

Why you should welcome 54-handicappers to the game

Steve Carroll dispels the myths peddled by those who have railed against the new maximum golf handicaps

It is no wonder golf is viewed so disparagingly if the whine on social media about 54 handicaps is the judge. Even though they've been in the offing for several months, the sport has finally woken up to the CONGU changes that came into force at the start of the year. "Shoot me now!" said one at the prospect of having to play his Saturday morning game with three 54-handicappers. If you've missed the disapproving din, let me recap. From the start of this month, the maximum handicap a player is allowed in competitions has been increased. There are new Categories of 5 and 6 – with the upper handicap limit set at 54 shots. It had previously been 28 shots for men and 36 for women. The same old myths get trotted out whenever 'handicaps' and 'golfers' come together in the same sentence.

Myth No. 1: 54 handicaps will win everything

This idea has always been widely perpetuated – the idea that every 28 handicapper was a bandit. You see it all the time on the course – the scorn and suspicion that's barely simmering under the surface every time someone at the higher end of the scale dares to get a drive airborne. Make the maximum handicap 54 and it's only a short hop to a nett 40 claiming the monthly medal, cry the naysayers. I've been a member of a few clubs in my time and I've rarely seen a high handicapper walk off with the club championship. People are off 54 for a reason. They can't consistently play or score well. Should that immediately bar them from competition, though? Some of the po-faced nonsense I've seen – 'they should have to pass a proficiency test first', 'get on the range before you go to the course' – just beggars belief. You're playing in the Midweek Stableford, not the Open. The reason competitions are split into divisions is so prizes can be spread over a variety of different handicap ranges. This is a game in decline. Numbers aren't falling off a cliff like they were in the aftermath of the financial crash, but we're hardly seeing newcomers breaking down the doors. The average age of members continues to rise. Golf is hard. I took 13 shots at the 1st hole in a medal at my club in the summer. The next week I wrote down a 12. I play off 11. Should I be banned from competitions until I've learned how to play the hole properly? This is a difficult sport that takes some perseverance. Here's a handicap that gives players a chance to compete from the very start. As they improve, so their handicaps will improve – and sometimes rapidly. But there's already a vehicle in place to deal with those whose ability rises quicker than the system can keep up with: it's called the general play reduction. Yes, there will be people who try to cheat the system. There always have been. But with that number of shots, anyone with a modicum of ability is going to be pretty easy to spot. And if a new player comes in and romps a competition from time to time, do you know what? I'm all for it. If that brings the joy of golf to them, and encourages them to bring other new players into the game, all the better.

Golf isn't just about picking up pots.

Myth No. 2: A slow game will get even slower

‘How long is a round of golf going to take? I’ll never get home again.’ I took a look at the last medal round at my club. There were 13 players who recorded more than 100 shots – one of which was 120. Take the nearly 20 competitors who also No Returned, which suggests their rounds were heading in a similar direction, and you can argue that a third of the field were coming in at more than the previous maximum mark. There are plenty of players out there already who can’t play to 28 but were forced to because of the rules in place. Not all of them are beginners. Some may be impaired by age or a physical condition. What do we say to those paying members? Sorry, golf competitions are not for you? That’s hardly the message of inclusivity that EVERY governing body in the game is pleading. The round I mentioned above took three hours and 40 minutes. Not blistering by any means, but hardly a crisis either. The argument that all new players are going to congregate together and take 500 plus shots while labouring round in six hours or more is simply not a credible one. You pick up your ball when you can no longer score in a Stableford and, from 2019, club committees will be able to cap holes at a maximum score in stroke play as well. No-one is going to be hacking round the course in 20 shots a hole. You might have to show a bit more patience as a new player takes a few shots to get to the green – just as they will when you carve one into the trees and spend five minutes looking for your ball before walking back to the tee because you’ve failed to play a provisional. Time management goes both ways.

Myth No. 3: It’s not worth entering the matchplay

If I meet a 54-handicapper, I’ll be giving them 43 shots in a matchplay game, assuming the competition conditions allow entry to maximum handicaps. I can hear the wailing already. ‘There’s no point in entering. I can’t possibly win.’ Well, if you are going to be defeatist about it then you probably won’t win. Again, there’s a reason why I’m giving away 43 shots. It’s because the handicap system has decided I’m 43 shots better than my opponent. On average, I should win. If my opponent has a good day – relative to their playing ability – and beats me over 18 holes, well, you know, that is allowed. It’s the whole point of the handicap system. Every player is capable of hitting good shots. It’s just that lower handicappers are more consistent. I want golf to be a challenge. I want to be stretched. The purpose of a handicap matchplay is to level the playing field. If I don’t like that, I can always enter the scratch. Clearly my opponent’s potential to improve is greater than mine on any given day. But I have advantages as well. I can put pressure on with my general play, try to intimidate with a better display of ball striking and generally force errors. I can get inside their head. If I let their large handicap get inside mine, then I’ll probably lose.

Myth No. 4: New players don’t understand golfing etiquette

You can’t let these newbies out the course. They won’t repair their pitch marks. They won’t rake bunkers. They’ll stand in your line. They’ll talk during your shot. These are all also things to which players who have been wielding a club for years need to hang their heads and plead guilty. Been down your club lately? I see plenty of people who’ve been playing the game for a number of years who are too lazy to tidy up after themselves in a bunker. So what am I saying? I’m saying let’s try to embrace everyone who wants to play this great game. Let’s encourage people to play competitions – whatever their ability. Let’s all try to be a little more tolerant. We were all novices once. My experience of starting out in the game at clubs was almost entirely negative. I felt like I wasn’t wanted. Then, as I started to get hooked, I found myself excluded from various events because my handicap wasn’t considered to be good enough. It almost cost golf a paying member for a lifetime. We’ve got a chance, with these latest changes, to change that for the better. Let’s make it about the golf, and not just about a number.

