



All About Handicapping

My name is Jeremy Dhondy and I am the Chairman of the English Bridge Union.

This column is to answer questions or comments about the EBU that you might have.

If you have a comment or a question I would be happy to hear from you. jeremy@mrbridge.co.uk

Q Is bridge a suitable game for using a handicapping system? A local bridge club I sometimes play at has introduced such a system, possibly to encourage less able players and give them the pleasurable feeling of winning or doing well, but this is at the expense of the stronger players.

A The short answer is that it is, in my opinion, a game well suited for handicap competitions. It will hardly be the only activity. Horses are handicapped by carrying different weights in races, golf and squash players participate with a handicap which acts as a leveller. Chess players surrender a piece or pieces or the weaker player has more time on the clock. Snooker players may give the weaker player a points start. A handicap may benefit the weaker player by giving him or her a better chance, but it also benefits the better player by producing more of a challenge. If you play golf against someone each week and beat him by fifteen or more strokes, then after a while, whilst there is the joy of the game itself, the competitive element dies away.

A handicap can also be used to stratify competitions, so that there is an incentive for players to participate even if they would be regarded in the weaker half of the field. I used to go to a French tournament held each year in La Baule. The major pairs competition

attracted some strong players, but the event had a handicap applied to all players and there was a separate prize list for those players. You could not, of course, win prizes in both categories.

Other countries also organise such games. In American tournaments, you will see reference to such things as the 49er pairs. If you'd like to play, you must have fewer than 50 masterpoints. As there is also a 99ers game this restricts the game to a small section of the membership. Because masterpoints build up over the years and don't reflect current form, they aren't perhaps best suited to the method. Some clubs in England run similar types of games to the American tournaments which can lead to a county competition.

In the local club, the main game is a pairs game, perhaps enlivened with the occasional teams event. A handicap competition can provide welcome variety. The first step is what to base the handicap on. It has to be something which is accepted and can be easily updated. Arpad Elo invented a scheme for chess which rates players and games can then be based on the scores. Bridge is a bit more difficult because it is a partnership game, but there are still workable methods.

Step forward the NGS

Fortunately if you play at an EBU affiliated club, the right system

has existed for the last six years: the National Grading Scheme. Several clubs already use this for handicapping (amongst other things). If you aren't familiar with it, a grade is produced which depends on your level, your partner's level and the opponents' levels. Therefore, if you play with a strong partner against weak opponents, then you will need a higher score to improve, whereas if you play with a weak partner against strong players you need a lower score to improve your grade. Your grade is expressed from a two to an ace and can change quite regularly.

To run a handicap, you can pick a date, eg when the event is due to start and give players a percentage based on their and their partner's grade. You might find a king starting with a 5% handicap over an average player (a seven). I don't suppose players would want to do this every game, but as an occasional change I think it has a role to play. You could also use it to have a split game, so that those with a higher rank are in a separate section to those with a lower rank. This, of course, would depend on having enough players.

Another method that can be used is stratification. You choose some levels (call them A, B and C). Players are put into one of them depending on their NGS grade and then at the end of the evening, as well as an overall winner, you can have B and C flight winners.

If you are an affiliated club, ►



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there is detail on all this in the Club Management Handbook.

Unaffiliated Clubs

These clubs don't have the benefit of the NGS, but that does not stop them from running such a game. You could run a handicap game based on percentage scores over the past year, so if you had averaged 55%, then you would start off with a 5% handicap against the 50% player, but a 5% advantage against the 60% player. You can publish the scores with or without handicap, if you wish.

Most scoring programs (including EBUScore and Scorebridge) will deal quite adequately with handicaps. You might decide that the whole handicap really does make it too difficult for the better players to overcome. If that's the case then it can always be adjusted or maybe only 80% of the difference in score counts.

How to handicap

Here is a method to use if you don't have access to the NGS:

- In determining the handicap winners, normal match-pointed percentage scores are adjusted by the handicap of each competing pair.
- Each member's handicap is calculated as follows:
- Take the average percentage score for the previous calendar year in club pairs events (minimum of ten events). Subtract this from 50 and divide the result by two to give the handicap.
- The handicap of each pair will be the sum of the handicaps of the two partners. This combined handicap is added to their match-pointed percentage score in the event, to give their percentage score in the handicap competition. (Note that some handicaps will be positive and some negative).

If someone wishes to play and hasn't played ten games, perhaps they have

moved into the area recently, you can always produce a temporary handicap until things settle down.

Bridge players, of course, are competitive creatures so if a club is to run a handicap it is best to give some thought to the regulations. For example, is the handicap fixed for the season or does it get recalculated at any point? How do you deal with a substitute? Must you play all the games or should it be, say, at least eight out of ten. If your club is unaffiliated, then those players who are EBU members can still use their NGS rating; perhaps the club could affiliate. You'd be very welcome.

Teams as well as pairs

It doesn't have to be a pairs game. I played in a league many years ago and there was also a league cup which was a knock-out event. A match between a first division team and a sixth division team (yes, there were six divisions then) could be quite unbalanced, so the division six team started 20 imps up in a 24 board match, a fifth division team 16 up etc. This seemed to work quite well.

In teams, a poorer team may often beat a stronger team in a seven or eight board Swiss match, but this is less likely in a 24-board league match and rare in something like a 48-board Gold Cup Match. Therefore, a handicap may be an incentive for a team which is fed up with losing in round one every year. With entries falling in many competitions that may be a useful fillip.

Perhaps your club might like to try this method once a month or so, as a variant on the normal game or perhaps over a few weeks at one time of year. If the club is worried about how it might be received (and the writer of the letter at the start of the article had some doubts) then asking the members at the AGM might be one way to gauge its likely acceptance and success.

I looked up a few club websites whilst preparing this article and found quite a few clubs offering a handicap pairs in one form or another, so there is some popularity out there which perhaps your club can build on. ■