Stroke Hole Allocation Guidelines

One of the most misunderstood aspects of the USGA Handicapping System concerns the “Stroke Hole Allocation” at a golf course. That is, the assignment of the handicap stroke holes. How many times have you heard a golfer refer to the No. 1 stroke hole on the score card as the “toughest” hole on the course?

Is the No. 1 stroke hole the toughest hole on the course? Maybe yes... maybe no!

Despite the feelings of most golfers, the stroke hole allocation of a course is not supposed to represent a ranking of the difficulty of the holes. Instead, it represents the ranking of the holes where a high handicapped golfer most needs a stroke in order to tie a low handicapped golfer.

In many instances, this need for strokes does occur on the most difficult holes, but not always.

Consider, for example, a 225-yard par-3 with all sorts of difficulty around the green. The hole may prove to be a tough par for even the very best golfers at that club and may sport a high overall scoring average.

On the other hand, the higher handicapper may not be able to reach the green in regulation, but is easily able to pitch it on in two and two putt for a bogey. Even though this hole would have a high overall scoring average, clearly it does not represent a hole where the higher handicapped player most needs a stroke in order to tie a low handicapped player.

Typically, a stroke is most needed on difficult par fives, followed by difficult par-4s, easier par-5s, easier par-4s, difficult par-3s and easy par-3.

The best way to determine this “need” is by an analysis of scorecards. A minimum of 200 scorecards from a low handicapped group (eight or less for men; 14 or less for women) must be reviewed and hole-by-hole averages determined.

A similar breakdown must be computed for a minimum of 200 scorecards of higher handicapped golfers (20-28 for men; 26-40 for women). When the hole-by-hole stroke averages of the two groups are laid out side-by-side, the holes with the greatest need can easily be identified by the large gaps in the scoring averages.

Generally speaking, the odd-numbered stroke hole assignments are awarded to the front nine and even numbered to the back nine. In instances where the back nine holes significantly rank more difficult, the odd and even assignments can be reversed.

Special care must be given to avoid the assignment of low numbered strokes near the end of each nine. In many instances, a 9- or 18-hole match could be completed before this pivotal stroke comes into play. Likewise it is best to avoid a low-numbered stroke to the first couple of holes on a golf course. In the event of a sudden-death playoff, this crucial stroke would be awarded too soon.
Some golfers wonder why the assignments are geared for match play. They argue that most, if not all, tournaments at their club are stroke play. To a certain degree, I would beg to differ and argue that dozens upon dozens of games each day involve match play (standard Nassaus) and that the assigning of the strokes in this manner is critical.

When starting out, the Handicap Committee should remember a few basic guidelines:

- Allocate strokes based on the tees played most often by a majority of the members.
- Allocate the odd-numbered strokes to the front-nine holes and the even-numbered strokes to the back-nine holes—unless the back-nine is decidedly more difficult than the front—you can reverse the allocation.
- Avoid allocating the low numbered holes to the beginning or end of the nine holes

A method for allocating your handicap strokes is to collect 200 hole-by-hole scorecards from two different groups of golfers. Group A consists of golfers with a Course Handicap™ of 0-8 for men or 0-14 for women. If there are very few members within this range, take the low 25 percent of its golfers as group A.

Group B consists of middle-to-high Course Handicap golfers, ranging 15-20 strokes higher than group A (20-28 for men and 26-40 for women).

The next step is to compare the average score per hole for group A against the average score per hole of group B. Rank the differential of hole scores between group A and group B from high-to-low (1 highest, 18 lowest) differential. Allocate odd and even numbers to front and second nine. The last step is to make sure low numerical holes are not at the beginning or end of each nine.

**Match Play:** The USGA recommended way to obtain the proper allocation based on scores is to collect 200 hole-by-hole scores of two groups of golfers. Group A is the lower handicap players and group B is the higher handicap players. The average score - hole by hole - is calculated for each group. The holes are then ranked by comparing the average scores from each group on each hole. The hole where the difference between those averages is the greatest is the #1 handicap hole and the hole where the difference is the least is the #18 handicap hole. This is the method that most clubs use to calculate the current ladies’ hole handicaps.

**Stroke Play:** For stroke play, the scoring is analyzed relative to par. Using the USGA recommended method for obtaining averages (above), simply add the average scores on each hole together and subtract two times the par to determine the difficulty in relation to par. Again, rank the differences in 1-18 order to determine the stroke play ranking.

*Remember that many Par 3’s are tougher than Par 5’s, but the par 5’s usually have a lower number handicap because they are the holes where the higher handicapper most needs a stroke to make the match even.*