved dramatically over the years, and the MGA has often been at the epicenter of change and progress. Below are 10 significant breakthroughs in the history of handicapping and course rating.

1870: The Concept of Par — the first measure of course difficulty — enters golf's lexicon when a British golf writer asks two professionals what score would be required to win the 1870 British Open at Prestwick, a 12-hole course at the time. The response was that perfect play should produce a score of 49 and the writer called this "par." The word derives from the sale of national system of handicapping. No doubt it was uphill work at the start but within eight or ten years the LGU had done what the men had signally failed to do — had established a system of handicapping that was reasonably reliable from club to club."

1912: The First USGA Handicap System is introduced as a procedure to determine eligibility for entry into the U.S. Amateur. Based on a British par-based procedure, it introduced a very significant change the concept of course rating, which was based on the expected scores of Jerome Travers, arguably the best American amateur golfer in this era.

1920s: The First U.S. Course Rating System is created by the MGA (see sidebar on page 15).

"Course Ratings measure how tough a course is for a scratch player while Slope Ratings are an evaluation of the relative difficulty of a course for players other than scratch."

1947: The MGA's Course Rating System for men — which has been refined over the years is adopted by the USGA Handicap Committee. This method called for rating courses on a holeby-hole basis where each hole was rated in tenths of a stroke. The USGA Handicap Manual contained descriptions of golf holes that typified holes of a specific rating and noted that hole ratings were totaled and rounded off to the nearest whole number as follows: "The rating of the entire course is the total of the separate hole ratings, with the final figure being the nearest whole number, such as 69 or 72, and never in fractions, such as 69.4 or 71.8."

1947: The Basic-Ability System is adopted by the USGA. This system introduced the concept that handicaps should be based on a golfer's *potential* — reflecting the player's best 10 of last 50 rounds. The procedure was implemented and improved by Bill Blaney, chairman of the USGA handicap committee (see sidebar on this page as well as pages 22-23).

1960: The Concept of Effective Playing Length Factors for each hole is introduced by the USGA for its Course Rating System. A hole's so-called "preliminary yardage rating" could now be modified, if necessary, in the light of significant course conditions (see page 16).

1982: The Concept of Obstacle Factors now considered crucial to a systematic, quantitative approach to course rating is incorporated, after five years of testing, into the USGA Course Rating System. Obstacle Factors can now provide an adjustment to the distance rating for a course (see pages 16-17).

1987: The USGA Slope Rating System becomes part of the USGA Handicap System after four years of extensive testing by regional and state golf associations, notably including the MGA. Slope is a major departure from the traditional concept that a golfer should receive the same number of handicap strokes at every golf course (see pages 18-19).

The major innovations during the 1980s would herald a revolution in rating golf courses.

# First Rate Pioneer

BILL BLANEY – an MGA president and USGA handicap committee chairman (see pages 22-23) – was the strongest voice in the efforts to improve course rating and handicap systems. Below is an excerpt from his 1980 letter, written at age 75, to the USGA in which he advocates further change.

"If memory serves me correctly, the Massachusetts Golf Association created the first course rating system in the mid or late 1920s. Each hole on a course was rated for the ease or difficulty a scratch golfer could score on said hole by reducing or increasing the hole par in steps of two-tenths of a stroke. The individual hole ratings were then totalled, with the final course rating being the nearest whole number to said total. (Example: 69.8 would revert to 70, as would 70.4.)

This, I believe, was the first "fractional par" rating

system. As it proved to have some inequities, it was later modified and refined several times until the USGA adopted a system of its own, which, in turn, was altered for improvement. The present [1980] USGA rating system is based almost entirely on yardage, with limited adjust-



ments permitted for the very easy or difficult courses.

While this is a good, solid foundation on which to base ratings, it does not, to my way of thinking, give enough consideration to other factors which affect the scoring efforts of players of less ability than the scratch golfer. It does not evaluate properly the playing difficulties of, say, two courses of equal yardage when there are wide differences between tightness and openness, many hazards and few, hilly course and flat, small well-guarded greens and large unguarded [greens], many holes ending uphill and just the opposite, etc. I admit these factors are very difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate.

Other problems arise if consideration is to be given to the distances various players can hit the ball. Certainly the long knocker of today is not bothered by hazards and heavy rough which are a pain in the neck to the short hitter. (At my advanced age, I am well aware of both sides.) Perhaps a new and more accurate definition is needed of the average scratch golfer on whose ability the course rating system and consequently the handicap system is based." How We Rate USGA Course Rating System Primer

### **Determining Factors**

SIX MGA REGIONAL course rating teams — comprising more than 90 USGA-trained course raters now carry out the on-course portion of the rating process for 40-60 Bay State courses annually. So, how do these teams calculate ratings — namely, Course Ratings and Bogey Ratings (see sidebar on page 17)?

The USGA Course Rating System takes into account the factors that affect the playing difficulty of a golf course. Yardage is the single-most significant factor to overcome for all golfers, regardless of ability.

In fact, course rating used to be based almost solely on length — the longer the course, the higher the rating. Today, rating teams the average shot use lengths for both scratch and bogey golfers to determine the landing zones. Then, at each landing zone, several 'effective playing length factors' which could affect playing length and require an adjustment to the measured length — are taken into account. Rating teams then evaluate 10 'obstacle factors' that can make a

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MGA course raters evaluate obstacle factors within 20 yards of landing zones, such as this fairway bunker.

hole more difficult or easier depending on its relation to how a scratch and bogey golfer will play the hole.

#### Effective Playing Length Factors

*Roll* is an evaluation of how far the tee shots for scratch and bogey golfers roll, and the effect that has on the playing length of the course.

*Elevation* is a measure of how changes in elevation from tee to green affect the playing length of a hole.

Dogleg/Forced Lay-Up is a measure of how much longer or shorter a hole is played because it has a bend (allowing players to cut the corner or forcing them to lay up), or because it has obstacles — such as water or deep bunkers — crossing the fairway in the players' landing zones (which force the scratch or bogey golfer to hit less than a full shot).

Prevailing Wind is a measure of the effect of constant wind on seaside courses, plains courses or other courses unprotected from the wind.

Altitude is an evaluation for courses at 2,000 feet or more altitude that will play shorter than their measured length because shots fly farther in the thin air.

#### Obstacle Factors

*Topography* is a factor if the stance or lie in the landing zone is affected by slopes or mounds, or the shot to the green is uphill or downhill, making club selection more difficult.

*Fairway* is an evaluation of the difficulty of keeping the ball in play from tee to green. Fairway ratings are based on fairway width in all landing zones, hole length, and nearby trees, hazards and punitive rough.

Green Target is an evaluation of the difficulty of hitting the green with the approach shot. Primary considerations are target size, length of shot, how well the green holds and the difficulty of normal hole locations.

Recoverability and Rough is the evaluation of the probability of missing the tee shot landing zone and the green, and the difficulty of recovering if either, or both, is missed. The Green Target rating drives the Recoverability and Rough (see below) rating value.

Bunkers is the evaluation of their proximity to target areas and the difficulty of recovery from them. The Green Target (see above) rating also drives the Bunkers rating value. "Rating teams evaluate 10 'obstacle factors' that can make a hole more difficult or easier depending on its relation to how a scratch and bogey golfer would play the hole."

Out of Bounds/Extreme Rough is the evaluation of the distance from the center of the landing zone to the OB/Extreme Rough. High grass, heavy underbrush in trees, and other extreme conditions are rated in this category because a ball in such "extreme rough" is likely to be lost or virtually unplayable. Such areas may also be rated under Recoverability and Rough (see above).

Water Hazards is the evaluation of a water hazard and its distance from the landing zone or green and, in the case of a hazard crossing a hole, the problem involved in playing over the hazard. The Water Hazards rating is applied on any hole where there is a water hazard or lateral water hazard.

Trees is the evaluation of the size and density of the trees, their distance from the center of the landing zone or green, the length of the shot to that target, and the difficulty of recovery.

Green Surface is the evaluation of a green's difficulty from a putting standpoint. Green speed and surface contouring are the main factors. The size of the green is considered irrelevant in evaluating putting difficulty. A Stimpmeter is utilized to measure the speed of the greens based on mid-season conditions.

Psychological is the evaluation of the cumulative effect of the other obstacles. The location of many punitive obstacles close to a target area creates uneasiness in the mind of the player and thus affects his or her score. This value is purely mathematical and is added after the on-course rating is complete.

When the evaluation is complete, the numbers for each factor are totaled and multiplied by a relative weight factor. The weighted obstacle values are applied to scratch and bogey formulas, then converted to strokes. Those strokes are added or subtracted from the yardage rating to produce Course Ratings and Bogey Ratings.

Course raters deliver their results to the MGA which, after an internal review, issues certified Course Ratings and — even more importantly — certified Slope Ratings.

# Come to Terms

**EVEN VETERAN GOLF ADMINISTRATORS can have trouble explaining the intricacies of the USGA Course Rating System and USGA Handicap System. To more fully understand both, it is essential to have a working knowledge of the following terms and definitions.** 

SCRATCH GOLFER One who can play to a Course Handicap of zero on any and all rated golf courses. He (she) can hit tee shots an average of 250 (210) yards and reach a 470 (400)-yard hole in two shots.

**BOGEY GOLFER One with a Course Handicap of 20 for males (24 for females) on a course of standard difficulty. He (she) can hit tee shots an average of 200 (150) yards and can reach a 370 (280)-yard hole in two shots.** 



USGA COURSE RATING The evaluation of the playing difficulty of a course for scratch golfers under normal course and weather conditions. It is expressed as the number of strokes taken to one deci-

mal place (72.5), and is based on yardage and other obstacles to the extent that they affect the scoring difficulty of the scratch golfer.

BOGEY RATING The one number every golfer other than a scratch should check before deciding which tees to play. This rating is the evaluation of the playing difficulty of a course for the bogey golfer. It is based on yardage, effective playing length and other obstacles to the extent that affect the scoring ability of the bogey golfer. To figure out this number, other than from looking at this database, the bogey golfer should take the Slope Rating, divide it by the set factor (5.381 for men, and 4.24 for women) and add that to the Course Rating. The result is a target score for the bogey golfer, and is a truer yardstick of the challenge that lies ahead for the particular set of tees.

**SLOPE RATING Indicates the measurement of the** relative playing difficulty of a course for players who are not scratch golfers, compared to scratch golfers. It is computed from the difference between the Bogey Rating and the Course Rating. The lowest Slope Rating is 55 and the highest is 155. How We Rate USGA Slope Rating Primer

### A Second Dimension

WHEN THE USGA Course Rating System was improved in 1987, Slope Ratings became a second dimension to the existing Course Ratings. In practical terms, Slope Ratings enable players to receive more strokes on a difficult course and fewer strokes on an easier course. Thus, the quantitative search for golf competition on "an equitable basis" was realized... if, of course, players take advantage of the benefits of Slope.

Prior to 1987, golf courses were rated only for the scratch golfer, with no consideration given to the aver-

age or higher handicap players (the USGA reports that the average Handicap Index for men is 16.1 while for women it is 28.9). Most players have a handicap that is based on the scores at their home course. When players went to another course in the past, they would receive strokes as per their handicap. However, a player with a handicap of 16 at his home course would many times play quite a bit above or below his or her handicap at the other course. This generally was caused by the

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... are some factors which can affect Slope Ratings.

other course being harder or easier, as well as by the player's own variations in scoring ability.

After much study, the USGA determined their handicap method needed to be revised to include not only consideration of the difficulty of the course for the scratch golfer, but for the bogey golfer as well.

#### Why Slope Is Different

While the scratch golfer remains the yardstick used by rating teams to determine Course Ratings, the bogey golfer is the yardstick for Slope Ratings. To determine Slope Ratings, rating teams now turn to a number that is equally as important as the Course Ratings — but one that does not appear on any golf course scorecard or handicap table: the Bogey Rating (see sidebars on pages 17 and 19). The Bogey Rating reflects the score a weaker player can be expected to shoot on a given course. Before Slope, the difficulty of any golf course was assessed entirely on one factor: distance — the longer the course, the higher was its Course Rating. But a bogey player doesn't hit it as far — or as straight — as a scratch player. A course that was rated three shots tougher for a scratch player could play perhaps 10 shots tougher for a lesser-skilled player (see page 19).

Since 1987, effective playing length factors and

obstacle factors (see page 16-17) have been evaluated to determine how the bogey golfer is likely to play a course. Once a rating team verifies its calculations for a course, the MGA computes the Slope Rating. The formula is the difference between the Bogey Rating and the Course Rating, multiplied by a set factor (5.381 for men, 4.24 for women). A national slope average of 113 was established (based on the number 1.13, which research showed was the average stroke increase

from one handicap to the next).

The Course Rating and Slope Rating together reflect the difficulty of the course for a player who is not a scratch golfer. The greater the difference between the scores of the scratch and bogey golfers on a certain course, the higher the Slope Rating will be and the more strokes players will receive. (Conversely, the lesser the difference, the lower the Slope Rating will be and the fewer strokes players will receive.)

"Under the old handicap system, scratch players and bogey players weren't equals," says Scott Whitcomb, MGA director of field operations. "In the past, the rating system catered to stronger players only. Since the introduction of the Bogey Rating and Slope Rating, players of all abilities are given equal consideration. It makes for a more equitable system for all." "In practical terms, Slope Ratings enable players to receive more strokes on a difficult course and fewer strokes on an easier course."

#### Why It's Called "Slope"

Since 1987, golf courses have been rated based upon the scores a scratch golfer and bogey golfer are expected to shoot from a certain set of tees. When these scores are charted on a graph, the line showing the differential in their scores forms a slope. Thus, the term 'Slope' — referring to relative steepness of the graph line of a weaker player's scores (see graph below) — was chosen to represent the USGA's new method of rating course difficulty for bogey golfers.



The more difficult a course, the more strokes the weaker Player B (a 16 handicap) receives in relation to the stronger Player A (6 handicap).

The graph illustrates the scores of two players — Player A who is a 6 handicap and Player B who is a 16 handicap. On a course of average difficulty (a Slope of 113), both players are likely to play close to their handicaps.

But as course difficulty increases, Player B's scores rise faster than those of Player A. To play an equitable match on a course with a slope of 135, Player B might need an additional 10 strokes while Player A might only need an additional 3 strokes. That discrepancy plotted on the graph shows that as the course difficulty is increased, the line of Player B rises at a much steeper 'slope' than that of Player A.

The more difficult a golf course is, the greater the discrepancy is between the scores of stronger and weaker players. Prior to 1987, the USGA Course Rating system did not account for that factor; Slope Ratings now do... that is, as long as golfers use Slope to convert their Handicap Indexes to their Course Handicaps.

# Fit to a Tee?

Slope is misunderstood by many golfers. While each course is rated from each set of tees for both the scratch and bogey golfer, many players in the bogey category choose tees by consulting the yardage on the scorecard... or they follow the rest of their group to a specific color tee. These golfers might be better served by calculating the Bogey Rating – a bit of math could lead to a more appropriate set of tees and a more enjoyable round.

Bogey players should take the Slope Rating, divide it by the set factor (5.381 for men, 4.24 for women) and add that to the Course Rating. The result is the Bogey Rating, a target score for the bogey player that is a truer indicator of the challenge that lies ahead. As an example (using ratings form the chart below), a male bogey golfer playing Dennis Pines Golf Course (Pine Course) from the back (Gold) tees would be expected to shoot:

Slope Rating	135
Divided by set factor	5.381
	25.1
Plus Course Rating	<u>+74.6</u>
Bogey Rating	99.7

#### The Bay State's Top-10 Course Ratings

USGA Course Ratings for private and public MGA Member Clubs ranked on Course Ratings from the course's back tees.

<b>Private</b>	Men's Course Pating	Total Vardano	Men's Slong	Women's	Women's
Courses	(Back Tees)	Tatuaye	Rating	Rating	Rating
1. The International GC	80.0 (Tiaer)	8.325	154	72.8	128
2. CC at New Seabury (Ocean Course)	75.7 (Gold)	7,031	133	67.2	113
3. Ipswich CC	75.2 (Gold)	7,023	140	75.4	135
4. Turner Hill G&RC	75.1 (Black)	7,025	138	70.6	126
5. Nantucket GC	74.9 (Gold)	7,080	136	72.9	126
6. TPC of Boston	74.8 (TPC)	7,488	143	69.7	123
7. Ballymeade CC	74.7 (Green)	6,928	140	69.6	123
8. Bay Club at Mattapoisett	74.5 (Black)	7,016	133	70.9	121
9. The Country Club (Championship Cour	rse) 74.3 (Blue)	NA	139	76.1	139
10. Vineyard GC	74.1 (Black)	7,044	142	71.9	126
Dublic	Monio	Total	Monio	Wamania	Wamania
Public	Men's Course Ration	Total Vardane	Men's Slone	Women's Course	Women's Slone
Public Golf Courses	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees)	Total Yardage	Men's Slope Rating	Women's Course Rating	Women's Slope Rating
Public Golf Courses 1. Dennis Pines 6C (Pine Course)	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold)	Total Yardage 7,005	Men's Slope Rating 135	Women's Course Rating 76.5	Women's Slope Rating 135
Public Golf Courses 1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course) 2. Bayberry Hills GC	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172	Men's Slope Rating 135 127	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7	Women's Slope Rating 135 119
Public Golf Courses 1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course) 2. Bayberry Hills GC 3. Stow Acres CC (North Course)	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold) 74.2 (Black)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172 7,035	Men's Slope Rating 135 127 131	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7 74.4	Women's Slope Rating 135 119 132
Public   Golf   Courses   1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course)   2. Bayberry Hills GC   3. Stow Acres CC (North Course)   4. Maplegate CC	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold) 74.2 (Black) 74.2 (Gold)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172 7,035 6,815	Men's Slope Rating 135 127 131 133	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7 74.4 70.2	Women's Slope Rating 135 119 132 124
Public   Golf   Courses   1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course)   2. Bayberry Hills GC   3. Stow Acres CC (North Course)   4. Maplegate CC   5. Red Tail GC	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold) 74.2 (Black) 74.2 (Gold) 73.9 (Black)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172 7,035 6,815 6,883	Men's Slope Rating 135 127 131 133 138_	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7 74.4 70.2 69.4	Women's Slope Rating 135 119 132 124 120
Public   Golf   Courses   1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course)   2. Bayberry Hills GC   3. Stow Acres CC (North Course)   4. Maplegate CC   5. Red Tail GC   6. Crosswinds GC	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold) 74.2 (Black) 74.2 (Gold) 73.9 (Black) 73.7 (Black)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172 7,035 6,815 6,883 7,056	Men's Slope Rating 135 127 131 133 138 136	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7 74.4 70.2 69.4 74.8	Women's Slope Rating 135 119 132 124 120 133
Public   Golf   Courses   1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course)   2. Bayberry Hills GC   3. Stow Acres CC (North Course)   4. Maplegate CC   5. Red Tail GC   6. Crosswinds GC   7. The Meadow at Peabody	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold) 74.2 (Black) 74.2 (Gold) 73.9 (Black) 73.7 (Black) 73.7 (Black)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172 7,035 6,815 6,883 7,056 6,708	Men's Slope Rating 135 127 131 133 138 136 135	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7 74.4 70.2 69.4 74.8 75	Women's Slope Rating 135 119 132 124 120 133 131
Public   Golf   Courses   1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course)   2. Bayberry Hills GC   3. Stow Acres CC (North Course)   4. Maplegate CC   5. Red Tail GC   6. Crosswinds GC   7. The Meadow at Peabody   8. Waverly Daks GC	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold) 74.2 (Black) 74.2 (Gold) 73.9 (Black) 73.7 (Black) 73.5 (Black)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172 7,035 6,815 6,883 7,056 6,708 7,114	Men's Slope Rating 135 127 131 133 138 136 135 130	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7 74.4 70.2 69.4 74.8 75 71.4	Women's Slope Rating 135 119 132 124 120 133 131 127
Public   Golf   Courses   1. Dennis Pines GC (Pine Course)   2. Bayberry Hills GC   3. Stow Acres CC (North Course)   4. Maplegate CC   5. Red Tail GC   6. Crosswinds GC   7. The Meadow at Peabody   8. Waverly Daks GC   9. The Captains GC (Port Course)	Men's Course Rating (Back Tees) 74.6 (Gold) 74.3 (Gold) 74.2 (Black) 74.2 (Gold) 73.9 (Black) 73.7 (Black) 73.7 (Black) 73.5 (Black) 73.5 (Black)	Total Yardage 7,005 7,172 7,035 6,815 6,883 7,056 6,708 7,114 6,724	Men's Slope Rating 135 127 131 133 138 136 135 130 130	Women's Course Rating 76.5 69.7 74.4 70.2 69.4 74.8 75 71.4 76.8	Women's Slope Rating 135 119 132 124 120 133 131 127 132

**How We Rate** Using Your Course Handicap

### Take Time To Convert

THE TWIN TO PICS of the USGA Course Rating System and the USGA Handicap System are fascinating material for some, a tedious necessity for others. For both groups, the MGA and USGA mercifully do the legwork to determine Course Ratings, Bogey Ratings and Slope Ratings... as well as the calculations for a player's MGA/USGA Handicap Index.

But, it is the golfer's responsibility to determine the most critical calculation of all — the Course Handicap, a number that should be used *before* every round of golf to determine how many handicap strokes each golfer should take (or give) on his/her score.

"Many MGA Member Golfers arrive at the first tee, especially when playing at a different course than where

they norm ally play, without making the conversion of their MGA/USGA Handicap Index to a Course Handicap," notes Whitcomb. "While they might well understand Slope Ratings, they just don't bother to use them. That almost always results in them playing with too few - or too many — handicap strokes."

IOFOGRAPHY

GREEN TARGET A ROUGH BUNKED

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The Handicap Index (with its portability) and Course Handicap (with its link to the Slope) are the two innovations which fulfilled the promise of the USGA's long-term

efforts to deliver "an equitable basis" handicap system. When these two components are used properly, golfers of differing skill levels can compete fairly against one another regardless of where they are playing.

A brief description of the Handicap Index and Course Handicap (and how to convert the former to the latter) follows below, while a much more thorough presentation of the entire USGA Handicap System will be featured in *MassGolfer's* Spring 2007 Issue.

#### USGA Handicap Index

USGA Handicap Index is a term that was coined by the USGA in 1987 when it introduced Slope Ratings as part of its Course Rating System. Handicap Index is expressed as a number taken to one decimal place (say, 16.1) which is periodically updated and attached to the

MGA Member Golfer's handicap card. However, Handicap Index is not the golfer's handicap — rather, it is an indicator of the golfer's *potential scoring ability*.

The USGA improved its Handicap System during the 1980s by using the platform of a player's potential - rather than actual - performance. That's why a golfer's Handicap Index is computed based on the 10 best of his/her last 20 scores, rather than an average of all of his/her scores.

How is a Handicap Index used on the course itself? It's not... the Handicap Index is only used as the basis to determine a golfer's Course Handicap for the course and set of tees he/she is playing on a particular day.

> Thus, Handicap Index is portable from course to course (as well as from one set of tees to another set of tees on the same course).

#### **Course Handicap**

Course Handicap was also a term coined by the USGA in 1987. A player converts his/her Handicap Index to a Course Handicap based on the Slope Rating of the course and the set of tees played (note that Course Ratings are not used to determine a course handicap). A Course Handicap — which indicates the number of strokes a

golfer needs to adjust his/her score back to the level of the scratch golfer for that course and set of tees — will be different on every course a golfer plays due to the various Slope Ratings. The number of strokes a player receives (the Course Handicap) is based upon the relative difficulty of the course and set of tees (the Slope).

Before teeing off, a golfer should always convert his/her Handicap Index to a Course Handicap ... and that happens to be a relatively easy process.

#### **Converting To A Course Handicap**

A golfer determines a Course Handicap by applying his/her Handicap Index to a Course Handicap Table. Every MGA Member Golf Course — or USGA-affiliated course nationally — should have a posted Course Handicap Table in the clubhouse and/or at the first tee.



**MGA /USGA Handicap Index** to a Course Handicap before you play. "The Handicap Index and Course Handicap are the two innovations which fulfilled the promise of the USGA's long-term efforts to deliver "an equitable basis" handicap system."

A portion of the Course Handicap Table for male golfers using the Gold Tees at Dennis Pines GC is displayed below. A male golfer with a Handicap Index of 16.1 (the average male handicap nationwide for men) who is planning on playing from those tees would loc ate that number in the Handicap Index ranges listed in the left-hand column and then would find his Course Handicap in the corresponding righthand column... 19 is the Course Handicap he plays for the round, meaning this is the number of handicap strokes he is allowed.

For the mathematically inclined, the Course Handicap is the Handicap Index multiplied by the Slope Rating of the tees played divided by 113 (and rounded to the nearest whole number).

Men's Course Han	dican Tahle
Dennis Pines GC (Pine Cou	rse) – Gold Tees
USGA Course Rating – 74.6	USGA Slope Rating – 135
MGA/USGA Handicap Index	Course Handicap
9.7 to 10.4	12
10.5 to 11.2	13
11.3 to 12.1	14
12.2 to 12.9	15
13.0 to 13.8	16
13.9 to 14.6	17
14.7 to 15.4	18
15.5 to 16.3	19
16.4 to 17.1	20
17.2 to 17.9	21
17.9 to 18.6	22
18.7 to 19.5	23

To check what a Course Handicap would be for any Handicap Index and Slope Rating, visit the USGA Course Handicap Calculator at:

www.usga.org/playing/handicaps/calculator/ course\_handicap\_calculator.asp

Once handicap strokes are allowed, most MGA Member Golfers know how the process works during a stroke play match. The weaker player is to 'take a stroke' — that is, deduct a stroke from his/her score based on 'handicap holes' (see sidebar on this page). At the end of the round, the golfers of differing abilities each figure their 'net scores' — their gross scores minus the strokes they were allowed to take on certain holes. The net score wins the match.

Once armed with a Course Handicap, a golfer is ready to play on an equal basis with any other golfer in the world. That's why the MGA rates, and how the system works for all golfers.

# #1 Handicap Hole

Almost every golfer has heard it – or said it – while standing on a tee: "This is our number one handicap hole... it's the toughest hole on our golf cours e."

While it is commonly believed that holes are ranked from toughest (number 1 handicap) to least tough (number 18), that's not usually the case.

'Toughness' is in the mind of the beholder. Imagine Tiger Woods playing at your course on the number one handicap hole – say, a 535-yard par 5. With his length, there's a decent chance he will get on in two to set up a birdie or eagle opportunity. Not so tough for Tiger.

How then are holes actually handicapped? Course representatives – not the MGA or USGA – decide how to rank holes in the order that handicap strokes are necessary for a weaker player to 'halve the hole' in match play format with a stronger player. Because dis-

tance is the biggest obstacle to overcome for weaker players, the longest hole is often the number one handicap hole. To halve Tiger's expected birdie on that 535-yard par 5 without the benefit of a handicap stroke, the weaker player would likely have to chip in – his tee shot traveled only 200 yards and it's rare he is



especially on the #1 handicap hole.

on the green in regulation. Thus, the weaker player needs a stroke to have a chance at halving this hole.

In contrast, on your course's #16 handicap hole – say, a 130-yard par 3 – the weaker player can often land his tee shot on the green and two-putt. Tiger finds this hole tough... to birdie, that is. The weaker player doesn't need a stroke to match Tiger's expected par.

The USGA Handicap System Manual summarizes the topic as follows: "A handicap stroke should be an equalizer and should be available on a hole where it most likely will be needed by the higher-handicapped player to obtain a half in singles or four-ball match play. Difficulty in making par on a hole is not an effective indicator of the need for a stroke. Generally the longer the holes, the greater the need for the higher handicapped player to receive a stroke."

Course scorecards display a 'Handicap' line – the hole identified as '1' (the number one handicap hole) has been rated the hole where a weaker golfer is most likely to need a stroke in a match with a stronger player.



### Fair and Balanced

WITH A CAREER including service as MGA president, New England Golf Association secretary-treasurer and USGA handicap chairman, Bill Blaney is rightly remembered as one of the most ardent amateur golf volunteers in Massachusetts and on the national scene. Most significantly, Blaney had a life-long passion to make the USGA handicap and rating systems more equitable and portable (see page 15).

FAIRWAY

Y & ROUGH

Perhaps less well recalled is Blaney's position among the Bay State's all-time great amateur champions. Yet he remains to this day the only player to

capture titles of a 'modified grand slam': the MGA State Amateur, the New England Amateur, the MGA State Senior Amateur and the New England Senior.

Born in Waban in 1905, Blaney established the competitive course record of 70 at Plymouth Country Club, where he was a member, at the age of 18 in 1924. Fourteen years later, in 1940, he would establish the course record at his other member club, Brae Burn Country Club (see sidebar on page 23) where he was an eventual 13-time club champion.

In 1926, the year he first qualified for the U.S. Amateur, the MGA rated only four players at a handicap of 4 or better — Francis Ouimet and Jesse Guilford were at scratch and Fred Wright, Jr. was rated a 2. Collectively, that illustrious trio won 16 MGA State Amateur titles and five USGA titles. No golfer was rated a 3, while Blaney was rated the MGA's only 4.



Blaney was reported to have "an infectious smile."

In 1928, Blaney graduated from Williams College and won the New England Amateur, defeating Guilford in the semi-final match. Boston sportswriter Burt Hoxie reported that, "For gracefulness on his shots, Blaney is it. He's another of the lightweights to arrive also, as he weighs under 150." The lightweight was also evidently meticulous, as Hoxie added: "One golfer called the height of optimism Blaney's removing a pebble in his line 40 feet from the ball. And then Bill rolled the pill four inches from the target."

After enduring defeats in the final matches of the MGA Amateur in both 1930 and '32, Blaney advanced to the quarterfinals of the 1932 U.S. Amateur. Upon his return to the Bay State, he was feted, along with fellow U.S. Amateur contestants Ouimet and Guilford, as the "Big Three' of Hub Golf" at a grand celebration at Woodland Golf Club.

Blaney won the second jewel of his grand slam the 1934 MGA State Amateur — defeating Wright in the final match — and his handicap was reduced by the MGA to a 1 that year. He began service on the MGA Executive Committee shortly thereafter, in 1936, and was appointed MGA vice president for the 1941-42 period. When MGA president Melville Merritt was pressed into duty with the U.S. Navy in 1942, Blaney succeeded him as acting president — at age 36, the MGA's youngest-ever leader. After a year in that role, he was elected and served as president from 1943-44.



A team of Bay State top amateurs was selected to play with the visting British Ryder Cup Team at Winchester Country Club on June 19, 1931: (left to right) Emory Stratton, Phil Finlay, Bill Blaney, Billy McPhail, Fred Wright, Jr., Francis Ouimet, Jesse Guilford, Joe Batchelder, Ray Gorton and Elmer Ward.

"Most significantly, Blaney had a life-long passion to make the USGA handicap and rating systems more equitable and portable."

Post-World War II, Blaney became a prime mover in the development of the "mid-amateur," helping form the Pre-Seniors Golf Association in 1948 which catered to players aged 40-54. In 1954, the maximum age limit was eliminated and the organization adopted their current name: The Hickory Shafts. The USGA would inaugurate its U.S. Mid-Amateur in 1981, for players who had reached the age of 25. The MGA State Mid-Amateur was launched in 1984 for players at least 25 years of age (that threshold was lowered to 30 in 1999).

Blaney also had a significant hand in the creation of the MGA State Senior. He won that inaugural championship in 1961 at the minimum qualifying age of 55 at his home course, Brae Burn. In 1971, he captured the final leg of his grand slam by winning the New England Senior at Woodland Golf Club.

Those who knew Blaney remember him as one who never discussed his stellar playing career. Indeed, he seems to have been driven more by a desire to make the game open and fair for the average player. His innovative and — at the

time — controversial ideas on basic-ability is a term we now call "potential" and that is at the very heart of today's USGA



Handicap System. The USGA adopted the basic-ability handicap (based on the best 10 of the last 50 rounds) in 1947, a procedure that was implemented and improved by Blaney.

"I feel basic-ability is much more representative of golf as it has been, and should be, played," Blaney said, years after. "I also feel it is less subject to manipulation by those who seem to desire a handicap advantage."

While he got his own handicap down to a 1, his main concern was "an equitable basis" for the game of golf for players of all abilities. So, if you get those handicap strokes on the first tee, pay a bit of thanks to Bill Blaney.

# An Ace of Clubs

John English – an MGA Past President and noted Bay State golf historian – recounted a Bill Blaney feat from 1940 in the MGA's centennial book, A Commonwealth of Golfers, an annotated version of which follows below.

"One of the most memorable holes-in-one in the annals of golf – Massachusetts or beyond – occurred as the pre-war decade was ending. The leading role was played by Bill Blaney at Brae Burn, his home course. He already had carved a prominent place for himself as an amateur player and by his contributions to the formulation of the game's handicap system.

In the summer of 1940, Blaney was playing again the kind of golf which had won him the New England Amateur in 1928, taken him to the quarter-finals of the U.S. Amateur in 1932 and earned him the MGA State Amateur in 1934. As he, John Cole, Merrill Delano and Bob Meier came out for what became an epic, if informal, weekend round, they were assigned to start at the seventh hole.

The round began inauspiciously for Blaney with a 1-over-par 5; the next three or four holes were uneventful. Then, as golfers mysteriously do, Blaney caught fire. When they came to the 160-yard sixth – the last of their round – he needed a par 3 for a 69. Even better, a birdie 2 would tie the amateur course record of 68.

The blue markers were set on the upper, back tee. The flagstick stood in the right-front quarter of the green, just beyond the brook which guards the front. Blaney pulled our his six-iron. The shot was on line all the way. The ball took two bounces on the green and dropped solidly into the final cup for a 1 and a new amateur course record of 67."

