



Understanding handicap

Every fall, when my leagues meet to discuss the rules for the upcoming year and we get to the rule about handicapping, somebody always says, "Bowlers with 200 averages don't need any handicap!" I have to laugh because they are both loud and wrong.

Lumping together all bowlers with averages at or above 200 makes no sense. We don't say that a 150 average is equal to a 175 average, do we? Of course not.

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So why do we say that a 200-average bowler is equal to a 225-average bowler? They obviously do not have the same skill level.

Suppose big average Bob (225) is bowling against middle average Mike (200). If

the handicap base is 80 percent of 200, both Bob and Mike get zero handicap pins.

Now run the numbers: If Bob bowls his average, Mike must bowl at least 26 pins over his average to win. If Mike bowls his average, Bob can bowl 24 pins under his average and still win. I think I'll bet on Bob.

Handicap was introduced as a way to allow lesser-skilled bowlers to compete

with better-skilled, more experienced bowlers—to help even the playing field. In the early years, very few bowlers averaged above 190, so 200 was a reasonable number to use as a handicap base. However, over the years, bowlers' skills and

innovative technologies in bowling ball design and lane construction and maintenance have aided in the dramatic rise in bowler averages.

In many leagues, high averages now top 230 or even 240, but many of those same leagues have never adjusted their handicap base to keep their leagues competitive. Add to this the fact that many bowlers do not understand why the handicap base needs to be increased, and you will see that the same teams will win the same leagues year after year after year.

If you look at Table 1 below, you will recognize it as a recap sheet using a handicap base of 80 percent of 200. Note that even though the team on the left, the "Try Hards," bowled all of their highest games of the series in the first game, they still could not win, even though the team on the right, the "Strong Arms," only bowled average.

As a matter of fact, the only time the "Try Hards" could win is if they all have their highest games at the same time that the "Strong Arms" all have their lowest games. This is typically what happens in leagues that have a handicap base that is *too low*: The higher-average teams dominate while the lower-average teams do not have a chance, even when they bowl well. This is usually perfectly

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Table 1

Try Hards							Strong Arms						
AVG	HCP	NAME	GM1	GM2	GM3	SET	AVG	HCP	NAME	GM1	GM2	GM3	SET
160	32	Adam	170	150	160	480	190	8	Anne	190	200	180	570
170	24	Bill	180	160	170	510	200	0	Barb	200	210	190	600
180	16	Carl	190	170	180	540	210	0	Cate	210	220	200	630
190	8	Dave	200	180	190	570	220	0	Deby	220	230	210	660
200	0	Earl	210	190	200	600	230	0	Elly	230	240	220	690
Total	80		950	850	900	2700	Total	8		1050	1100	1000	3150
Hcp			80	80	80	240	Hcp			8	8	8	24
HCP TOTAL			1030	930	980	2940	HCP TOTAL			1058	1108	1008	3174
			Loss	Loss	Loss	Loss				Win	Win	Win	Win

Table 2

Try Hards							Strong Arms						
AVG	HCP	NAME	GM1	GM2	GM3	SET	AVG	HCP	NAME	GM1	GM2	GM3	SET
160	64	Adam	170	150	160	480	190	40	Anne	190	200	180	570
170	56	Bill	180	160	170	510	200	32	Barb	200	210	190	600
180	48	Carl	190	170	180	540	210	24	Cate	210	220	200	630
190	40	Dave	200	180	190	570	220	16	Deby	220	230	210	660
200	32	Earl	210	190	200	600	230	8	Elly	230	240	220	690
Total	240		950	850	900	2700	Total	120		1050	1100	1000	3150
Hcp			240	240	240	720	Hcp			120	120	120	360
HCP TOTAL			1190	1090	1140	3420	HCP TOTAL			1170	1220	1120	3510
			Win	Loss	Win	Loss				Loss	Win	Loss	Win

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okay with the higher-average teams, and the lower-average teams go along, thinking that the playing field is level, when it is *absolutely not*.

Now look at Table 2. These are the exact same game scores, but here the handicap base has been adjusted to allow for higher-average bowlers. It is now 80 percent of 240, instead of 200. So yes, the 200-average bowler now gets some handicap, but the lower-average bowlers get more, too. Now, the "Try Hards" win the game when they bowl well, and they also win when the "Strong Arms" bowl poorly, which is as it should be.

Of course, many of the higher-average bowlers are going to lobby for the lower handicap because it gives them an additional advantage. Some of the lower-average bowlers are going to side with them because they do not understand handicap and wrongly believe that a lower handicap base is better. They do not realize that they are handing the more-skilled bowlers a stick with which to beat them.

Bowling regulators have long recommended that the handicap base be high enough so that *everyone*, even the highest average bowler in the league, gets some handicap. Look at the handicap base in your league, and look at the highest averages. Does every team *really* have a chance to win?

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