

Equitable Stroke Control and your handicap

Equitable Stroke Control (ESC) is the system put in place by the USGA to eliminate the effect of "distaster holes." You know, that one hole per round where you put three balls in the water and then 5-putt. It's also a way to combat those pernicious sandbaggers who intentionally blow up on a hole in order to raise their handicaps.

Equitable Stroke Control puts a limit on the number of strokes you can write down on the scorecard for any one hole, based on your course handicap. For example, on that one disaster hole you might have taken 14 strokes (get to the practice range, buddy!) to get the ball in the cup. But based on your course handicap, ESC might require you to post only a "7" on the scorecard you turn in.

Taking the "14" might throw your handicap index out of whack. And remember, the handicap index is not meant to reflect your average score, it's meant to reflect your best potential.

To determine the Equitable Stroke Control limits for your round, you must first know your course handicap. Once you've determined your course handicap, you can check the chart down below (which should also be available at golf courses) to determine the ESC limits.

Of course, if you have not yet established a handicap index, then you can't determine a course handicap. And without a course handicap, you can't determine ESC. But in order to establish a handicap index, you must turn in adjusted gross scores, which requires knowing a course handicap. What gives?

Don't worry, the USGA knows what to do. If you do not yet have a handicap index, then use the maximum allowable handicaps to determine course handicap and ESC. For men, that means using 36.4 as a handicap index, and for women, 40.4.