

SECTION 2 — THE HISTORY OF COURSE RATING

Course rating, like golf, has its origin in the British Isles. The first measure of course difficulty was par. The word par is derived from stocks; i.e., “a stock may be above or below its normal or par figure.” British golf writer A.H. Doleman in 1870 asked Davie Strath and Jamie Anderson, two professionals, what score would be required to win The Belt at the then 12-hole course at Prestwick. Their response was that perfect play should produce a score of 49. Mr. Doleman called this par for Prestwick and when Young Tom Morris scored two strokes over par for three rounds (36 holes) to win The Belt, the term stuck.

Another measure for scoring difficulty of a golf course was “bogey,” which was the expected score of the fictitious Colonel Bogey. Around 1890, Mr. Hugh Rotherham of the Coventry Golf Club proposed the concept of a blind opponent in match play. He was called Colonel Bogey by Dr. Thomas Browne of Great Yarmouth. Colonel Bogey was a low handicap player who usually made 4 on long par-3 holes and 5 on long par-4 holes but otherwise played nearly flawless golf. Bogey scores ranged from 76 to 80 on most courses.

The first course rating system was developed by the Ladies Golf Union (LGU) under the leadership of Miss Issette Pearson in about 1900. Robert Browning in “A History of Golf” says of the LGU, “Their biggest achievement was the gradual establishment of a national system of handicapping ... No doubt it was uphill work at the start (1893) but within eight or ten years the LGU had done what the men had signally failed to do — had established a system of handicapping that was reasonably reliable from club to club.”

The first USGA Course Rating System was established in 1911. It was proposed by Leighton Calkins who also proposed the first USGA Handicap Committee. Calkins was an officer of the Metropolitan Golf Association and served on the USGA Executive Committee in 1907 and 1908. Calkins’ proposal was that par ratings be based on the play of U.S. Amateur champion, Jerome Travers. Rating courses according to the “expected” score of the national amateur champion became accepted, and course rating was born in America. Calkins was angered, however, by the USGA’s decision to allow clubs to determine their own ratings, calling such a system a “farce” and “useless.” Calkins later won his point, and a USGA Course Rating was issued by regional golf associations as it is today.

By 1914, the USGA rating concept began to dominate articles in British golf magazines. By 1925, a Golf Unions’ Joint Advisory Committee of the British Isles was formed to assign Standard Scratch Scores to golf courses in Great Britain and Ireland. Today, their men’s authority is called the Council of National Golf Unions (CONGU).

In the 1920’s, the Massachusetts Golf Association suggested refinements in course rating methods, and William Langford of Chicago developed a fractional par concept which further refined course ratings. In the 1930’s, Thomas G. McMahon, who was President of the Chicago District Golf Association in 1942 and 1943 and President of the Southern California Golf Association in the early 1960’s, refined Langford’s technique and introduced “differentials” between scores and course ratings.

The USGA Handicap Committee adopted the Massachusetts Golf Association’s recommendations for course ratings for men in 1947. This method called for rating on a hole-by-hole basis where each hole was rated in tenths of a stroke. “The USGA Handicap System” contained descriptions of golf holes that typified holes of a specific rating. The hole ratings were totaled and rounded off to the nearest whole number; i.e., “The rating of the entire course is the total of the separate hole ratings, with the final figure being the nearest whole number, such as 69 or 72, and never in fractions, such as 69.4 or 71.8.”

During this same period, the Chicago District Golf Association endorsed the “fractional par rating method.” The Chicago rating method depended on (1) yardage, (2) course difficulty, and (3) experience. “Course difficulty” was based on a course’s overall character rather than the sum of a hole-by-hole evaluation. “Experience” meant the observation of the play of expert golfers and comparison of their performance with the existing rating.

Both course rating procedures were eventually approved by the USGA. Both remained in effect until April 1960 when a new single approach was introduced. It involved a “preliminary yardage rating” for each hole which was “modified, if necessary, in the light of significant course conditions, called Rating Factors.” The Chicago District Golf Association continued to use the fractional par method.

In 1963, the USGA introduced another course rating system. It was essentially the procedure developed by the Massachusetts Golf Association modified by principles of the fractional par rating method used by the Chicago District Golf Association with one official yardage rating chart calculated by the USGA.

Another significant change was announced January 1, 1967. Effective that date, course ratings were expressed in decimals and not rounded off to the nearest whole number.

In 1971, William Wehnes of the Southern California Golf Association developed the first “obstacle rating” procedure using plus and minus adjustments by nines, for a number of course obstacles. For a time, this technique was used by both the Northern and Southern California Golf Associations.

In 1977, Lt. Commander Dean Knuth of the Naval Post-Graduate School proposed an improved course rating system that involved numerical rating of 10 characteristics for each hole. These ratings along with the weighting factors for each characteristic provided an adjustment to the distance rating for the course. The method used some elements of decision theory and was intended to be a systematic, quantitative approach to course rating. It was the basis for the present USGA Course Rating System. Knuth eventually became the USGA’s Senior Director of Handicapping.

In May 1978, Dr. Richard Stroud, a consulting member of the Handicap Procedure Committee, wrote a letter to Gordon Ewen, Chairman of the Committee, proposing the concepts of the Slope System. In discussing a 1971 proposal by Dr. Clyde Soley and Trygve Bogevoid for a slope-like approach to handicapping, Stroud wrote, “It should be emphasized that the proposed scheme for selecting course-difficulty parameters is based on length alone. There is a significant chance some more sophisticated methods will prove necessary; i.e., the Knuth method for refining course ratings and a similar procedure for predicting slope.” This proved to be the case, and course rating became a two-number procedure in 1981.

In 1979, the USGA formed the Handicap Research Team (HRT). Charter members of the Team were Trygve Bogevoid, Dean Knuth, Dr. Lou Riccio, Dr. Fran Scheid, Lynn Smith, Dr. Clyde Soley, Dr. Richard Stroud, and Frank Thomas. The HRT researched and refined many aspects of the handicap procedure including course rating. The concepts of expert and bogey ratings emerged. The present USGA Course Rating System, which includes Bogey Rating and Slope Rating, was developed and tested by Knuth.

In 1982, the Colorado Golf Association rated all of its courses using the new procedure, under the leadership of HRT member Dr. Byron Williamson. In 1983, Colorado tested the Slope System with positive results. Five other states joined Colorado in the test during 1984, and others followed in subsequent years.