

Handicaps

Levelling the field.

by BOB JEWETT



IMAGINE THE FIRST two pool players — let's call them Willie and Barney. On the first day...
Willie: "Let's play some."
Barney: "Sure! Love to."

On the second day...
Willie: "How about another match?"
Barney: "I need a spot."

These days, the second scenario seems much more common. Since that first match may have seemed too one-sided, many ingenious ways to slow down Willie or prop up Barney have been devised.

Games played to a number of points are particularly easy to handicap. Barney begins with a head start, or only has to reach part of Willie's goal. A common scheme a century ago was to count each of Barney's points double or triple, which makes it easy to see who is ahead with the spot included. The most extreme cases of point spot I've heard of were a 12-3 game of one pocket and a 100-1 spot at straight pool. The 99-ball sport was offered by Irving Crane to a beginner I knew, and illustrates the huge difference in abilities between pool players. Crane won most of the time.

Another general technique is to physically hinder Willie's play: Willie has to play one-handed or one-handed without resting the stick on the rail. Willie must shoot all shots behind his back. Willie must make all shots using the mechanical bridge. Willie must play left-handed (assuming Barney doesn't know Willie is left handed).

"No-count" can be used in point-based games like straight pool and caroms. If Willie is playing "20 no-count," he must run 20 or more for any of the points to credited toward his score. A similar, but seemingly opposite handicapping strategy is "and stop." At "three and stop," Willie has to leave the table after any run of three. Both of these handicaps can be used between equally-skilled players to empha-

size offense or defense respectively.

At 9-ball, there are more spots than you can shake a Balabushka at: The winning 8, where Barney wins at any time he sinks either the 8 or 9 ball; the called 8, where Barney wins only if the pocket is called first; safe 8, where if Barney makes the 8 and Willie the 9, the game is void; the winning 7, winning 6 etc., where Barney wins if he sinks the the winning ball or any higher-numbered ball; the break, where Barney always gets the break even if he loses a game. Among the more bizarre games: if Barney gets the 9 ball to hit the head rail, he wins; Barney gets to move the cue ball a hand span (about nine inches) before each shot. The "orange crush" is the winning five and the break. The "Rainbow" is the winning everything; all Barney has to do win is legally sink an object ball.

Some handicaps are sharks in sheep's clothing. Willie may say something like, "Let's play 8-ball. I'll take five of your balls off the table right at the start." Sounds good, but Barney will soon discover that he only gets to shoot at clusters or balls frozen on the rail, while Willie has clear sailing with all the obstacles removed. Barney should respond, "No, I'll take three of mine off whenever I want."

The most straightforward way to handicap either 8- or 9-ball is for Barney to start with some games to his credit, for example three games in a race to seven. Ball spots become more or less significant as the table is easier or harder.

A second field of handicapping is for league and tournament play. Many players will not enter a tournament or scratch league where they feel they have no chance to win, and many rating systems have been developed to allow roughly-even chances. Usually a player with a higher rating must score more points to win a game, or win more games to win a match.

The hardest problem in designing a system is adjustment of the ratings. A common method is to develop a per-inning score, for example noting how many balls are sunk per turn at the table and whether safeties are played. This has the advantage

of giving comparable ratings to players who have never met, so a national tournament is possible. There are two main disadvantages: score keeping can be difficult; tables and style of play can vary, producing imbalances in the ratings.

A third problem was evident in an inning-based system for a three-cushion match I played in. Each player was only expected to score his per-inning average, and some players had hit on the strategy of only playing safe and rarely trying to score, bringing their averages down. One player about my speed had manipulated his rating so we played with a 2:1 handicap. Tournament and league officials often face such situations, and the bylaws of the system should provide remedies.

Another common problem in handicapping systems is that the divisions are too coarse. If there are only A, B and C players, a low A and a high B player should really play even, while two B players at opposite ends of the range should play with a spot.

Jewett's Rating System

In 1980, I worked out a rating system for an in-house league. It has since been used in a regional league in the San Francisco area. Its advantages are simplicity and fairness, but it has no provision for inter-region leveling. Here is all you need to start your own local handicapped 8-ball or 9-ball tournaments:

Each player has a rating; better players have higher ratings. Beginners will have ratings around 20, while professional players will have ratings around 100 or higher.

Matches are handicapped by requiring the better player to win more games to win the match. The size of the handicap is determined by the difference between the ratings of the players according to the table below.

For example, if a player rated at 55 played someone rated at 25, the difference would be 30 rating points and the match length would be six games to three.

Use the "Quick Sets" table to reduce the delay from slow players if both players have ratings under 45 or if the whole tournament is waiting on one match that hasn't

NORMAL SETS	
Rating Difference	Match Games
0-5	5-5
6-14	5-4
15-21	6-4
22-28	5-3
29-36	6-3
37-46	7-3
47-56	6-2
57-Up	7-2
QUICK SETS	
Rating Difference	Match Games
0-6	4-4
7-18	4-3
19-29	5-3
30-39	4-2
40-48	5-2
49-UP	6-2

started yet. Use of the shorter matches is at the tournament director's discretion.

The ratings are adjusted after each tournament. For each match a player wins or loses, his rating goes up or down one point. New players are adjusted faster than that, moving three rating points for each of their first 10 matches and then two points for their next 20 matches.

If the better player is giving up half or more of the match, he has choice on the first break, otherwise lag for first break.

One good format is to play a 10-week season. Each week, three rounds of a round-robin are played by whomever shows up. At the end of the season, awards are made to those with the most wins. This rewards good attendance, as well as good pool playing, while anyone with a minimum number of matches can play in a single-elimination final tourney.

Have you run into — or been run over by — an interesting handicap? Send it in. If you are interested in more details of this system, contact me via Billiards Digest or e-mail me atjewett@netcom.com.