

A Guide to Croquet Handicapping

This guide is aimed at players who are early in the croquet learning process, by that I mean players who

- know how to play and the basic rules
- have been given a handicap but whose handicap is above 12 for Association Croquet (AC) players or above 6 for Golf Croquet (GC) players, and
- are starting to play in club competitions.

It is designed to supplement the guidance in the rules (AC rules are [here](#) & GC rules are [here](#)) and on Croquet England's website ([here](#)) as some beginners find these hard to understand. Note throughout this guide where the word 'here' is underlined, there is a link to a webpage/site. Clicking on the 'here' will take you to that website). If you do understand what is said in the rules/website, use those resources as they are definitively correct! Similarly, club handicappers should be taken as the authority for all handicapping information/guidance. If in doubt, ask your club handicapper.

For AC handicapping the Oxford Croquet website also has a guide that is midway between the official guidance and this guide. That can be found [here](#).

A player can have 2 or possible 3 handicaps. One for AC, one for GC and possibly one for short croquet (SC). This guide is split into an AC section (with a short section on SC), and a GC section. Each section covers:

- If a game is being played with handicaps how does that change the game
- How a person's handicap changes
- How to fill out a handicap card

The information in this guide is valid when your handicap is above 12 (for AC) or 6 (for GC) but changes slightly when your handicap is below those levels. By the time you've reached that level you're likely to have found out about the difference already (or be playing people who can explain them to you).

1 Association Croquet

AC handicaps range from 24 to -3 (i.e. they can be negative!), and better players (below 5) can have a handicap that includes a ½. At the time of writing, the reigning world champion Robert Fulford has a handicap of -2½. Most starting players have an initial handicap set between 18 and 24.

This guide doesn't cover level play, and doesn't cover tactics for using bisques.

1.1 How do handicaps change the game

In a full game (26 points) on a full-size lawn, then the normal approach is that the difference in handicaps is taken and the weaker player (i.e. with the higher handicap) gets a number of bisques equal to that difference. For example, if a player with an 18 handicap plays someone

with a 14 handicap, they get 4 bisques ($4=18-14$). The stronger player (i.e. with the lower handicap) gets no bisques.

Each bisque is worth a free turn. At any point in the game, at the end of their turn, a player with bisques can 'take a bisque' and immediately have another turn. The only restriction is that they must carry on playing with the same ball. So, if they are playing the red ball and they take a bisque at the end of their turn, then they must play the free turn with the red ball. Other than that, **it is a completely new turn** so they can, for instance, roquet all the other balls again.

Put simply that's the basics of handicap play; it's designed so that if two players at any level are playing a handicapped game they each have a 50% chance of winning. In general, this seems to work, and high handicap players can play low handicap players in a handicap game and either player can win.

Although that's the basics there are some additional conventions, rules and adjustments.

- **Mechanics of taking a bisque** – the number of bisques is generally indicated by the appropriate number of sticks put into the ground at the side of the court (although there are other methods, e.g. some clubs use count down blocks). By convention the stronger player 'owns the bisques' and the weaker player shouldn't need to touch the bisques. Taking a bisque is indicated by raising a finger above your head. The stronger player should then indicate that they've seen that signal by raising their finger above their head and taking one of the sticks out of the ground.
- **'Base' games** – if a handicap 20 player plays a handicap 18 player, then in the 'normal' approach the handicap 20 player would receive 2 bisques and the handicap 18 player would receive none. This can lead to a very long game, so sometimes games (and/or competitions) are played with a 'base'. If both players are above the base number, then they both received bisques equal to their handicap minus the base. So, if the above game was played base 10, then the handicap 20 player would receive 10 bisques and the handicap 18 player would receive 8 bisques. If a game is played with a base, but either players handicap is below the base then the base is ignored, i.e. if the handicap 20 player plays a handicap 8 player in a base 10 game, the handicap 20 player receives their full allocation of 12 bisques and the handicap 8 player receives none.
- **'Full Bisque' games** – some games/competitions are played 'full bisque' in this case both players receive all their bisques. This is most commonly used in Short Croquet (see below).
- **Half Bisques** – if a handicap 14 player plays a handicap $4\frac{1}{2}$ player, then the handicap 14 player received $9\frac{1}{2}$ bisques. What's that $\frac{1}{2}$ bisque and how is it used? A half bisque allows a free turn in the same way that 'full' bisque does, the only difference is that if a half bisque is used, the player cannot score any points on that turn i.e. they cannot run a hoop or peg a ball out. They are useful for setting up a good position or hampering your opponent's position (by splitting their balls up for instance). If you take a half bisque (for instance to set-up a good position), then you can take a full bisque after it (to run some hoops). Note a 'full' bisque cannot be split into two half bisques. Hence you can only ever get one half bisque in a game.
- **Shorter games/smaller lawns** – if the game being played is shorter than a 26-point game (e.g. an 18 point or 14 point game) then the number of bisques is reduced. There is a table showing these reductions [here](#). Similarly, if a smaller lawn is used (e.g. a half-lawn) then the number of bisques is reduced. There is a website based calculator

available [here](#), which can be used to determine the number of bisques received with a variety of game lengths and lawn sizes. Note, both reasons can result in the weaker player receiving a half bisque which is used as described above.

1.2 Handicap Changes

A person's initial handicap is generally set by a club handicapper, and at the handicap levels we are talking about in this guide your club handicapper can change your handicap if they feel this is appropriate (subject to a number of regulations which you needn't worry about!). There are also Croquet England handicappers at various levels who can also adjust your handicap (generally cutting your handicap if they see you playing a lot better than your handicap).

However, most handicap changes are handled using the AHS (Automatic Handicapping System). If you're a beginner who's improving, then this is a mechanism (using a handicap card) which changes your handicap every time you win a net 5 games. E.g. if you are a new player with your handicap set to 18, if you play a number of games which go in a sequence of win, win, lose, win, win, lose, win, win, win, then you have won 7 games and lost 2 games so have a net 5 wins, then your handicap will go down. At the range we're talking about handicaps change by 2, so your handicap would change to 16.

The details of the AHS are [here](#). Your handicap is determined by an index that changes as it goes through trigger points. However, at the level we're talking about each game you play changes your index by 10 points, and the trigger points are every 50 points, hence the effect of changing your handicap every net 5 wins (or losses). See the section on 'recrossing trigger points' below for a bit more detail. As players improve, they may play 'level' games (i.e. without bisques) and in this case the index change isn't 10.

All club members should also be registered with Croquet England (by the club). If your handicap changes you should update it yourself in the members section of the Croquet England website.

1.3 Filling in your handicap card

All singles games that are played on a full lawn in a competition should be entered onto your AC handicap card. This includes shorter games played on a full lawn (e.g. 14-point, 18-point etc.). This generally means games played in the club competitions or played for your club in one of the regional or national competitions/leagues should be put onto your handicap card. One-ball, doubles games, and friendlies (e.g. in a club roll-up) **should not** be put onto your AC handicap card.

Games on lawns that are smaller than full-size (E.g. on a half lawn) don't go on your AC handicap card but can be put on your separate SC card (if appropriate – see below).

The image below shows two typical entries on a handicap card. In this case you played Fred Bloggs who is an 8 handicap (Hc column), the game was a handicap game (so H in the H/L column, L indicates level games), you lost by 8 (i.e. 26-18 so -8 in the score column), because you lost you lose 10 index points (-10 in the +/- column) changing your index from 1000 to 990. In your second game you played John Smith who's a 22 handicap (22 in Hc), in a handicap game (H in H/L), and won by 5 (i.e. 26-21, +5 in score) so gain 10 points (+10 in +/-) and your index returns to 1000.

Date	Opponent		Game		Index	
	Name	Hc	H/L	Score	+/-	New
	Index brought forward from previous card:					1000
7/5/18	Fred Bloggs	8	H	-8	-10	990
2/6/18	John Smith	22	H	+5	+10	1000

1.4 Short Croquet

In most cases a Short Croquet game is a 14 point game played on a half lawn. There is a table for mapping AC handicaps to SC handicaps [here](#). If you play a lot of short croquet (or very little full lawn croquet), then your club handicapper may suggest you have a separate SC handicap card and maintain your SC handicap that way.

SC games are generally played full bisque (i.e. as described above, there is no base deduction of bisques).

If you have a SC handicap card, your club handicapper may suggest that you record **all** singles games (including friendly games) on your handicap card.

The SC handicap card is similar to AC handicap card and is completed in a similar way. The only difference is that your index only changes by 1 with each win/loss (but the trigger points are still set so that you still need 5 net wins/losses for your handicap to change).

2 Golf Croquet

GC handicaps range from 20 to -6 (i.e. they can be negative!). At the time of writing, Robert Fulford who played in the last GC world championship final has a handicap of -5. Most starting players have an initial handicap set around 10-14. For AC players with a handicap of less than 10 there is a mapping from AC to GC handicap which can be used to set an initial handicap. However, once an initial handicap has been set, AC and GC handicaps are maintained separately using a handicap card for each.

2.1 How do handicaps change the game

There are two ways that GC handicaps can be applied to a game, either the 'extra stroke' or the 'advantage' method. The advantage method of applying handicapping started in the early 2020s, and is becoming the predominant method used, and hence is the one described here.

Most GC games are played as the first to 7 points. The ‘advantage’ method adjusts the number of points needed by the stronger and/or weaker player with the aim of giving each player a 50% chance of winning. The method is described in the document [here](#), but the most used part is a table used to determine the advantage which is [here](#), and is reproduced below.

ADVANTAGE Golf Croquet

Table of Starting Scores for first-to-7-points

Stronger : Weaker

2022 Revision Roy Tillcock

*2023 Revised DGRADE scale

Weaker player	HCP	Stronger player																	
		-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
2800-	-6	0:0																	
2650-2799	-5	0:1 0:0																	
2500-2649	-4	-2:1 0:1 0:0																	
2350-2499	-3	-2:2 -2:1 0:1 0:0																	
2200-2349	-2	-3:2 -2:2 -2:1 0:1 0:0																	
2100-2199	-1	-3:2 -1:2 -1:1 -1:0 0:0																	
2000-2099	0	-2:2 -1:2 -2:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1900-1999	1	-3:2 -2:2 -2:1 -2:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1800-1899	2	-3:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1700-1799	3	-2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1600-1699	4	-3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1500-1599	5	-3:2 -3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1400-1499	6	-3:2 -3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1350-1399	7	-3:2 -3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -1:1 0:1 -1:0 0:0																	
1300-1349	8	-3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 -1:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1250-1299	9	-4:2 -3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 0:1 -1:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1200-1249	10	-3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -2:0 0:1 -1:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1150-1199	11	-3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -1:1 -2:0 0:1 -1:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1100-1149	12	-3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -1:1 -2:0 0:1 -1:0 -1:0 0:0																	
1050-1099	14	-3:2 -2:2 -1:2 -2:1 -1:1 -2:0 0:1 -1:0 -1:0 0:0																	

The weaker player’s handicap is found on the vertical axis and the stronger player’s handicap is found on the horizontal axis (ignore the numbers on the green background, use the numbers which range from -6 to 14). The corresponding entry in the table is found and used. For example, if the weaker player has a handicap of 10 and the stronger player a handicap of 4, then the entry is -1:2.

The first number is the adjustment to the stronger players starting score, and the second number is the adjustment to the weaker players starting score. In the above example the stronger player’s adjustment is -1, so they start with a score of -1 and so have to run 8 hoops to reach 7 points. The weaker player’s starting score is 2 so they only have to run 5 hoops to reach 7 points.

There are many methods for recording the score as you go around the lawn (e.g. using clips, an advantage peg etc.), however, the simplest is to just verbally agree what the score is after each hoop.

2.2 Handicap Changes

GC handicaps change in a very similar way to AC handicaps. At the levels we are talking about, winning net 5 games will cause a change in handicap. Your handicap changes by 1 unless your GC handicap is above 12 (when it changes by 2).

Note there are no ½ handicap points in GC.

In GC it is more likely that games will be played level (i.e. the handicapping method above is not used and players just play a first to 7 hoops game). In level games the index change (see below) may not be 10 and hence it may take more or fewer than 5 net wins to change your handicap. However, the overall approach remains the same, i.e. fill in your handicap and maintain your index, and when your index goes through a trigger point your handicap changes. There is one exception to that rule which is explained in ‘recrossing trigger points’ below.

All club members should also be registered with Croquet England (by the club). If your handicap changes you should update it yourself in the members section of the Croquet England website.

2.3 Filling in your handicap card

All singles games that are played in a competition should be entered onto your GC handicap card.

The image below shows two typical entries on a handicap card. In this case you played Fred Bloggs who is an 8 handicap (Hc column), the game was a handicap game (so H in the H/L column, L indicates level games), you lost by 2 (i.e. the scores after advantage was 7-5 so -2 in the score column), because you lost you lose 10 index points (-10 in the +/- column) changing your index from 1000, to 990. In your second game you played John Smith who’s a 6 handicap (6 in Hc), in a handicap game (H in H/L), and won by 5 (i.e. 7-2, +5 in score) so gain 10 points (+10 in +/-) and your index returns to 1000.

	Opponent		Game		Index	
Date	Name	Hc	H/L	Score	+/-	New
	Index brought forward from previous card:					1000
7/5/18	Fred Bloggs	8	H	-2	-10	990
2/6/18	John Smith	6	H	+5	+10	1000

If you play a level game, then the index can change by a number which is different to 10. There is a table on the handicap card which shows the ‘Points Exchange in Level play’, the winner’s and loser’s handicap are used to find the number of points exchanged (i.e. gained by the winner and lost by the loser). If the winner is the weaker player, then more than 10 index points will be exchanged, if the winner is the stronger player, then less than 10 index points will be exchanged.

3 Recrossing Trigger Points

All the handicap cards (AC, GC, & SC) use trigger points. A very common discussion is what happens if you recross a trigger point. Continuing the examples shown in the 'filling in the handicap card' sections above, if you won 5 games from the point showed in the handicap card your index would change to 1050 and your handicap would change, as your index has hit trigger point. If you lost your next game, your index would be 1040 and below the trigger point, so does your handicap go back down again? The answer is 'no', once you've gone through the trigger point at 1050, your handicap only changes again when you hit the trigger point at 1100 (when your handicap goes down) or you hit the trigger point at 1000 (when your handicap goes up again).

You can look at it as hitting a trigger point sets your handicap to the corresponding handicap in the trigger point table, so hitting it again just sets it to the same handicap again.