Guide to Plus Handicaps
Or: Fun with Icky Math (and confusing concepts)

Why is a handicap on the other side of zero, which you would think should be represented as a minus number, actually called a Plus Handicap? Because the lucky player who carries it has to give back, or ADD strokes to their gross score to arrive at a net result.

It’s helpful to remember that in handicapping, we are always trying to get to zero (Scratch).

When a zero-handicap golfer plays a 5.0 handicap player, most of us can accept that the higher-Handicap player needs more strokes from the lower-Handicap player as the Slope increases and less as the Slope decreases. Now imagine the same for a +5.0 player and a zero-Handicap player. As Slope increases the higher-Handicap player (even though at Scratch) needs more strokes from the lower-Handicap player and, conversely, fewer strokes as Slope decreases.

(Question to self: is anyone going to believe a scratch player NEEDS STROKES?)

Most of the issues with Plus Handicaps arise when – let’s face it – we are doing the (icky) math! Here are some tips and Q & A to make it easier to understand.

Where to Apply Strokes –
A player with a plus Course Handicap must add strokes according to the allocation table (handicap stroke holes) beginning with the 18th stroke hole. For example, when a player with a plus Course Handicap competes in a partnership stroke play competition, a team (side) with a Course Handicap of +1 must add a stroke to its score on the hole designated as the 18th stroke hole. In a match play competition in which the lower-handicapped team has a Course Handicap of +1, that side plays at scratch, and the other side adds one stroke to its Course Handicap.

Handicap Allowances –
Allowances (percentage of handicap less than 100%) are designed to make all forms of play fair. When a plus-handicap player is part of a side, the percentage allowances for different formats bring that player’s Course Handicap closer to zero. This occurs in order to keep as close as possible the proper percentage spread between the plus-handicap player and the other members of the side.

Example: On team A-B, Player A has a Course Handicap of +5 and Player B has a Course Handicap of 10. The total spread between Course Handicap is 15 strokes. In a competition where 80% of each player’s Course Handicap is used, Player A becomes a +4 (+5 x 80%) and Player B becomes an 8 (10 x 80%). Now the spread between Course Handicap, after the allowance is 12, which is 80% of their original spread of 15.

Q & A on Plus Handicaps (USGA Handicap System Decisions, Section 9) –

Note: To have even MORE fun than you are reading this article, test yourself on the following questions before reading the answers. Your 8th grade math teacher will be very proud.
1) Q: In a match, Player A’s Course Handicap is +2 and B’s Course Handicap is 8. How many strokes may B receive? 
   A: Player B should receive 10 strokes, and A should play at scratch.

2) Q: In a four-ball match played on a handicap basis, the Course Handicap of each player involved is as follows: Player A has a +2, Player B has a 6, Player C has a 2, and Player D has a 4. How should Course Handicap be allocated? 
   A: Player A should receive no strokes, Player B receives 8 strokes, Player C receives 4 strokes, and Player D receives 6 strokes.

3) Q: In a four-ball stroke play net competition, A and B are partners. A’s Course Handicap is +2 and B’s is 2. On which holes may handicap-strokes be received or given? 
   A: A should add one stroke on the holes allocated as the 17th and 18th handicap-stroke holes. B should deduct one stroke on the holes allocated as the 1st and 2nd handicap-stroke holes.

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