



## Hole Handicapping—It's Probably Not What You Think

The golf holes where you get handicap strokes is a major point of discussion on every course on the planet. Everyone who has ever played the game has opinions on which holes are hardest and why, and which holes are mis-rated or handicapped inappropriately. Much like reviewing art, there are plenty of opinions, and none of them are necessarily wrong.

In an ideal world, the hardest hole (relative to par) would receive the #1 handicap, the second hardest would be #2, etc. You've probably noticed that the handicaps are split between odds on the front nine and evens on the back, so that, in matches where strokes are given and received, those strokes are spread out so that the match is not settled too early. On most courses, the odd holes are on the front nine and the evens on the back, because ideally you do not want a match to be won or lost by a stroke on a stroke hole; thus, fewer strokes would be received on the back nine. The exception to this rule is when there is a significant difference in difficulty between the front and back nines (recall that this was the case at old Birdwood, where the odd handicap holes were on the more penal back nine).

To establish hole handicaps, the method used to be the following: take a large sample of scores from a wide range of golfers of differing abilities and simply rank the holes from hardest to easiest. Sounds simple enough, right? But in practice...not so much. The problem arises from the different tee boxes. How many 20-plus handicappers play from the Cavalier tees? How many scratch golfers play from the sage tees? Do we have enough low single-digit female golfers to get a sufficiently large sample? The problem faced by most courses is the lack of golfers with a diverse range of skills playing from a diverse set of tees.

The solution a few years back was to scrap this method and simply use the hole handicaps determined by the USGA committee that periodically rates each course. As we discussed in our most recent handicapping blurb, this rating process involves assigning a score relative to par for each hole. A difficulty score is assigned to each hole at Birdwood based on the USGA committee's criteria.

Here's where things get tricky. In assigning hole handicaps, the following rules should be applied:

- 1) spread strokes evenly over all 18 holes,
- 2) make sure the lowest index holes (one and two) are in the middle triad,
- 3) apply stroke holes three and four in the first or third triad of each nine, and
- 4) avoid having stroke indices less than six on consecutive holes (if possible).

For hole handicapping purposes, the round is dividing into six, three-hole groups (or triads). Rule 1 is designed so that players who get strokes have a chance to use them before the match is over. Rule 2 makes it less likely that a stroke hole closes out a match (so that a player who is behind would have a chance to recover after losing a hole to someone getting a stroke). Rules 3 and 4 try to avoid the situation where a golfer giving up strokes runs into a gauntlet of consecutive holes where their opponent is always stroking.

Let's now apply this to Birdwood. For men, the hardest holes are four (handicap 1) and 14 (handicap 2, the hardest hole on the back nine...little argument here, I suspect). When Birdwood hosted the State Senior Open last summer, the hardest holes were #14 followed by #8 (!). They did play eight without the drop zone across the canyon, but still, it is a short hole, so it's not rated that difficult for men despite the gaping hazard in front of the green. Hole three is rated second hardest on the front nine. But the hole is significantly harder from the Cavalier and black tees (where you must hit across the ravine) than the more forward tees (recall that the blue tees were set back next to the black for about one long weekend when the course opened two years ago). Or the next time you are walking from the 17th green to the 18th tee, see how long it takes you to get to your tee box once you walk past the Cavalier tees. Where there are huge differences in difficulty between tee boxes, each set of boxes can have its own hole handicap. This is the case at Glenmore, for example.

For women, the same rules apply, but the hole ratings use different standards based on how far women hit their drives, etc. So now the third hole is the hardest on the front nine, followed by hole eight (appropriately), where the approach shot is especially challenging.

Here are the Birdwood hole handicaps for men and women:

Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Men	9	7	3	1	11	15	17	13	5	6	12	18	8	2	14	16	10	4
Women	13	7	1	5	9	11	17	3	15	6	16	12	10	2	8	18	14	4

Overall, Birdwood's handicaps follow most of the rules. For the men, the hardest holes are in the middle triad on both nines and the second hardest holes on each nine are not. There are consecutive holes with indices less than six, however (3 & 4, and 9 & 10). For the women, the hardest hole is not in the middle triad, but all other guidelines are followed.

In short, there are factors beyond difficulty that determine how each hole is handicapped. The current system tries to strike a balance between a simple difficulty estimate and making sure the distribution of handicap strokes results in matches that are fair and remain as competitive as possible over all 18 holes.

If you have questions about this or any other handicap issues, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Warm regards,

Birdwood Handicap Committee

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