Is your league's handicap system fair?

By Pie Snelson

A few years ago, I wrote about the inequities in many leagues' handicapping systems, and I took a lot of grief from people who did not agree with me. They were adamant that handicap should be capped at 200. Well, that's just not true. Maybe back in 1975, someone who had an average of 200 was king, but that era faded about 30 years ago. Now, with more consistent lane dressing, better bowling balls, and good coaching beginning in the youth leagues, 200 is still a fine average to have, but it is no longer the benchmark it used to be.

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Previously, I showed a handicap that is limited to a 200 base unfairly punishes a lower-average team. They can almost never win against a higher-average team, even when they bowl well and the higher-average team bowls poorly. The good news is I have found more tournaments now get it, and almost all have raised their handicap base.

Unfortunately, many leagues, though, still do not understand that by limiting handicap to 200, they hurt the lower-average bowlers and condemn them to perpetually losing to the higher-average teams. What's worse is some small-average bowlers themselves vote to limit handicap because someone convinced them bowlers with 200 averages "don't need any handicap." They have chosen to wrestle the gun away from the good guy and use it to shoot themselves in the foot.

This example contains actual averages from a real 2014-2015 league that has limited its handicap to 80 percent of 200:

TEAM A			TEAM B			TEAM C		
Name	Avg	Hcp	Name	Avg	Hcp	Name	Avg	Hcp
Al	211	0	Ben	186	11	Cab	209	0
Ann	131	55	Babs	153	37	Casi	182	14
Amy	165	28	Barb	169	24	Cal	154	36
Abe	243	0	Bob	189	8	Clem	213	0
Axe	225	0	Bill	215	0	Cez	219	0
Total	**975**	**83**	**Total**	**912**	**80**	**Total**	**977**	**50**

Notice that even though the total team average of Team A (975) is higher than Team B (912), Team A gets way more handicap. How can that be?

Actually, there are several problems with the system used by the league. First, its handicap is based on an individual average of 200. Just looking at just these three teams, we see seven bowlers with averages that are above the base of 200. If 200 is the average limit for handicap, then all bowlers whose averages match or exceed 200 get zero handicap. At zero handicap each, they are deemed equal to each other. We know that a person who averages 131 is not as good as a person who averages 165, so why do we say that a person who averages 209 is equal to a person who averages 243? Yes, they both average 200 or better, but they are not equal. By

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limiting the handicap to 200, we pretend that they are equal … but they are *not* equal!

A second injustice here is in assuming the bowler who averages 153 plus her 37 handicap pins—a 190 total—stands a chance against the 243-average bowler. Is that really fair?

But the real inequity here is in allowing the teams with the really big-average bowlers to benefit from all the handicap that the small-average bowlers bring to the team without having those pins offset by the higher averages also on their team. Look at the total averages of Team A versus Team C. The team averages are only two pins different, but in each game, Team A gets 33 pins more handicap than Team C! This is because Team A gets to keep all of the handicap pins that their lower-average bowlers get.

There are multiple ways to right this wrong. One way is to make the highest average in the league the handicap base. Doing that here would change the handicap to one that is based on the 243 average. The handicap would be 80 percent of the difference between the bowler's average and 243. Here's how it would look:

TEAM A				TEAM B				TEAM C		
Name	Avg	Hcp		Name	Avg	Hcp		Name	Avg	Hcp
Al	211	25		Ben	186	45		Cab	209	27
Ann	131	89		Babs	153	72		Casi	182	48
Amy	165	62		Barb	169	59		Cal	154	71
Abe	243	0		Bob	189	43		Clem	213	24
Axe	225	14		Bill	215	22		Cez	219	19
Total	975	190		Total	912	241		Total	977	189

Although these handicaps would be fairer and more reflective of the averages, some bowlers have it hard-wired in their heads that 200 is the magic number that should not have any handicap. So for those who cannot come to grips with the idea that a 203-average bowler is *not* equal to a 230-average bowler, another way to approach the issue is to use team handicapping instead of individual handicapping. This neutralizes the advantage that big-average bowlers get when they are allowed to keep all of the handicap from the small-average bowlers on their team. Here is an example of how it would look using a team handicap based on 80 percent of 1,000:

TEAM A				TEAM B				TEAM C		
Name	Avg	Hcp		Name	Avg	Hcp		Name	Avg	Hcp
Al	211			Ben	186			Cab	209	
Ann	131			Babs	153			Casi	182	
Amy	165			Barb	169			Cal	154	
Abe	243			Bob	189			Clem	213	
Axe	225			Bill	215			Cez	219	
Total	975	20		Total	912	70		Total	977	18

Now that is much better and far fairer.

Please take the time to review your own league and see if the handicap system being used is working for your team. If you see a problem, share this article with your teammates, and be sure you all attend your league's organizational meeting and vote to make things better and fairer.

Until then, practice hard and bowl well.