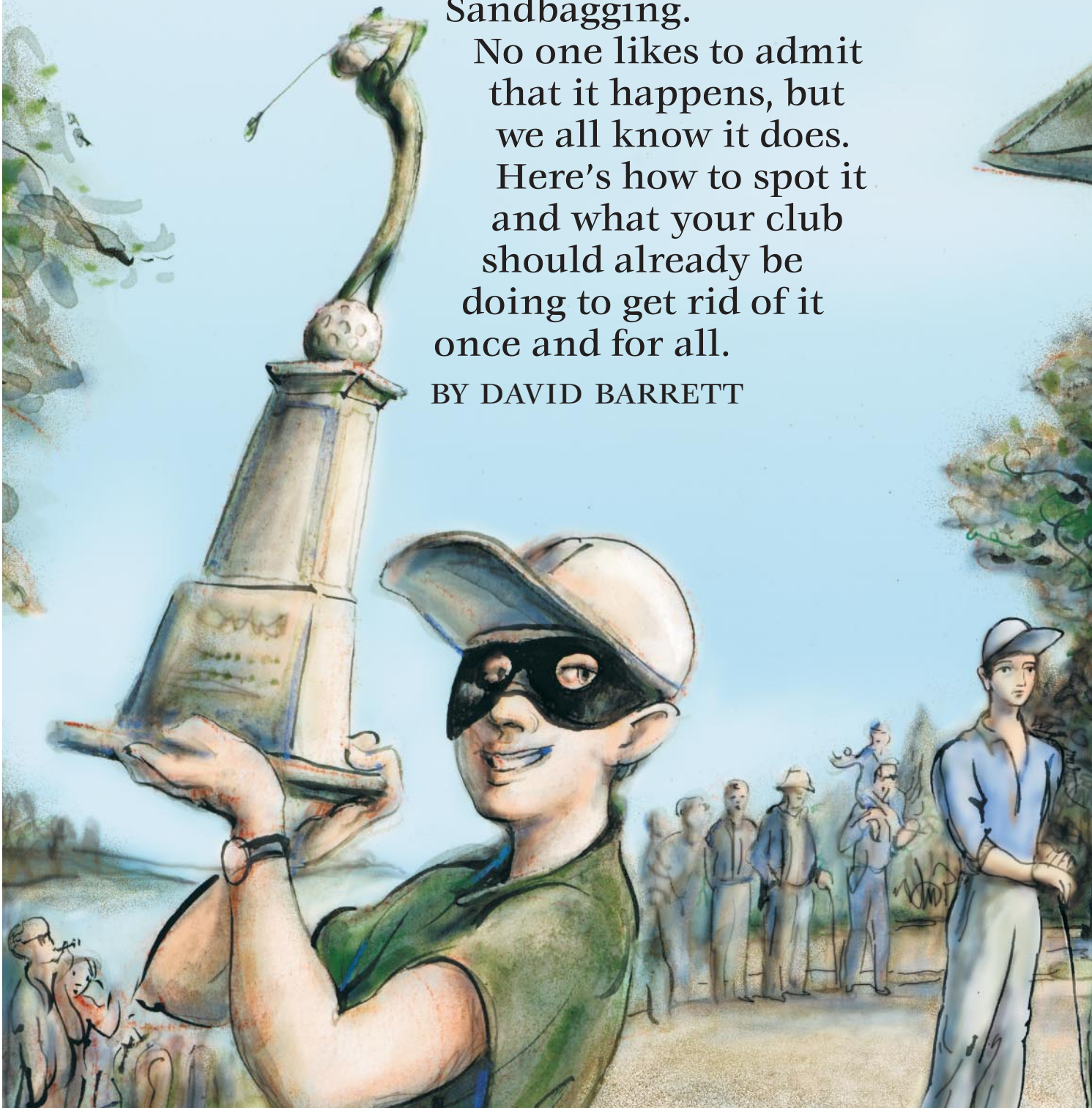


Fairway Felons

Sandbagging.

No one likes to admit that it happens, but we all know it does. Here's how to spot it and what your club should already be doing to get rid of it once and for all.

BY DAVID BARRETT





ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL DEGEN

At a recent handicap seminar, one of the attendees asked the association director of handicapping and course rating, “At our club, the same individual seems to win all our net events. We’ve tried everything we could think of, to no avail. What else can we do?”

“Have you tried a gun?” replied the director.

The topic of sandbagging in golf often seems much like the weather—everyone talks about it, but nobody does anything about it.

The handicap system is one of the great things about the game because it enables players of all abilities to compete against one another on a level playing field. At least it’s supposed to. But if you sit down in any grillroom, you’ll hear complaints about players whose Handicap Indexes are, shall we say, a bit suspect.

You know whom we’re talking about. The guy who wins his flight every other year in the club championship. The 12-handicapper from another club who waltzes in with a gross 74 in the member-guest. Or even your weekend buddy who always seems to beat you in a \$2 Nassau.

It’s not true that nobody ever does anything about sandbagging. The AGA and USGA work very hard trying to educate clubs and golfers on using the system properly, and every club has a handicap committee that acts as a watchdog and has the power to step in if necessary and adjust a player’s Index. If, in the real world, committees are not always as strict as they could be, the fact is they usually don’t get much help.

And let’s face it: Being handicap chairman is not the most glamorous, or most appreciated, job at the club.

“What often happens is nobody says ‘boo’ until a player shoots a net 59 or 60 in an event,” says Kevin O’Connor, the USGA’s senior director of handicapping. “Then people say, it’s not fair, we knew he was going to win this event from the get-go. That’s not the time to have an impact on a player’s Handicap Index. The time is before that. It’s basically a member’s obligation.”

The most important safeguard against sandbagging is what the USGA and AGA call “peer review.” This means that an official USGA Handicap Index can be established only by an organized group of golfers that meets the USGA’s definition of a “golf club,” which includes the requirement that players have a regular and reasonable opportunity to play with one another. (In the public-golf sector, most daily-fee and municipal courses have such clubs, and there are also “clubs without real estate” formed by groups of players who regularly play together.)

This is not to say that it’s easy to control sandbagging, even at the most closely-knit clubs. While members might complain to one another about another player’s Handicap Index, they usually are uncomfortable—or don’t even think about—going to the handicap committee.

“We’ve had very few people come to our committee and make a complaint,” says one handicap chairman. “I think it’s because a golf club is supposed to have a collegial atmosphere.”

Nor will other players often say anything to a suspected sandbagger.

“Golfers are very non-confrontational about this,” says the handicap chairman. “It’s an unpleasant thing to do.”

Of course, if the sandbagger is a member of your regular foursome, the simplest solution is to refuse to play with him—a not-so-subtle form of peer review. But if he’s making off with the hardware in too many club tournaments, it’s a problem for everyone.

Any player can have a great round. But when there’s a pattern of low scores in tournaments, it



raises a red flag. The nature of the handicap system, which is based on the best 10 of the previous 20 scores instead of a player's average score, militates against low net numbers. (In fact, to be absolutely precise, the system uses what are called "score differentials," the gross score adjusted for both the Course and Slope Ratings.) This means that even a round in which the player "merely" shoots to his Course Handicap (i.e., his net score matches the Course Rating) is actually a strong showing because that should happen in roughly only one out of every four rounds. A net score of three strokes below the Course Rating is a once-a-year occurrence for most players with honest handicaps, while a net score in the low 60s is a once-in-a-lifetime thing—if you're lucky (see "Beating the Odds").

The first line of defense for a handicap committee in the case of a player who performs "too well" in tournaments is an automatic reduction of Handicap Index based on exceptional tournament scores. This is built into the system and kicks in automatically when a player has two or more tournament score differentials at least three strokes better than his Handicap Index (scores in tournaments must be posted with a "T").

Handicap committees appreciate this provision because it is completely objective and spares them from having to make a judgment call—and maybe an awkward phone call to the suspect player. It also takes care of the player whose Handicap Index might be completely legitimate, but who really does play

much better than usual in competition.

Some other aspects of the handicap system serve as checks against sandbagging. The fact that only 10 of 20 scores are used means that a player can't inflate his Index by posting a couple of extremely high scores. And Equitable Stroke Control (ESC), which sets a maximum score on any hole (e.g., a 7 for a 10–19 Course Handicap), means that he can't inflate it by having a couple of really bad holes in every round.

Still, without peer review, the power of the handicap committee, and a strong chairman, the system alone can't stop a determined sandbagger.

"The committee can monitor posting practices to make sure that scores are being entered," says the USGA's O'Connor. "How the committee will know the scores posted are 100 percent accurate is open to question. The only people who know are the ones who played with them. The human element is important." Virtually all sandbagging falls into one of three categories:

OOPS! IT JUST SLIPPED MY MIND

The simplest way to sandbag is by "forgetting" to post your best scores. The handicap committee can make spot checks by looking at tee sheets for a given day and seeing if those players posted scores. If a player fails to post a score, the committee may post it for him. It may also post a "penalty score" equal to the best differential in his last 20 rounds.

The AGA's computerized service can help. With the push of a few buttons, any club can call up an alphabetical list of scores posted on a particular date. If the committee knows that 100 golfers went off on Saturday but the report shows that only 50 scores were posted, you've got a problem.

Ignorance of the system, real or feigned, may lead to players not posting scores. Some believe, or claim to believe, that you can't turn in scores when you play match play or better ball because you might not finish every hole. But, since the principle in handicapping is that your potential is best reflected by considering every round you play, these forms of play count. If you pick up on a hole, you mark down the most likely score you would have made, up to the maximum under ESC.

Another excuse players sometimes give for not posting a low score is that rounds played away from their home course don't count. This is wrong: Away scores must be posted. On the other hand, a string of high scores in away rounds could be an indication of something fishy. Away scores are tagged with an "A" because they are less subject to peer review. If a player's Handicap Index increases by three or more strokes due to the

posting of numerous away scores and subsequent scores at his club clearly indicate that his increased Index is too high, USGA guidelines say that the committee shall adjust his Index downward.

DID I WRITE '91'? MY PENCIL MUST HAVE SLIPPED

A more nefarious sandbagging method is for a player to post a score higher than he actually shot. Here is an area where the Internet makes peer review a little easier. Instead of sneaking around in the computer or posting area at the club, you can now check any player's scoring record on the Web at azgolf.org in the comfort of your home. Of course, few players are going to take the time to check unless they have reason to be suspicious, so it also makes sense for the club to make current scores easily available for review. Most clubs do this by placing the computer terminal in a well-trafficked area, allowing golfers to check their peers' scoring records through the AGA service.

GOSH, MY PUTTER REALLY WENT COLD ON THOSE LAST FEW HOLES

Sandbagging can be much more subtle, under the heading of manipulating the round. Some players take advantage of match play and better-ball play to inflate their scores by giving less than their best effort when it won't hurt them in the match.

"We've all run into players who, when they're out of a hole, never make the putt. I don't think the system can take care of that," says one handicap chairman. The same goes for players in better ball whose partners have already won the hole.

One player would routinely thrash his opponents in 12 or 13 holes, then mysteriously lose his game and make several double bogeys and triple bogeys after the match had been decided.

It's even easier to throw strokes in a casual round when no match is being played—at least if you don't have a conscience or any pride in what score you shoot.

A SANDBAGGER DOESN'T HAVE TO GO AWAY FROM HIS HOME course to subvert peer review. He can avoid scrutiny by playing most of his rounds with guests, family, or a few cronies. Only when he comes out of the woodwork and claims the trophy in a club event—spoiling it for those with legitimate handicaps—

Beating the Odds

EXCEPTIONAL TOURNAMENT SCORES PROBABILITY TABLE

Net Differential	HANDICAP INDEX RANGES				
	0-5	6-12	13-21	22-30	31-up
0	5:1	5:1	6:1	5:1	5:1
-1	10:1	10:1	10:1	8:1	7:1
-2	23:1	22:1	21:1	13:1	10:1
-3	57:1	51:1	43:1	23:1	15:1
-4	151:1	121:1	87:1	40:1	22:1
-5	379:1	276:1	174:1	72:1	35:1
-6	790:1	536:1	323:1	130:1	60:1
-7	2349:1	1200:1	552:1	229:1	101:1
-8	20111:1	4467:1	1138:1	382:1	185:1
-9	48219:1	27877:1	3577:1	695:1	359:1
-10	125000:1	84300:1	37000:1	1650:1	874:1

The values in the table are the odds of shooting a net differential equal or better than the number in the left column. Net differential reflects how many strokes lower than his Index a player shot.

The above table, taken from the USGA Handicap System manual, shows that it's very unlikely that a player will shoot more than three strokes below his Handicap Index in a given round. If the same player does it on multiple occasions in a short span, he's either defying the laws of probability or a sandbagger.

For example, a player with a Handicap Index of 10.5 shoots a 74 from a set of tees with a course rating of 71.2 and a slope rating of 126. His handicap differential is 2.5, taking the slope rating into account ($74 - 71.2 = 2.8 \times 113/126$). That gives him a net differential of -8.0. From the chart, the odds of this occurring are 4,467 to 1.

Higher handicap players have a greater chance of shooting an exceptional round because score variability rises with handicaps. That's why mid- to high-handicappers often walk off with the title in a large-field net event. Low-handicappers can be consoled by the fact that their consistency gives them the edge in head-to-head play and multiple-round tournaments.

do his fellow members and the handicap committee become aware of what's going on.

At many clubs, particularly new clubs without real estate, education is the most important function of the handicap committee. One handicap chairman of a club without real estate is constantly reminding players that they need to turn in all scores, from the club's weekly outings and elsewhere. "Most guys are just being lazy or they don't know—though I'm not saying there aren't guys out there who don't turn in scores and suddenly they're playing better," he says.

Though sandbagging doesn't seem to be a big problem at the club, the suspicion that players might not be posting their scores led the committee to institute a club rule that players who have posted fewer than 10 scores in a year would be ineligible for the club tournaments.

There are undoubtedly many players at all types of clubs

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who don't post all their scores due solely to inattention, not because they are trying to manipulate their handicap. Nor, for that matter, is a low round or two necessarily an indication of sandbagging. In fact, some of those grillroom whisperings after a tournament may be completely unfounded.

"The basic problem with handicap play is that whoever wins is going to play better than they normally do," says Diane Coolidge, AGA's Director of Handicapping. "If you know the guy well, you say, that's terrific. If it happens at a member-guest, you say, who the heck are your friends? If it's players from another club at a pro-am, you say, what a bunch of cheaters."

In fact, they may not be cheaters at all. The sad fact about sandbagging is that its existence spoils some of the fun of competition for the vast majority of golfers with honest handicaps, whether they win or lose. That's why an active handicap committee and a strong chair-

man—who really do something about sandbagging—is so important.

REVERSE SANDBAGGING—VANITY HANDICAPS

The flip side of sandbagging is players who carry Handicap Indexes that are lower than they should be. There are a number of reasons, but the most common offender is the player whose ego is tied to his handicap and fancies himself better than he actually is. He's generally lax about posting scores, but he always remembers to post his good ones. When he picks up on a hole, which is pretty often, he gives himself the benefit of doubt (if he has a 30-foot putt for bogey, he'll take a bogey). He'll even give himself the three-foot putt he missed because he "wasn't really trying."

This is the kind of player you love to wager with (but usually get stuck with as a partner). But wait, could it be you? Many casual golfers improve their lies and are generous to one another in conceding

putts and to themselves in marking the scorecard. They don't even think about the fact that all of these things lead to lower handicaps. When they tee it up in a competition in which they have to hole out everything, they are in trouble. Or, they might think they don't need to post their worst scores because they're not going to count anyway—not realizing that this has an impact on the scores that do count.

Then there are players who manipulate their handicaps to make themselves eligible for USGA or AGA events that have a Handicap Index limit. Usually, this is a matter of fudging a little bit to ensure being on the low side of the borderline. Sometimes, though, there is outright fraud, like the fellow who shot a 125 in New Jersey trying to qualify for last year's U.S. Mid-Amateur Championship, which requires an Index of 3.4 or less. The USGA has performance guidelines which prevent such perpetrators from entering an event a second time—and the club's handicap committee has

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RULE BY COMMITTEE

“The AGAs Handicap Committee has recently released a ‘Handicap Chairman’s Kit,’” says Hugh Pryor, AGA Treasurer and Chairman of the Handicap Committee. “It contains some helpful hints and suggestions to assist chairmen in managing the handicap system. There are several interesting articles, sample policies, letters, and flyers that can be posted at the club.” Here are a few guidelines to the actions a club’s handicap committee should take to ensure the integrity of the handicap system.

Committee. Be sure you have a handicap committee and a strong chairman. The chairman must be a club member.

Education. Make sure that all members are aware of the correct procedures for posting scores. The committee shouldn’t be seen as solely a disciplinary body.

Listings. Have a list of members’ Handicap Indexes in a prominent place and

make current scoring records available on the computer for inspection by fellow members.

Member Feedback. Members should be encouraged to come to the committee if they think there might be a problem.

Tournament Designation. Determine which events will be designated as tournaments for handicap purposes and convey to the members that these rounds must be posted with a “T”.

Monitoring. Crosscheck with tee sheets on random days to make sure scores are being posted. Randomly print and display the list of scores posted on a busy day so members can see if their fellow members are posting. Check tournament days to make sure scores were posted with a “T.” Review results of tournaments for exceptional scores (for guests, forward such scores to the guest’s golf club or golf association). Check for cases of a Handicap Index being raised significantly by excessive

away or Internet scores. If it appears that a player’s Handicap Index is too high because of a failure to post scores or for other reasons, the committee has the power to take the necessary steps to correct the situation.

Post Scores. If a score has not been posted, the committee can post it and/or post a penalty score equal to the lowest differential on the player’s scoring record.

Threat of Modification.

The committee can call a meeting and threaten a suspected player with modification of his Index, explaining the circumstances.

Modification. The committee has the authority to adjust a player’s Handicap Index by whatever amount it deems necessary.

Withdrawal. This step is rarely taken, but if a player repeatedly fails to meet his responsibilities under the USGA Handicap System, his Handicap Index can be withdrawn. ■



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