

## **SWF Zoom meeting: Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2023 at 7.00pm**

### **Advantage GC: what does it mean for SWF League Play?**

Attendance: 22 clubs represented by 68 people including one in Yorkshire.

*This is a summary of the discussions – there are two appendices: Our original briefing paper and David Haddrell's letter to the Gazette.*

*There is much more correspondence but bringing it all together in an understandable way is a bit of an undertaking, so we'll keep an ear to the ground and will be coming back to this topic.*

*Don't forget to trial it at you club and let Stephen know how you get on – he's keen to know the handicaps, results and times of games and any feedback on what people think about it.*

We are very grateful to Roy Tillcock for attending and providing really useful input and to David Haddrell for seeking approval to share his forthcoming letter to the Croquet Gazette – see below.

Prior to the meeting a briefing paper had been sent to all clubs – see below – which was summarised by Stephen, confirming that this year's League handicap matches will all be played using the Extra Strokes format.

*The Chair stated that the meeting was not to debate the merits/demerits of both Advantage (AGC) and Extra Strokes (ESGC) handicap play but to consult clubs as to future arrangements for the SWF leagues. It was recognised that there were views for and against each system and that clubs were in differing starting points with several having adopted AGC and while others may not have used the system. However, as the meeting progressed, it became apparent that there were views on the respective merits of the two versions which needed to be expressed.*

Generally it was not possible to identify an overwhelming consensus on any of the issues discussed but this is what we considered:

- That change is always difficult to implement
- Why AGC?
  - Who introduced it?
    - The World Croquet Federation and taken up by the CA
  - Was there any consultation?
    - CA Tournament Committee did not consult further
  - Why is it still the first to 7 – why not one person needing to score more hoops from a 0:0 start thus avoiding negative hoops?
- The respective benefits of AGC and ESGC
  - ESGC makes it easier for new players to learn the game
  - ESGC hampers a player's development
  - ESGC requires a different set of tactical knowledge to AGC
  - Some prefer the tactics of ESGC but there is acknowledgement that these may not be widely taught
  - AGC may be off-putting and lead to fewer players – less likely to be adopted at some clubs where competitive play is less important than social play
- That the implications of AGC are greater when games are played between players with large differences between their handicaps
  - This is not so much of an issue in other regions where League play across this range is not permitted

- The system has not been tested where there is a wide discrepancy in handicaps
- They are inappropriate and shouldn't happen
- They happen quite frequently and should be recognised
- There are divergent views as to whether the high handicap or the low handicap player benefits from ESGC
- Whether or not timed games should be permitted
  - They are unfair and not included in the Rules
  - They are essential to allow 20 games in a day
  - There is some evidence that untimed games do not interfere with current formats but this is far from comprehensive
- Whether the number of games in a match should be reduced to allow untimed games
  - Several teams are comprised of people who do not want to play all day
  - Some people may not want to travel if they will be playing fewer games
- The implications of timed games in terms of scoring
  - Whether or not players are allowed to refer to a score chart such as Roy Tillcock has produced to establish what the score is as time draws near
  - Calculating the result – there is now a tool that can be used for this but this is not currently allowed and would need a change in the Rules
- Match format options
  - AGC only and somehow solve the timed games issue and implications of the starting table
  - ESGC only despite what's happening elsewhere – winning teams would have to play AGC in the Feds' Tournament
  - Leave it for the teams to decide – this would have to be done when the match is arranged at the beginning of the season
    - But what about the finals?
  - All matches as Level play but banded handicap ranges
    - But then we wouldn't have any winners for the Handicap Tournament
  - Have Leagues for each format
    - one might die a natural death over time
    - a real problem for smaller clubs
    - greater travel distances
  - AGC for lower handicap Leagues and ESGC for higher handicap Leagues
  - Change to Southern Fed's pattern for leagues with no high handicaps, teams of 4 and only singles
- If we retain ESGC efforts need to be made to improve the quality of coaching

A straw poll was taken at the end for several options but only a few votes (between 5 – 11) were cast for either side in any of the alternatives indicating that more thought needs to be given to this, or indeed that whatever happens, a lot of people will be unhappy!

The Committee will consider sending a Survey Monkey to members to gain a better perspective.

What also is not clear is how many people present had actually played AGC yet or trialled it in their clubs.

## **Briefing paper for SWF Zoom meeting 24.1.23**

### **Advantage GC: what does it mean for SWF League Play**

The aim of the meeting is to help inform us all about the issues that are likely to arise in replacing Extra Strokes GC with Advantage GC in SWF League play in 2024 when we vote on this at our AGM in November.

This is **not**

- A decision-making meeting as any changes to Leagues will take place at the SWF AGM.
- A meeting to discuss the basis or origins of Advantage GC, except as far as identifying the scope of the testing carried out so far and its application to handicap GC as it is played in the SWF.
  - Follow this link to an explanation of the rationale behind its introduction:  
<https://www.croquet.org.uk/?d=3340>

### **Points for discussion and resolution**

1. Is the replacement of Extra Strokes GC with Advantage GC now inevitable?
  - 1.1. If so, what are the implications on the organisation of our leagues.
2. In order to achieve this, do we have to conform to the league structure used in the Southern Federation or can we carry on with our current structure? Some alternatives are:
  - 2.1. Ignore Advantage and carry on with Extra Strokes until we are satisfied that Advantage has been modified to meet our requirements.
  - 2.2. Change our handicap leagues to the same pattern as theirs, allowing no players with handicaps above 12, teams of 4, 16 singles and no doubles per match.
  - 2.3. Keep our own leagues, accepting that the Advantage tables are not appropriate to them and that the status of timed games in Advantage is uncertain.
  - 2.4. Have a mix of the two systems, either allowing each match to be played as the captains decide or having separate leagues.
  - 2.5. Give up Handicap GC in our leagues and have all of our four GC leagues as Level Play with minimum handicaps, e.g. Open, 5, 8, 11.
3. If the SWF replaces Extra Strokes with Advantage, what happens to the GC players who don't want the change?
4. What is the experience in other Federations? Have they actually had Advantage leagues?
5. Our geographical spread (see figures below) is far greater than that of any other Federation. This means that the teams have to travel proportionately further, and we have a match of 20 games to justify travelling such distances.
  - 5.1. Does this mean that, if we keep our leagues as they are, we must continue to allow timed games? The implication of having timed games in Advantage GC is considerable and is not covered in the latest edition of the WCF Rules of GC. (See point 9 below.)
6. Our High Handicap league has players with handicaps 16 and 18 playing and there is no reason why a 20-handicapper shouldn't play, given a properly completed handicap card. The Advantage GC tables have not been tested for such high handicaps.
7. In the Handicap league and, even more, in club competitions, there are sometimes very wide differences in handicaps competing. Must we ban such games, or allow them, whilst accepting that the Advantage GC tables do not cater for them?
8. How are scores to be recorded on Handicap cards? If a player wins, having reached a score of 7, while their opponent has a score of 4, do we just write 7-4?

## 9. Timed Games

### 9.1. Are timed games allowed in Advantage GC?

9.1.1. The WCF Rules of Golf Croquet, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, March 2022, says in Rule 21 Advantage Play, that Rules 1 to 18 apply. However, as Time-Limited Games are covered in Rule 19, there is no provision for them in Advantage.

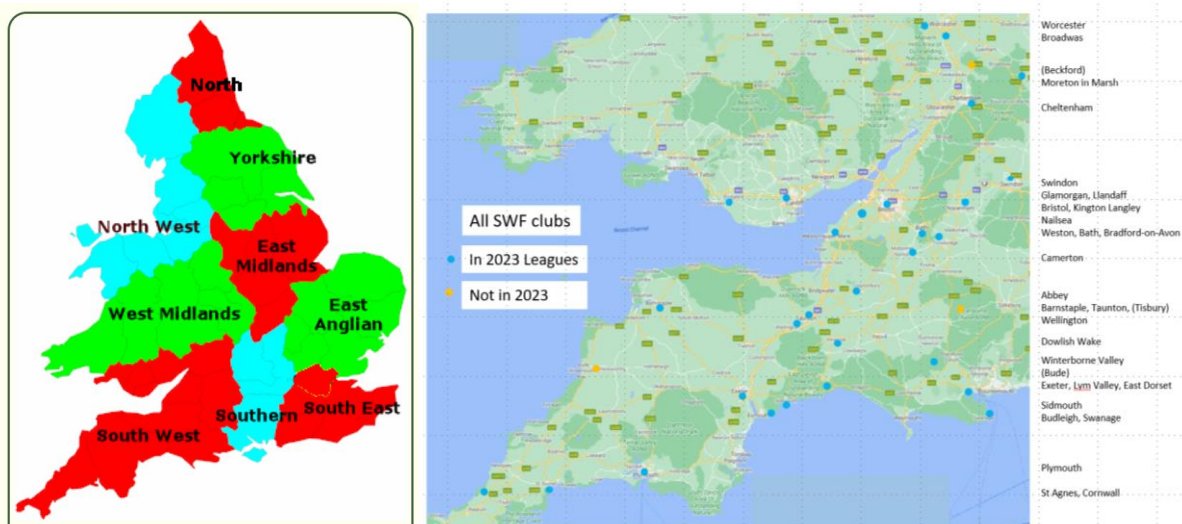
9.1.2. The advice on the CA website 'How to play Advantage GC' states that "Most forms of time-limited handicap games are intrinsically unfair and we strongly advise that time limits are NOT used in Advantage GC for that reason." This ignores the occasions when a time limit is required in order to finish a day's play within the available time.

9.1.3. As the actual hoop score cannot be used at the end of a time-limited game, the CA advice 'suggests' a fairer system, using ratios. Whilst this may be feasible after the game is finished, it is very unfair during the last few minutes of a game when one player's ability to do the necessary calculation may be far better than their opponent's.

### 9.2. How is the score recorded for a timed game?

### 9.3. How does a player work out the state of the game as time is running out?

It is generally held that the Level Play game is better than the Extra Strokes Handicap game, but this is by no means a universal opinion. There are players who enjoy the added complexity of extra strokes tactics and others who have tried Advantage but prefer Extra Strokes. Furthermore, there are players who prefer Advantage as the burden of the Extra Strokes tactics has been removed.



## What's happening in other Federations?

As reported to the Federations' Forum on 6 January 2023

### Croquet North

Key issues include ongoing disagreement amongst Clubs regarding GC Handicap vs Level Play vs Advantage.

### East Anglia

EACF Leagues are adopting Advantage as the default system, for all leagues and inter-club events (like champions' days and the Anderson Shield).

Only if both captains want and are happy to play using extra turns will matches use this system. This is, in effect, a reverse of last year's position where ET was the default, but people could play Advantage if both captains wanted to (and some did!).

### **East Midlands**

All clubs are being canvassed to determine whether or not Advantage GC will be viable as a trial league in 2023. I know Nottingham are interested and that Woodhall Spa are considering it. A decision will be made at the Federation's March meeting.

The EM Federation will trial advantage GC in addition to the level play GC leagues this year. Only a handful of clubs have expressed interest in this trial but I'm sure we have enough clubs to make it viable.

### **North West**

We did agree at our AGM to use Advantage scoring in our Handicap GC League. The discussion now seems to be whether the scoring system with clips placed on centre peg & advantage post is overkill, or necessary for our more forgetful members!

### **South East**

As far as leagues are concerned we are moving towards Advantage GC for the Handicap League and will need to do some training for clubs during the winter.

### **Southern**

Already using Advantage for past two seasons

One thing we are planning to introduce in the New Year is a GC level play competition for players with handicaps of 10+. Neil Stewart (Eynsham and Blewbury) has evidence of a demand for such a competition, and we hope that it will gently introduce players with higher handicaps to level play competitions.

### **West Midlands**

Zoom seminar planned for late Jan / early Feb focused on Advantage and handicapping

### **Yorkshire**

YCF has chosen to retain extra turns for its handicap leagues in 2023 whilst running some one-off Advantage events in the season.

### **CA**

The official position may be found here: <https://www.croquet.org.uk/?p=games/golf/advantage>

## David Haddrell's forthcoming letter to the Croquet Gazette

### No Advantage

In GC handicap play some players believe that the current system of extra shots in GC works against a lower-handicap player, especially when playing an experienced opponent. Actual match statistics show the opposite.

Either way, perhaps we could do better. Advantage croquet has been devised to even up the odds, so that the results of Advantage games are evenly balanced between the higher- and lower-handicap players. If they are, then the system is seen to be fair, and will be superior to the status quo.

Much brain power and heartache has gone into devising the system, and understandably there are high hopes that it will be widely accepted. But we mustn't brush aside the downsides, and the significant harms that will come to the game if Advantage is widely adopted.

The fundamental objection to Advantage is that it takes out a higher-level skill. Holding extra turns doesn't just give you a better chance of running the next hoop. Having a sense of when to use them, and when to hold on to them, is part of the psychological warfare that lies behind a good player's shot-to-shot tactics. And playing against them can require you to change your game as much as playing on a poorly maintained court. It would absolutely be a backward step to throw all this away. For that reason alone the Advantage system should be vociferously resisted.

Compare the development of AC, which has gone in the opposite direction. Over its long history the general standard of play has improved, and it became difficult to distinguish between players at higher levels. The answer has always been to add a layer of difficulty, which is how we have arrived at the super-skilled, highly tactical game that we have today. How can we then consider taking away tactical skills from GC?

For novices, using extra shots is difficult because there is just too much to think about. They will have been through an introduction where they learn the shots, the faults, and some simple tactics. Most are quickly able to join in roll-ups, novices' tournaments and perhaps inter-club high-handicap 'friendlies'. They know about extra shots, but more often than not they don't use them effectively, or forget them completely. Until eventually it 'clicks' - there is a tactical weapon available that they can get to grips with. Their game goes to a different level. In fact after a while they find themselves playing *against* extra shots. There is usually some dismay at this, until they accept that there are ways of countering, which opens yet another avenue for development. That is a brilliant position for the game to be in. Advantage replaces all this progression with a gift from on high of some free hoops - a gift which comes with major costs.

- Games in roll-ups and in club competitions are often timed. It's necessary. We have to fit in coffee and lunch breaks, and in competitions fit six or seven games into a day. In Advantage, the results of unfinished games are not immediately apparent, they must be calculated. For each team multiply the number of hoops they have scored by the number of hoops their opponent had to score at the start. The team with the biggest resulting number has won. (You may have to read that again.)
- Do you play differently depending on whether you are winning or losing? Want to know if you're winning? Same calculation as above. (Can you still remember why you put your ball just there? Oh, your opponent has run a hoop, perhaps you were distracted by the arithmetic.) This spectacularly fails the stated requirement of being transparent - during the course of play - to both players and to observers.

- Even just getting started involves taking the mean handicaps of the two teams, looking up the handicap table (of course you'll have it on your phone), and putting clips on the centre peg and on an Advantage post.

So yes, there's a problem to be fixed but the way we're going about it could be better. No doubt the powers-that-be have already considered other possibilities, but anyway here are some starters for 10. There are two approaches: reducing the number of extra shots, or reducing their effectiveness.

Reduce their number - by adopting some form of tapering to the numbers:

- If the difference is 1 or 2 then ignore it and play level, *and/or*
- start with the handicap difference, the first one (say) counts in full but above that they only count for a half – to be rounded up, *or*
- to weight the effect towards the lower handicap : 'A' level differences get 1 point, 'B' level 2 and 'C' level 3. Divide by three and round the result.

(Examples: 1 plays 5, at present giving away 4. Counting up, 2=1, 3,4,5 = 2 each. Total 7. Divide by 3, rounded = 2.

Or 4 plays 9, currently giving away 5. Counting up, 5,6=2 each, 7,8,9 = 3 each. Total 13. Divide by 3, rounded = 4.)

Reduce their effectiveness - this could add to the complexity of the decision, i.e. increase the tactical skill levels in the game:

- A ball put in the jaws with an extra shot can only 'go halfway' on scoring the hoop, so is prevented from being first at the next hoop, *and/or*
- A ball put in the jaws with an extra shot will not score if peeled by its partner ball (*or* by any ball), *or*
- Extra shots can only be used on hoops 1-6. *Or*, they lapse after the hoop corresponding to how many there are (that is, if there are four extra shots they have to be used by hoop 4), *or*
- A player cannot *win the game* in their next turn after an extra shot. If they run a hoop it does not score. So an extra turn cannot (directly) win a 13<sup>th</sup> or golden hoop. Extends the rule that extra shots may not be used in an 8-shot end game, *or*
- An extra shot must be announced before the first shot is taken and cannot be revoked.

## CONCLUSION

The chances of a win in a GC handicap game should be 50:50, so that, as we say, 'The handicap system in GC means that a weaker player can play a stronger one, and both will enjoy the game.' The current system of extra shots doesn't seem to be achieving that requirement.

The Advantage solution of adjusted starting positions may achieve statistically better outcomes but is short-sighted. Over the longer term it will prove positively harmful, because it discards a wide range of tactical skills which are currently acquired over years of playing. At grass-roots level it reduces enjoyment of the game by introducing complications that have nothing to do with actual play. In timed games it makes it impossible to judge the current state of play, or even the result, without resorting to some mental arithmetic.

A far more satisfactory solution could and should be found by making an easily understood adjustment to the current extra-shot rules. Some possible ideas are given above; of course there may well be better ones.

Team captains say 'You have extra shots – use them wisely'. We must not take that wisdom out of the game.





