

The Slop on Slope and Course Ratings

Being given the opportunity to do a golf course grow-in this year was a privilege, from the planning stages to the mowing of the first blades of grass to the WSGA (Wisconsin State Golf Association) coming out to rate the golf course.

Slope is an indicator of how difficult a golf course plays for all golfers with handicaps above scratch. The USGA course rating is the USGA's evaluation of the playing difficulty of a course for scratch golfers under normal course and weather conditions . . .

It was interesting to see how many different factors are involved in coming up with the Slope and course rating. Around the first of October, the WSGA came out and within a month we received our preliminary numbers, preliminary because several of the greens were already covered. With that long fall we had, I just couldn't get the covers on soon enough. (That was meant to be facetious.) To my amazement, we had garnered a slope of 123 and a course rating of 72.1. That is from the tips, no less. I was amazed because I thought to myself, "Our course is harder than that, that can't be right." Our pro didn't seem to think anything of it. He knew something I didn't. At this point, I decided to schedule a meeting with John Warren, the director of course ratings for the WSGA. My curiosity was getting the best of me and John was more than happy to come on out and clarify things with me as he has done with so many before.

Slope and Course Rating Defined

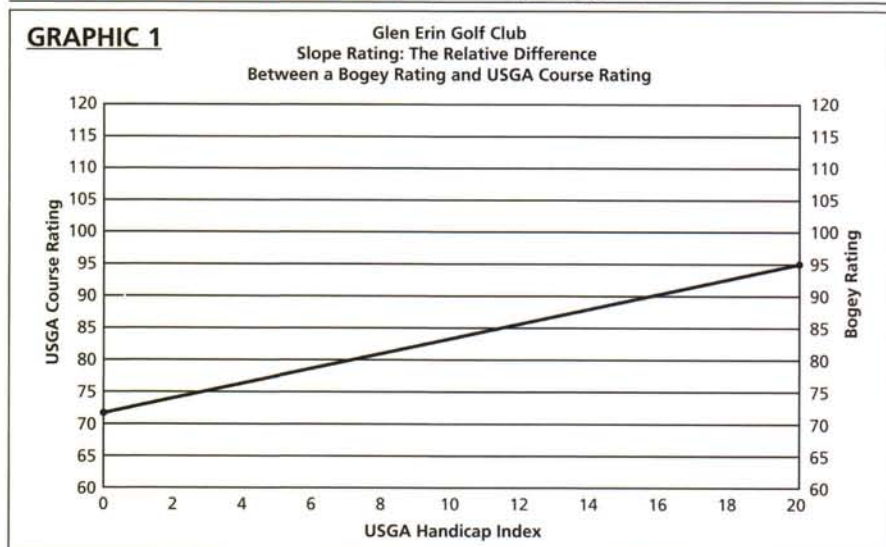
Slope, as defined by the USGA, is the difference between the bogey rating and the scratch rating multiplied by a fixed value (5.381 for men and 4.24 for women). Slope is an indicator of how difficult a golf course plays for all golfers with handicaps above scratch. The USGA Course Rating is the USGA's evaluation of the playing difficulty of a course for scratch golfers under normal course and weather conditions for the purpose of providing a uniform basis on which to issue USGA Handicap Indexes. With definitions clarified, I will use Glen Erin's numbers to illustrate how the formula for Slope works.

$$\begin{array}{r r r r r} \text{(Bogey Rating)} - & \text{(Course Rating)} & \times & 5.381 & = \text{Slope} \\ 94.9 & - & 72.1 & \times & 5.381 = 122.68, \text{ rounded up to } 123 \end{array}$$

Graphic 1, page 14, depicts Glen Erin's numbers charted.

Chances are, you are employed by a club that has been guilty of modifying the course by adding length and obstacles, thinking that the changes you have made will increase Slope, which in turn will increase your marketability as well. Sure, that will increase Slope—NOT. Why? The changes made were probably done so as to impact the scratch golfer more than the bogey golfer, hence your Slope rating has actually declined. I know what you're thinking, and I will ask you this to help clarify the above. Have you ever heard a bogey golfer complain that a course is not hard enough? I didn't think so. The only way to

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increase Slope is to proportionately increase the difficulty of the tees (holes) for the higher-handicap golfer.

The Rating Process

The course ratings are derived by evaluating each hole from every tee and every shot as seen through the eyes of a scratch and bogey male and female golfer. It's kind of like playing air golf. Those of you who have a tendency to play air guitar in a bar because you've had too much to drink can relate to this. By the way, take some lessons; you're not as good as you think. The obstacle stroke value, in conjunction with the effective playing length, are the key factors in the rating process. The ten obstacles considered are:

1. Topography
2. Fairways
3. Rough and Recoverability
4. Out of Bounds/Extreme Rough
5. Water Hazards
6. Trees
7. Bunkers
8. Green Target
9. Green Surface
10. Psychological

The obstacle stroke value is determined for scratch and bogey golfers by analyzing the ten obstacle factors and their effect on the respective golfers on a hole-by-hole basis. The range value for each obstacle is given a number between 0 and 10, 0 being a little influence and 10 being a great deal of influence. The four adjustments for effective playing length are:

1. Roll
2. Elevation
3. Doglegs
4. Prevailing Winds

To illustrate the process undertaken by a course rater looking through the eyes of a male scratch golfer, I will use hole number three at Glen Erin Golf Club, a 378-yard par 4. This is only an abbreviated version of what a course rater will do! (See Graphic 2.)

GRAPHIC 2



The rater will first stand on the tee and shoot the official yardage with a laser gun. While on the tee, the following observations are made: the prevailing winds are at the golfer's back, no trees or bunkers will be a factor in the wide landing area, but the landing area is about 200 yards out from the tee before falling down into a valley. As defined by the USGA, the landing area for a male scratch golfer is at 250 yards; because the landing area for this particular hole falls short of this, a point adjustment will be made. For the sake of illustration and generalization, we'll say the tee shot was assigned an overall point factor of 5. The rater will now move to the landing area and observe the shot into the green. He sees that the trees on the left are not much of a concern, a point factor of 1. The green target is wide, but extremely shallow, a point factor of 5. There is no out-of-bounds or water hazards, a point factor of 0. There are four steep-faced pot bunkers guarding 70% of the green, a point factor of 6. He will now move to the green and examine the surface. The green surface is relatively flat, but does fall off to the front left, a point factor of 4.

MENS TEE MARKERS	USGA Course Rating	USGA Slope Rating	Nine-Hole Course Rating		Nine-Hole Slope Rating	
			Front Nine	Back Nine	Front Nine	Back Nine
Black	72.1	123	35.4	36.7	123	123
Orange	69.9	118	34.3	35.6	118	118
White	67.4	113	32.9	34.5	113	113
LADIES TEE MARKERS						
White	72.4	121	35.3	37.1	119	123
Green	68.7	115	33.5	35.2	114	116

The Stimpmeter measures the green at a speed of 8.5, a point factor of 3. Once all of the point factors are assigned, the rater will look at number three as a whole and assign it a psychological score—what kind of havoc will this hole wreak on the golfer's mind—for a point factor of 3. This same process will occur on the other 17 holes, all from the various perspectives of the scratch and bogey male and female golfers. Once all of the point factors have been compiled for all 18 holes, the numbers are then entered into a course rating computer program provided by the USGA. The calculation gives you your total course rating for each set of tees, male and female. Glen Erin's numbers are shown in Graphic 3.

The Course Rater Fallacy

Off the record, has your golf course ever cancelled a course rating due to the fact that your membership or owner dislikes a rating team deemed "easy raters?" You know what I mean. Your course gets rated and you didn't get the difficult numbers you were looking for, then your buddy at Wacko Country Club tells you that "you should keep canceling until you get this rating group, they'll give you harder numbers." It's bull malarkey! If you were rated a 72.1 with a Slope of 129, you're still going to have those same numbers when the other team gets done, give or take a tenth of a point. The fact of the matter is, all course raters must be certified by one of two USGA Course Rating Calibration Seminars held annually. For checks and balances, your local association, whether it is the WSGA or the CDGA, will perform dry runs and compare notes to

make sure the teams are calibrated with each other. So remember, the next time you want to cancel a scheduled rating because you think you are getting an easy team, forget it—it's not worth the phone call.

The Test

Now that we all have a better understanding of Slope and rating, it's time for the test. Each of two golf courses is about 6,800 yards long with a par of 72. Course "A" has a course rating of 73.1 and a Slope of 120 and that train leaves Chicago at 2:30 p.m. traveling at a speed of 56 mph. Course "B" has a rating of 69.4 and a Slope of 128, and that train leaves Chicago at 2:37 p.m. traveling at a speed of 62 mph. At all handicap levels, which is the more difficult golf course? If you said Course "A," you're right. If you said Course "B," read the article again. If you are still trying to figure out what the trains have to do with this, give it up, you're a lost cause.



Sources and References Cited:

- Mr. John Warren, WSGA Director of Course Rating
- "The Course Rating Game" by Rick Pledl. March/April 2000 issue of Wisconsin Golfer.
- USGA
- WSGA

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