

Bob Jewett



# Handicapping 14.1

Start up an even-handed straight pool league.

**It seems** that the demise of **14.1**, AKA straight pool, may not happen for a while.

While there has been no major 14.1 tournament that I'm aware of since the 2000 edition of the U.S. Open in New York City, I've heard of several active leagues from NYC to Fargo, Minn., to Mountain View, Calif., where I play in one. More players show up each season, perhaps attracted by the lower luck factor — compared to those smash-and-pray games that are more common — or the fact that you can more easily keep track of your progress in learning the game as your run lengths increase.

The local league runs with "seasons" and a round-robin format, so every player gets to play every other player, just as the teams in most 8-ball leagues do. Since each "team" is just a single player, it's easy to schedule makeup matches. The turnout this season is so large that we've had to split into A and B divisions. At the end of regular play, we'll have a two-week playoff of the four players with the most wins in each division.

Handicapping is done by setting the number of points each player needs for a win, with the best players going to 140 and the novice players going to 50. This length was chosen to give roughly a two-hour match.

In the past, adjustment was done only at the end of the season. The handicaps of the top third of the field were raised and the bottom third lowered, typically by 10 points. This system is pretty simple and gives everyone a chance to win at least some games.

In the next season, we are going to adopt an automatic rating adjustment system to be applied after each week's play. This is based on the player rating ideas discussed by Mike Page in his analysis of the results of the 9-ball World Championships in *BD's* October 2002 issue, "Sizing Up with the Pros." The adjustments are also similar to a 9-ball system I discussed here in December 1996.

Each player is assigned a rating — the higher the better. Someone who sometimes runs 50 in the league might have

120-Point Chart	
Rating Diff.	Match
0-3	120-120
4-9	120-115
10-15	120-110
16-22	120-105
23-29	120-100
30-37	120-95
38-45	120-90
46-54	120-85
55-63	120-80
64-72	120-75
73-83	120-70
84-94	120-65
95-106	120-60
107-119	120-55
120-133	120-50
134-149	120-45
150-167	120-40
168-188	120-35
189-212	120-30
213-241	120-25
242-277	120-20
278-326	120-15
327-400	120-10

a rating of 700, while someone who has a season-best of 20 balls might be a 600. The actual number is unimportant, since the handicap is determined just by the difference between the ratings. The handicap tables are set up so that a difference of 100 rating points leads to a 50 percent handicap of the length of the game.

The first table, printed in the middle of this page, shows straight pool matches in which the better player goes to 120 points. For our two hypothetical players who are 100 rating points apart, the match would be 120-60. If the players are 300 points apart, they would play at 120-15, which is probably not such an interesting match, and means that the league needs to be split into divisions.

Other charts can be calculated for other game lengths so that the games come out about the right length of time. For example, if two weaker players are matched up, the 60-point table on page 26 might be used.

Other lengths of matches from 50 to 150 points are available online at the San Francisco Billiard Academy Web site, at [www.sfbilliards.com](http://www.sfbilliards.com), to allow tailoring to your time constraints. If one player is particularly slow, you could take his matches from a shorter chart.

Ratings are adjusted after each match. The winner goes up by three rating points, while the loser goes down by three points. This is easy to put into a spread sheet, but is also easy enough to do by hand. The next week, everyone finds the difference between their rating and their opponents', looks on the posted charts, and begins the matches. It's best to have a score sheet at each table with the handicap written down, since the matches will be changing every week.

In a player's second season, adjust his rating by only two points per match, since he has some track record. In the third and following seasons, adjust by just a single point for each match.

In some handicapping systems — 14.1, 9-ball and carom — it is necessary to keep track of per-inning averages. Often this leads to sandbagging, where a player will intentionally drag the

## Bob Jewett

game out to appear to be much weaker than he is so he will get an unfair start from the other players. This is not a pleasant situation. In the above system, there is no requirement to keep inning averages and much less chance to sand-bag.

One of the hardest parts of running a handicapped league is figuring out where to start new players. One good way is to have them play an established player to see how they match up. You could even look at one of the charts to figure out the rating. Suppose the new player won the test match, 60-45. Looking in the 60-point chart, on this page, that puts him roughly 40 rating points better than his opponent. Of course, either player could have been having an exceptional day, and a longer match would give a more accurate idea of their relative strengths, but it's a start.

Sometimes new players need to be adjusted significantly after the first few weeks of play. One way to handle this would be to look at the scores of each match as above, and figure out the inferred rating difference from the

60-Point Chart	
Rating Diff.	Match
0-6	60-60
7-19	60-55
20-33	60-50
34-49	60-45
50-67	60-40
68-88	60-35
89-112	60-30
113-141	60-25
142-177	60-20
178-226	60-15
227-300	60-10

scores, and then the inferred rating for each match from the ratings of the opponents. In the example above, if the opponent is a 630-rating, the new player is estimated — for that single game — to be a 670. The average of the estimates from several matches, or perhaps the middle one of an odd number, should be a good estimate of the new player's performance.

A good league operator is essential to the success of any league. Our league is a low-budget effort, with our volunteer league operator, Alex Balogi, doing all the work for zero pay. His frequent e-mails and posted schedules keep everyone up to date. The \$8 per week charge goes mostly for table time plus an occasional pizza night. This season the winners of the two division playoffs will each get a set of billiard balls in a hand-made presentation box.

If you do try a straight-pool league, don't be discouraged by a low turnout the first few sessions. As word gets around, and people see the game, the league will grow, and players will have fun and build skill at a game that deserves to be played more.