

<http://www.stwgc.com/index.htm>

## Rules Corner 11 - Do Handicaps Work?

A couple of years ago when I was Chair of the Partner Tournament I tried an experiment. I was interested to see if the 7 handicap limit between players was really necessary to keep the tournament fair for all.

After the first day cards were in I picked 6 cards – two mid handicappers (20 to 29), two high handicappers (30 and above), and two low handicappers (19 or less). In each case I picked cards with nets between 74 and 78, (trying to stay with 75 when possible), which meant the player was playing about average for her.

Then I paired the cards in different ways: a mid with a high handicapper; a mid with a low handicapper; two mids together; two highs together; and two lows together. Then I figured the results, and they were amazingly similar. When two players are playing an ‘average for them’ game, it doesn’t really matter what the handicaps are.

And when I compared the results of the real tournament I found that in each of the winning teams one player (and sometimes both) had played exceptionally well on at least one of the two days. So there is no combination that ensures a win. If you want to win, pick someone who will play exceptionally well on at least one of the days. Unfortunately, there is no real way to do that in advance!

However, I also found what one might expect: low handicappers tend to be more consistent, while high handicappers tend to have exceptional holes where their 2 or 3 ‘pops’ make a real difference. And, as expected, mid handicappers are somewhere in between – they provide a steadying influence when paired with a high handicapper, and can come up with some exceptional holes especially on holes where they get 2 ‘pops’. Also, some players do their best under pressure, and others (like me) tend to wilt under pressure and play best when nothing much is at stake.

The moral of this is if you want to win this kind of tournament, pick someone who tends to do well under pressure and whom you enjoy playing with, and then hope that one of you has a really good day.