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Letter to all National Associations

Re: Audit of elite amateur handicap records – findings and recommendations

Background

In connection with the 2013 Annual General Meeting, several different sources reported to the EGA Handicapping and Course Rating Committee their concern that many plus handicaps administered under the EGA Handicap System “are inflated beyond recognition” and “represent a true reflection of the player’s playing ability only in very exceptional circumstances”. In other words, the message was that plus handicaps are often not representative of the player’s true level of golfing skill. Following internal discussion within the HCRC, the Committee decided that an investigation had to be conducted.

Procedure

A formal letter was sent to a selection of National Associations representing the three Continent of Europe Zones, requesting copies of the handicap records of the top five WAGR-ranked male and female players, with the assumption that all of these players would hold plus handicaps. Once we had received the documents from the NAs, a very detailed analysis was undertaken, comparing information displayed on the counting events as well as other competitions.

Key findings

Two findings stand out from the rest of the investigation:

- It is not surprising that players in this plus handicap range record very many qualifying rounds played outside the jurisdiction of their NA, with a significant number of rounds also being played outside that of the EGA. This need not present a problem. However, it turns out that the **procedures for recording the qualifying rounds** can differ, with some handicapping authorities recording them as single rounds (as intended by the system, with all the necessary information concerning the round included, e.g., the CBA), whereas other handicapping authorities simply record them on the basis of a manual adjustment. Such manual adjustments just present the variation of the handicap with no information given as to the score and/or CBA, meaning that there is insufficient information from a handicapping perspective. This procedure also makes it difficult for NAs to comply with the obligation under clause 3.1.18 of the EGA Handicap System to audit the handicap records of all players playing off +1.0 or better. It also affects the application of the Annual Handicap review as the data basis used for the AHR is much smaller than it should be (the AHR needs the actual score; i.e., a handicap variation cannot be used).
- Very many of the players audited had **failed to post scores from qualifying competitions**; many players in the sample had failed to post more than 20 scores over a single season; extreme cases were represented by four players (from different NAs) who had failed to post 39, 37, 35 and 34 scores respectively. It should be noted that some players had posted all of their scores. Needless to say, failure to post scores could lead to players being significantly under- or over handicapped.

While we did not check if un-posted scores were below buffer zone (and should therefore, in many cases have resulted in an increase) it is likely that players' desires to maintain a low handicap leads to a certain selectiveness in the reporting of scores for handicapping purposes. However, it should be noted that failure to post scores might be completely unintentional; for example, in cases where the CBA-result was "reduction only", players might have believed that failure to post the score (unless it was a reduction score) makes no difference. In some cases, particularly re rounds played in the US, the information necessary to record the score properly as a single round might be difficult to obtain.

Recommendations

- It is paramount that a handicap record contains all the necessary information assumed by the EGA Handicap System – please refer to clause 3.12.3. Appendix A of the EGA Handicap System manual contains an example.
- All parties must be made aware of/reminded about their obligations under the EGA Handicap System; for example, the requirement of all NAs under clause 3.1.18 to audit all handicaps of players +1.0 or better, or the player's obligation under clause 3.5.5 to report all qualifying scores, including away scores, to his/her handicapping authority. We believe that many potential problems concerning the maintenance of handicaps at the elite end could be avoided if these obligations are met. One of the most important steps to be taken by all NAs is to speak to the elite players about their obligations, making them aware of the fact that their handicaps will be audited by the NA (in the following years the EGA HCRC will follow up on the special audit reported on here; in cases where there appears to be a negative pattern of failure to comply with the system, this will have to be addressed on an individual basis).
- All handicapping authorities are encouraged to record international rounds (essentially all "away" scores) as single rounds, with all the necessary information included for proper handicapping as assumed by the system; please do this rather than record a manual adjustment. If, for whatever reason it is not possible to record the round as a single round, then at least provide some sort of remark on the record sheet for why it was recorded as a manual adjustment.

Please note that it is not our intention to stigmatize any player from any particular NA – we simply want to draw everyone's attention to what might be a widespread problem. Do not hesitate to contact us if you think that we may be of further assistance in this matter. The report from the Handicap Research Group contains names and records of individual players and remains confidential.

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Hans Malmström
Chairman, EGA Handicapping and Course Rating Committee