

## Handicapped for Success: Course Handicaps & Equitable Stroke Control (ESC)

So you've been counting all of your strokes and dutifully posting all of your rounds. But, are you posting the right score? This article will explore the definition of a **Course Handicap** and how it relates to your **Index**. First, it's helpful to recall that the **Handicap Index** formula is an average of the ten lowest **Handicap Differentials** of your twenty most recent scores. It takes into account the difficulty of the courses you played and is designed to reflect your playing potential. The next piece of the handicapping puzzle is your **Course Handicap**.

The USGA Handicap System defines a **Course Handicap** as *“the USGA’s mark that indicates the number of handicap strokes a player receives from a specific set of tees at the course being played to adjust the player’s scoring ability to the level of scratch or zero-handicap golf.”*

As we all know, golf courses vary greatly in the type of challenges they present. Given the wide range in course difficulty, your **Handicap Index** (based on scores from different courses) will not always be a good indicator of your expected score for a particular course. For that reason, it needs to be adjusted for the difficulty of the course you are playing.

Your **Course Handicap** tells you how many strokes over the **Course Rating** you would score *if you play to your potential - your Handicap*. In other words, your **Course Handicap** gives you a “target score” for the course. Here’s the formula:

$$(\text{Handicap Index} \times \text{Course Slope}) / 113$$

Round to nearest whole number

**Buena Vista Golf Course, CA**  
**Course & Slope Rating: 71.8, 120**

Example:  $22.3 \times 120 = 2676$

$2676 / 113 = 23.68$

23.68 rounded to the nearest whole number = **24**

So with an **Handicap Index** of 22.3, playing at Buena Vista Golf Course, your **Course Handicap** would be 24. Adding that to the **Course Rating** of 71.8 would give you a target score for the day of 96. If you meet your target, then you have “played to your Handicap”. You can think of your **Course Handicap** as your personal par!

Aside from telling you your target score for the day, your **Course Handicap** is required to determine the score you post for your round. Now you might be thinking, “What do you mean ‘the score to post’? Don’t I just count all my strokes and post my total?” The answer is yes, of course you count all of your strokes, but you might not post them all! What?!! Have you ever noticed when you post a score that it asks for your **Adjusted Gross Score**? Just what does that mean?

Snowmen, Niners, The Big Ten - you know what I’m talking about. We’ve all had them, those “blow up” holes where we can’t seem to do anything right. Hitting from one bunker into another, 3 or 4 putts, hitting into the same water hazard more than once (think Tin Cup), whatever the combination, bad holes happen. Here’s where **Equitable Stroke Control (ESC)** comes in. Remember, your **Index** reflects your playing potential. **ESC** is designed to keep exceptionally bad holes from dramatically affecting your **Handicap Index**. It also sets a maximum number that a player can post on any hole depending on the player’s **Course Handicap**. For handicap purposes only, before posting you must adjust your hole scores when they are higher than the maximum **ESC** number you can post. Simple – right?

The table below shows the maximum number of strokes allowed for each **Course Handicap** range. Using the **Course Handicap of 24** that we calculated above for Buena Vista, the maximum allowed strokes for any hole would be 8.

**Equitable Stroke Control Table**

Course Handicap	Maximum Number
9 or less	Double Bogey
10-19	7
20-29	8
30-39	9
40 and above	10

Before recording your score, look at each hole and adjust those that have a score higher than your allowed maximum. Using the example above, if you have a 10 on a hole then you would adjust that to an 8. There is no limit to the number of holes you can adjust. After adjusting all of your individual hole scores, re-total your score to arrive at, you guessed it, your **Adjusted Gross Score**. This is the score you will post for that round. If you do not adjust your scores before posting, then you could unintentionally inflate your **Index**.

So now you have two reasons to compute your **Course Handicap** – to ensure an accurate **Index** and to give you a target score for your round. We will explore the use of **Course Handicaps** in competition in a future article. Stay tuned!