

Report of the Tournament Regulations review group

Introduction

1. The review group presents the following recommendations, with the rationale beneath them, and seeks approval, and one decision, from the Executive. Once approved, the detail can be reflected in the Tournament Regulations, along with further suggested drafting changes. The Regulations will then come back to the Executive for final approval in the usual way. It is also proposed to email clubs as soon as possible after approval of the recommendations, to outline the changes and give guidance on a number of other issues that have been highlighted during the course of our work.
2. The group would like to record its thanks to all those who contributed to their work, in particular over 400 players who completed our survey and the many committee members who shared more detailed feedback.

Overview of Recommendations

Recommended changes

3. The group unanimously recommended the following changes:
 - a. Where allocation is by highest Dynamic Grade, players without a grade should be given a proxy grade based on their handicap.
 - b. Open events (i.e. level play events with no handicap or other similar restrictions) should allocate places by highest Dynamic Grade (i.e. highest current Dynamic Grade) unless otherwise stated.
 - c. Open events should be permitted to allow restrictions on entry by gender.
 - d. The term 'first-class' should be abolished, and events previously defined as first-class events which are not open events should allocate places by lot unless otherwise stated.
 - e. 'Series' should be added as a reserved word.
 - f. Doubles events should have two places (one pair) reserved to be allocated at the discretion of the relevant Selection Committee for a Croquet England event, or of the Tournament Secretary for a club event.
 - g. Although single entrants to doubles events should still only be paired at the Closing Date unless the special conditions say otherwise, the Tournament Regulations should give the option of pairing by the Manager at the Allocation Date, and set defaults on how that should be done unless stated otherwise. In addition, if one player in a pair withdraws, the other player should be treated as a single entrant, not as having also withdrawn.
 - h. Only one player in a doubles pairing need be Under 25 to benefit from the Under 25 priority allocation. This should continue to be for two Under 25 players, whether in one pair or two.

- i. Recommended Allocation Dates should be changed to 8-12 weeks before the event for all events, but no earlier than 15 February.
- j. A new concept of Allocation Deadline, the day before the Allocation Date, should be introduced, and displayed in the fixtures list instead of the Allocation Date.
- k. The planned format for Grade 1 Championships should not allow elimination on a single game loss in either a qualifying or the knockout stage.
- l. If a player is wrongly allocated a place in an event through failure to update their handicap, or plays off the wrong handicap in the event, but the Tournament Manager exercises the discretion to allow the player to continue playing, the player may not progress in the main event or win any Series points in addition to not being permitted to win any prize.
- m. For GC, players who are half an hour late after the appointed start time should expect to be deemed to have lost the game (as opposed to the current hour).
- n. The Tournament Conditions should state that acceptance of the entry fee, including cashing of a cheque, does not imply acceptance of the entry, to avoid this being stated in multiple special conditions.

Issues where the group was not unanimous

4. Three members of the group considered that adjustments should cease to be made to the Dynamic Grades of players who had played few or no games in the last year, at least until more complete data about the impact of their play was available. One member did not positively support abandoning adjustments but was not inclined to argue strenuously against it. The fifth opposed abandoning them. **The Executive will need to make a decision as to whether grade adjustments for allocation purposes should be retained in the Tournament Regulations. [Post-meeting note: the Executive resolved the provision should be deleted.]**
5. A suggestion was made that a new requirement be introduced that the draw be no earlier than 3 days before the event. The group did not reach any agreement on various options. **The Executive will need to make a decision between the various options set out in paragraph 20 below. [Post-meeting note: the Executive decided to adopt a hybrid of options c, e and f by including a recommendation that the draw for seeded events be no earlier than 3 days before the event, and a requirement to have a Draw Date no earlier than 3 days before the event for Series events.]**

Issues discussed where no substantive changes are recommended

6. While no changes are recommended, drafting revisions on these and other matters to improve clarity or precision have been proposed to ACTC.
 - a. Default start times should remain 9.30am.
 - b. Clubs may not reserve places for club members in Series events.
 - c. Places should continue to be reserved for the Manager and the last winner of the main event in addition to two U25 players, but not for any other categories.
 - d. Grade 2 and Grade 3 Championships and GC Series events should be required to allocate places by highest Dynamic Grade.
 - e. Other than Championship, open and Series events, places should be allocated by lot unless otherwise stated.

- f. There should be no requirement to have an Allocation Date, except for Series events.
- g. Where allocation is by highest Dynamic Grade, the grades on the allocation date should be used.
- h. Grade 3 Championship status should be retained.

Issues discussed which will need consideration by others

- 7. The following issues are commended for attention by others.
 - a. Can the detailed fixtures calendar entries include a field for allocation method, to encourage all clubs to make clear what method will be used? It may be too late to do this for this year.
 - b. Should the AC Eastern and Western Championships be regraded to Grade 2 or should their format be changed? Should the Charity One-Ball remain a Championship, albeit Grade 3?
 - c. Are the approvals for all recurring Championships (and their grades), events using the word England or English, and Charity events documented, and if they cannot be found, can they be re-approved now by ACTC, GCTC or the Executive as appropriate?
 - d. Can team championships, e.g. the Inter-Counties be ungraded in the Fixtures Calendar? If not, an amendment to the Regulations which says that team championships are not graded will be needed.
 - e. Should overseas Championships be given a grade? (The Irish AC Championship has one, but not the Scottish GC Championship. It is suggested that as non-Croquet England fixtures, neither should.)
 - f. Can WCF and ERC events being held in England give the WCF/ERC as the Organising Body rather than Croquet England?

Issues not discussed

- 8. The group has not yet discussed allocation for Grade 1 Championships, but did not want to hold up this report. An addendum will follow in November.
- 9. Nor has the group discussed whether grade adjustments should be made for the purposes of seeding when players have not played recently. This too will be addressed in the addendum.
- 10. The group did not have time to consider the inter-relationship between handicaps and DG for allocation purposes and whether any revisions to either allocation practice or handicap adjustments would be beneficial, and suggests that the Handicap Committee and/or the WCF Rankings Operation Committee should consider this.

For decision by the Executive

Grade reductions for allocation purposes

11. The Tournament Regulations currently provide, for GC only, that for the purpose of allocating places by highest Dynamic Grade, *“the Dynamic grade of a player who is not in their first or second calendar year of ranking games, and who has played fewer than 15 ranking games in the previous 12 months, and has also played fewer than 15 ranking games in the previous calendar year, shall be reduced by 30 points. A further reduction of 30 points shall be applied for each prior consecutive calendar year in which the player has not played 15 ranking games, up to a maximum of seven further consecutive calendar years or until the calendar year of the player’s first ranking game, whichever is more recent. The maximum reduction under this regulation is 240 points”*.
12. Until recently, a similar provision applied to both GC and AC, with a reduction of 50 points a year. The reasons for its original introduction are not known, nor whether there was any analysis behind it, so it is likely to have been simply to be to favour regular players. ACTC recently abandoned it for AC and GCTC altered the reduction to 30 points a year. This was based on data produced by the WCF for the purpose of assessing how the rankings should deal with the grades of players who had played no games for 5 or more years.
13. The argument in favour of having grade reductions in threefold:
 - a. Players who have not played for an extended period are likely to suffer from at least a temporary decline in playing strength and therefore won’t immediately play at their historic grade level when they first return.
 - b. The grades of players who have not played for an extended period have not suffered from grade deflation (the existence of which is questioned by some, with no concluded decision from the WCF Rankings Operation Committee as yet), during the period they have not been playing, whereas players who continued to play will have done (which may be to varying degrees depending on the quantity of play).
 - c. It is unfair for active players on the GC tournament circuit to lose places in oversubscribed events to occasional players with historically higher grades who, for whatever reason, enter GC events infrequently.
14. Three members of the group (KA, BH and GH) favoured abandoning the provision for GC as well. The arguments considered in favour of this were:
 - a. It does not seem to be a popular provision.
 - i. The results from the survey were that there is more support generally for abandoning grade reductions than there is for retaining them (157 to 102).
 - ii. This was particularly marked at handicap 3 to 9 level (80 to 32).
 - iii. Unsurprisingly there is most support for abandoning them among players who play fewer than 10 games a year (50 to 18) and least among those who play more than 50 (14 to 39), but even among those who play 15 to 50 games a year, there is a strong steer towards abandoning them (55 to 26).
 - iv. The support for retention among those who play more than 50 games a year could be characterised as players who engage with the sport more regularly having a better understanding of their value – or could be

- explained by self-interest, like the results among those who play fewer than 10 a year.
- b. It is an unnecessarily complex provision. Views varied about whether it was properly understood by those who needed to apply it, but even one person who considered that it was well-understood reported that a handful of errors had been found last year.
 - c. Data is available for Series events, which comprise well over half the GC calendar fixtures, which indicates that:
 - i. Nearly 10% of entries are from players who could potentially be affected by the adjustment (138 entries from 79 different players across 59 of the 88 Series events, out of 1506 entries for 1436 places). Three-quarters of these were at B- or C-level (104 of the 138), meaning that the bulk of the potential impact was on the group of players who most supported abandoning it (although they might be less likely to have an understanding of the pros and cons).
 - ii. In only 14 cases (less than 1% of places) did the adjustment actually affect who was allocated a place (and in 6 of those, the player subsequently got in from the reserve list), with a further 14 instances of the order of the reserve list being affected.
 - iii. Those 14 cases affected 11 individuals, with one individual being affected 3 times and another twice. The individual affected three times gained a place in two of the events from the reserve list and earned a place in the national final.
 - iv. The 14 cases were in 11 different events, with 2 cases in 3 events and 1 case in 8 events. 1 event was in the Championship Series, 2 in the Open, 6 in the B-level and 2 in the C-level.
 - v. The grades of the 11 players actually affected ranged from 1165 to 2014. The grades of all 79 players potentially affected ranged from 956 to 2475. 4 players had grades above 2200, all of whom were still allocated a place even after the deduction had been applied.
 - vi. The data does not indicate in how many of the 110 cases in which there was no impact the calculation was required and in how many it was unnecessary because the particular event was undersubscribed. However, the majority of Series events were oversubscribed, and the calculation was potentially required in 48 of the 77 events where there was no actual impact.
 - vii. Those in favour of abolition did not consider that these numbers justified the additional complexity.
 - d. The figure of 30 points a year, which was derived from the data for players who had played no games for 5 or more years, was reached by taking the average reduction in standard of the 80% players who performed worse after their return (which was 147 points) and dividing by 5 to get an average of 30 points a year. It compared the Performance Grade indicated by the first 20 games after the return in isolation with the unadjusted Dynamic Grade at the end of those 20 games, which is the appropriate comparison when considering whether a change should be made to the rankings after 20 games. Once the data from the 20% of players who performed better after their return is included, the actual length of the break for each player is taken into account, and the comparator is

changed to the Dynamic Grade at the start of the return (since the purpose here is to assess whether an adjustment should be made before the first game is played), the average is only 18 points. If this were corrected, it is likely that even fewer entries would actually be affected.

- e. More significantly, this data shows a huge variation in the impact of a 5 or more year break on quality of play, with no discernible pattern. This may be explained by the fact that it makes no distinction between those who have prepared for their return, for example through practice or playing unranked games, and those who haven't. A uniform reduction is therefore inappropriate and a discretionary one impractical. This, along with the desire to support players who wished to focus on one code only for a year or two before returning to the other, was the principal reason for the reduction being abandoned for AC. However, it should be noted that it is rare for deductions to have an impact on players whose break has been only one or two years (only one of the 14 players affected in the Series had played 15 games or more in the last 3 years).
- f. There is no data at all on the impact of breaks of less than 5 years and the impact of playing some games but fewer than 15. It is argued that it is inappropriate to make any adjustments for this without such data. An adjustment could be reintroduced if appropriate once the necessary research had been done. This research should be done for both AC and GC and the matter reconsidered once it has been done.
- g. There are two potential reasons why a player might play to the level of a lower Dynamic Grade after a break: reduction in skill level and grade deflation¹. The data for breaks of 5 years or more incorporates both. A paper on grade deflation by Stephen Mulliner notes that "It is difficult to assess the impact of deflation on players with DGs below 2200.... A plausible hypothesis is that some DGs below 1700-1800 may be inflated and those from that level to 2200 are affected only a little." Players with grades above 2200 are unlikely not to be allocated a place whether or not reductions are applied, and the suggestion is that grade deflation may not be relevant to the rest.
- h. Players were thought to be relatively unlikely to seek to enter inappropriate events when returning from a break or after only small amounts of recent play. This is supported by the average grades of the opponents of returners after a 5 year break: of the 31 whose performance grade in their first 20 post-return games was 100 points or more worse than their starting grade, only 4 played opponents with a higher average grade than their own starting grade, only 3 more played opponents with an average grade within 50 points of their own starting grade and only 4 more played opponents with an average grade within 100 points of their own starting grade.

¹ Grade deflation is a recognised concept in grading systems (including the original Elo system for chess, as a result of players entering the system with low grades and then improving. There are a number of possible mitigations which systems can adopt to counter its effect. Stephen Mulliner, a member of the WCF Rankings Operation Committee, has produced a paper suggesting that the GC ranking system suffers from grade deflation of approximately 11 points a year for players with Dynamic Grades above 2200. Richard Bilton, another member and the GC Rankings Officer, has estimated it at 0.3 points per game. However, James Hopgood, a third member, has raised a number of questions and David Maugham has carried out research questioning the existence of grade deflation in the GC system.

- i. If a player does choose to enter a tournament which their standard of play is not high enough for and, without reductions, gets a place, their grade will rapidly adjust by reason of their results. Whether a reduction should be applied would only be relevant for events with Allocation Dates before the first two or three events actually played.
 - j. If the reductions are abandoned, then it will be the lowest graded more active player who misses out to a returning player, and it is considered that this is unlikely to be more than once a season, although it is hard to get the data to assess this. By contrast, it seems more likely that the same returning player could miss out multiple times, as happened last year. While they could address this by travelling to an undersubscribed event, without the enthusiasm built up from other recent events, it is thought there is a greater risk that they will be discouraged and give up. It is argued that it is better to encourage people to enter or return to tournament play, and this fits better with the strategy of getting More People to play More Croquet rather than the same people playing more croquet.
 - k. It can produce perverse results, for example if a player gains a GC grade through a small number of games when a high AC handicapper, then improves their ball striking skills significantly through playing AC, without playing GC in the intervening years. This can result in a significant deduction being made from a grade which is itself significantly lower than the player's skill level, and mean that the player will find it harder to start playing tournament GC after, for example, playing a single interclub match 8 years ago than they would after playing a single interclub match last year.
 - l. It is argued that all events, both GC and AC, should be open to entries from all subscribers to Croquet England on an equal basis, whether they are highly active in GC (or AC as the case may be) or whether, for whatever reason, they cannot or choose not to commit the majority of their time to croquet, or that code. It is therefore argued that it is inappropriate to penalise less active players by reducing their grades for allocation purposes, simply because they are less active, and would only be appropriate if data evidenced that the adjustment fairly represented a change in the level they were likely to be playing at.
15. One member of the group (CR) was initially inclined to support retaining the adjustment, but after discussion of the effect of grade deflation on different grade profiles was less inclined to argue for retaining it.
16. One member of the group (RB) supported retaining the provision. In particular, he noted the further research needed, and considered that it could be confusing for clubs to have too many changes (one already made to change the number of points deducted, a second to abandon deductions and potentially a third to reintroduce them). The other arguments in favour of retention considered were:
- a. There is thought to be a greater fluctuation in form in GC than AC, although this was not agreed amongst the group. Although it is difficult to show this through data as yet, observation suggests that it is harder to retain a similar level of skill without regular play. It is considered that an occasional player with a historically higher grade is unlikely to play better than the active player losing out.
 - b. In particular, there is thought to be greater potential for upsets in GC by players who are weaker on paper but active and match-ready, and it is therefore important not to squeeze out lower ranked players. It is considered that an average returner who is not match-ready is less likely to achieve an upset.

- c. GC has moved on more in tactics and skill level than AC, although this was not agreed amongst the group, noting in particular the increased frequency and complexity of peeling turns in AC and the increased quality of shooting, which also has an impact on popping turns and leaves.
- d. Not making reductions does have the potential to affect the same active player multiple times, particularly at the start of the season where they may be the lowest ranked player who would otherwise get a place in multiple events where allocation is before the season has started (although the spread of events at which there has been an actual impact makes this seem unlikely). That player is thought to be likely to be better than the returner, although it is difficult to know how that can be assessed.
- e. Other sports did not allow entry based on historic skill levels (although examples where they do can be found, and the facts that croquet is an amateur sport, with two codes, depending less on fitness may distinguish it from other sports).
- f. It is argued that it is important not to penalise active players, in particular those who support the Series, and not allow them to be the ones who miss out on places for oversubscribed events (on the basis that not to make an adjustment for less active players penalises active players for exposing their grades to reductions either through losing games or grade deflation). There is a risk that if active players do miss out to less active players, they will become disillusioned and stop playing which would be more damaging than failing to encourage returners.

17. The Executive is asked to consider these arguments and decide whether the provision for grade reductions should be retained in the Tournament Regulations or deleted.

Draw dates

- 18. One member (RB) suggested that there should be a new requirement that the draw should be no earlier than 3 days before the event, in order to allow time for results from one weekend's play to be added to the rankings before the draw is done for an event the following weekend.
- 19. This did not attract unanimous support. One member (BH) saw the merit in consistency. One member (CR) broadly supported it but favoured allowing it to be disapplied in special conditions. One member (GH) was content with it for seeded GC events but not for others and favoured making it a recommendation rather than a requirement. One member (KA) opposed it, considering that the draw should be done as soon as possible after the closing date, subject to allowing time, where relevant, for recent results to be included in the ranking system, which may mean that the draw doesn't take place until the night before the event starts. The group has been not able to discuss this orally but only by email.
- 20. Options include:
 - a. Introduce a requirement that the draw may not be done more than 3 days before the event.
 - i. This should ensure that the draw is done using the most up-to-date rankings. While not all events start on a Saturday, for events such as the GC Opens, the Ranking Officer is likely to ensure that the rankings are updated promptly. Stipulating the time frame in the Regulations reduces the risk of inexperienced managers doing the draw before all relevant results have been added.

- ii. The drawbacks are: that the advantage is of no relevance for unseeded events (common in AC but less common in GC); that it delays the draw unnecessarily if the rankings are updated more swiftly, as they currently typically are in AC and often are in GC; and that it gives less time for players to change their travel and accommodation arrangements if they have a late start (extremely rare in GC but less so in AC given the greater flexibility in formats).
- b. Introduce a requirement that the draw may not be done more than 3 days before the event unless stated otherwise in the special conditions. This should achieve the desired advantage in all relevant events, but would require those for whom it is not relevant and who wish to preserve the status quo to notice and include the necessary special condition.
- c. Introduce a requirement that the draw may not be done any more than 3 days before the event for seeded events only. This addresses the first drawback but not the others.
- d. Introduce a requirement that the draw may not be done any more than 3 days before the event for seeded GC events only. This addresses more of the drawbacks but introduces another change between AC and GC which the Executive was keen to avoid except where necessary.
- e. Introduce a recommendation along one of the above lines into the Tournament Regulations. This achieves the desired aim less well but allows more flexibility.
- f. Include a requirement to have a Draw Date no earlier than 3 days before the event in new definition of Series (see paragraph 44 below), include the rationale in the planned communication to clubs and reconsider next year for other events.
- g. Defer the decision until the November meeting. This will allow the group to discuss it orally and perhaps reach a unanimous recommendation, but will mean that an issue which could affect clubs' fixtures calendar entries will need to be communicated separately after the rest.

21. The Executive is asked to consider these options and decide how to proceed.

Recommended changes in more detail

Players without a grade

- 22. The current regulations provide that *If allocation is by Dynamic Grade, then entrants with no Dynamic Grade shall be allocated places (based on lowest handicap) only after all entrants with Dynamic Grades have been allocated places.*
- 23. With the rise in GC events allocating places by Dynamic Grade at higher handicap levels, this can act as a barrier for new players to join the tournament scene. This was raised as an issue in the survey in at least 25 comments on earlier questions, even before reaching the specific question on this topic.
- 24. Only 28% of respondents to the survey who expressed a view supported retaining the existing position. Among the 72% who supported changing it, by far the strongest support (47%, which is 65% of those supporting change) was for using the player's handicap index trigger point as a proxy for their ranking grade. This was the most popular option at all handicap levels.

25. While recognising that this may have an impact on existing committed players, who may lose out on a place to a new player as a result of the change, the group considered that the benefits of encouraging newcomers outweighed this, and that the best way to do so was to follow the feedback from the survey. This method is the same as the method normally used to assign a ranking grade after the player's first ranked game, and therefore simply anticipates the outcome of that exercise to facilitate entry.
26. The group considered other risks associated with this change, but did not consider that any were sufficient to change the decision:
 - a. Club handicappers could artificially adjust a new player's handicap downwards in order to promote their prospects of allocation. Few if any handicappers are believed to be so lacking in integrity; and if they were, they would be doing this already in order to boost the player's ranking when assigned their first ranking grade and thus support allocation to their next event. On the contrary, the greater problem is that handicaps are often too high, also frequently commented on in survey responses. This change might encourage club handicappers to ensure that a newcomer's handicap is appropriate. Furthermore, actual results will soon correct an inappropriate initial grade, not least because of the Automatic Start Grade Adjustment (ASGA) mechanism.
 - b. The level of correlation between handicap indexes and Dynamic Grade is not perfect, and could perhaps do with further consideration by the Handicap Committee and/or the WCF Rankings Operation Committee. It is, however, good enough, and if a revised table setting out the starting Dynamic Grade for each handicap is ever produced, it can be adopted then. Meanwhile, the Handicap Committee has agreed that handicaps should be adjusted if necessary once the ASGA had been triggered.
27. While this is principally an issue for events aimed at higher handicappers, it could also affect other events, particularly where a player skilled in one code enters an event in the other code for the first time. The vast majority of top players already have grades in both codes: only 13 AC players with a grade above 2200 do not have a GC grade (and 9 of those have not played for 3 years or more) and only 7 GC players with a grade above 2200 do not have an AC grade (and 3 of those have not played in the last year).
28. In view of those small numbers, the group does not recommend drawing a distinction between different levels of play, as there are too few to make a significant difference in top-level events, and those who have not yet tried the other code seem unlikely to do so now. While the numbers increase as the grade range decreases, it would be difficult to choose and justify any particular cut-off point for a different rule to apply.
29. Furthermore, expanding on paragraph 26, allocating a proxy DG from a handicap normally results in a lower DG than the skill level might suggest, so there is some built in margin for not unduly advantaging players new to one code.

Open events

Allocation

30. The current Regulations provide that for First-Class events (on which see further below) – which almost all, if not all, open events are – allocation may either be by highest Dynamic Grade or by ballot. However, not all open events disclose in their special conditions which method has been chosen. Several respondents to the survey commented on this.

31. An overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey (87% of those who expressed a view) considered open events should be allocated by highest Dynamic Grade in order to ensure they have the strongest possible entry and are as competitive as possible. This was the trend at every grade level.
32. However, some strong arguments were made in comments about there being a place for some open events to be allocated by lot, such as ensuring that the same set of players do not always monopolise oversubscribed events and giving more opportunity for improving players to pit themselves against strong players in order to improve further.
33. In addition, several comments indicated that they would like to see 50% of places allocated by Dynamic Grade and 50% by lot, to get the best of both worlds.
34. The group's recommendation is therefore to set a default of allocation by highest Dynamic Grade, but to make clear that this is only a default and that clubs can choose a different method if they wish.
35. In addition, if technically possible (and feedback from Dave Kibble has been positive) the group would like to see a new field added to the standard detailed Fixtures Calendar entry for clubs to state expressly which method of allocation will be used. To ease this, the Regulations should include definitions of the most common methods along with descriptions of how they are operated, e.g. by highest Dynamic Grade, by lot, or by lowest handicap, so that clubs can either refer to those, or indicate there is a bespoke method in their special conditions, or indicate it is not applicable (if no Allocation Date is used).

Restrictions

36. The current Regulations provide that tournaments containing the word Open must be Level Play and have no restriction on entry other than as provided for in Regulations P1 (dealing with Non-Subscribers) and C3 (dealing with allocation methodology). Three events, one organised by Croquet England, currently use the word Open for events restricted to women.
37. This does not seem objectionable in principle, and has parallels in other sports. It is therefore proposed that the definition of 'open' be changed to expressly permit restrictions by gender.

'First-class' events

38. 'First-class' is currently a reserved word, defined as follows:

A First-Class event is an event played under the conditions of [AC: Level Advanced Play or Level Super-Advanced Play] [GC: Level Play], with unrestricted entry except for:

- A. *restrictions by gender or non-Subscribers;*
 - B. *restrictions excluding players with handicaps over a stated level or Dynamic Grade below a stated level; or*
 - C. *other restrictions approved by Croquet England.*
39. While virtually all open events meet this definition, a number of events do not, most commonly if they have a threshold to ensure a minimum standard of entrant, e.g. entry limited to those with a handicap of 3 or less.
 40. As indicated above, the current position is that allocation for these events is either by highest Dynamic Grade or by lot, but again, this is not always disclosed.
 41. No event uses the word first-class in its title, and it is not believed to be a well-understood term. It is used in only one other place in the Regulations, dealing with limits on applying variations to draw and process formats, where applying the limit to Championship events only would seem acceptable.

42. The group therefore recommends that the term be abolished, and that allocation be handled in the same way as for any other event which is not a Championship, open or Series event, namely by lot. Again, it is proposed that this be only a default and clubs can choose a different method if they wish.
43. It is noted that if a club proposes to allocate an open event by lot, there is merit in applying an upper handicap limit, which would in any event stop the event being truly open: while entrants might be content to see a handicap 4 displace a -1, they might be less content to see a handicap 14 displace a -1.

Series as a reserved word

44. GCTC are keen to ensure that all events which are part of a Series have an Allocation Date. The easiest way to deal with this is to add Series as a reserved word. While there is no current problem with clubs using the word Series for events which are not part of the formal Series, it also has the merit of ensuring no problem develops in future.

Doubles events

Approach to drafting

45. There should be separate allocation provisions for doubles and singles events given the different considerations that arise.
46. It should be expressly spelt out that the number of places for doubles refers to the number of individuals, and is thus twice the number of pairs (this is necessary to fit with the way the Tournament Entry System works). Places will however be allocated in pairs.
47. It should also be clarified that a pair's Dynamic Grade or handicap is the average of the two players' individual grades or handicaps.

Discretionary places

48. The group recommends that two discretionary places (i.e. one pair) should be reserved in every doubles event allocated by Dynamic Grade, to be allocated at the discretion of the relevant Selection Committee for events organised by Croquet England or the Tournament Secretary for events organised by clubs.
49. This is principally to guard against the risk of disability discrimination, where a player may have a poor singles ranking but nonetheless be a good doubles partner. An example might be a player with learning difficulties, who can strike the ball well under direction but cannot grasp tactics. However, there might be other circumstances in which the discretion could be exercised, for example a rapid improver for whom the event would be a good development opportunity. The wording of how the discretion should be exercised for Croquet England events will need to be agreed with the Selection Committees. It is not proposed to prescribe how it should be exercised for club events, although guidance can be given.
50. For Croquet England events, the selection should be made within a week of the Allocation Date. If it has not been, or if the Selection Committee do not consider that there is any pair for whom the discretion should be exercised, the final two places will be allocated to the first pair on the reserve list.
51. For club events, if the Tournament Secretary does not feel confident about making the decision, they can of course seek advice.

Treatment of single entries

52. The group considered whether the current position that single entries are only paired if the event remains undersubscribed at the Closing Date should change. Although initially attracted to bringing this forward to the Allocation Date, the group does not recommend a change for the following reasons:
- a. It is open to all single entrants to look at the entry list to identify other single entrants and seek to form a pair at any time, before or after the Allocation Date.
 - b. Pairing at the Allocation Date could have unwelcome consequences. For example, if Player A enters an undersubscribed event before the Allocation Date naming Player B as their partner, Player B enters only after the Allocation Date and Player C enters without a partner before the Allocation Date, Player A could find themselves paired with Player C instead. While the Secretary could seek to check with Player A, Player A might or might not be able to reply swiftly.
 - c. Furthermore, if an entrant's partner withdraws after the Allocation Date, the entrant (who we recommend should be treated as an entrant without a partner rather than treated as having withdrawn) could have fewer possible other single entrants to seek to form a pair with if they had already been paired at the Allocation Date.
53. However, the group noted that some clubs do positively encourage single entrants, saying that they will be paired by the Manager, but do not state when or how this will happen. It might be done at the Allocation Date or perhaps only when doing the draw. It is therefore recommended that a default position be added to the Tournament Regulations for clubs who state this, although they can of course make other provision in their special conditions. The default position proposed is that:
- a. Entrants who entered as a pair take priority over entrants paired by the Tournament Secretary; and
 - b. The pairing will be carried out on the Allocation Date by drawing lots.

If the special conditions do not mention pairing of single entries, the normal default that the pairing will be done at the Closing Date will apply.

Under 25s

54. To encourage young players and give opportunities to them as a category very likely to improve rapidly, two Under 25 players who would not otherwise be allocated a place are given priority entry. Currently, for doubles events, an Under 25 player can only benefit from this if their partner is also Under 25.
55. The group recommends that this be changed, to allow priority entry to two Under 25 players who would not otherwise be allocated a place, regardless of the age of their partner. If the two enjoying priority entry are in a single pair, a third will not also get priority entry, but if they are in different pairs, both pairs will get priority entry.
56. The group recognised that this change could have an impact on existing committed players, who may lose out on a place as a result, and also that it would allow an older player to gain priority entry to an event they might not expect to get a place for. However, the group considered this was an acceptable reward for encouraging a young player to enter. The group noted that the pair missing out would be the lowest graded pair, who could also miss out if another higher graded pair entered.

Allocation Dates

Existence and recommended dates

57. Although there was no specific question about this, a significant number of respondents to the survey commented on the timing of allocation. These comments fell broadly into three categories:
- a. those who wanted to see no Allocation Dates at all, and instead to see places allocated on a first-come, first-served basis;
 - b. those who wanted early Allocation Dates, in particular because of the desire for certainty in planning ahead and the difficulty of booking accommodation and travel at shorter notice, which was raised by domestic players (particularly those in the north) as well as overseas players;
 - c. those who wanted later Allocation Dates, to ensure that as few players as possible competed with a handicap lower than the lower threshold. Under the current Regulations, a handicap change after the Allocation Date does not prevent a player from competing in an event they were eligible for on the Allocation Date.
58. The group does not recommend having no Allocation Date, as this can penalise players who are unable to deal with tournament entries the day the Fixtures Calendar goes live. Having an Allocation Date, and a method of dealing with entries to oversubscribed events on that date, gives a fair opportunity to all.
59. An Allocation Date is not however compulsory, and some clubs already choose not to have one. The implications are set out in guidance notes on the website, but not included in the Tournament Regulations, and it is proposed to include it for the future.
60. The group did however have sympathy with the accommodation challenges, and therefore recommends lengthening the recommended period between allocation and the event from 4 weeks for Championship events and 8 weeks for other events to between 8 and 12 weeks for all events.
61. This will remain a recommendation, so clubs (and Tournament Committees) will be able to adopt longer or shorter periods if they wish. Guidance on some of the considerations to take into account when deciding will be included in the communication to clubs.
62. It is recommended that Allocation Dates should not be permitted to be earlier than 15 February, to allow at least a fortnight for players to get entries in, with encouragement to allow at least a month. Any club who wishes to have an earlier date than 15 February should simply have no Allocation Date.
63. The group noted that one implication of lengthening the recommended period between allocation and the event is likely to be to increase the number of players playing in handicap-restricted events with a handicap outside the permitted range, as there will be more scope for it to have changed between allocation and the event. The group considered whether to unlink the eligibility date from the Allocation Date, but considered this would be unfair, and could provide a perverse incentive not to play (or at least not to win). While noting the comments objecting to this even with the current shorter period, the group considered this was an acceptable price to pay for the other benefits of lengthening the period.

Deadlines

64. Two top players failed to get places for the GC Open Championship in 2024 because of confusion over whether the deadline was the Allocation Date itself or the day before. While this was in part due to mistaken drafting in the special conditions which suggested, unlike the Tournament Regulations, that an entry on the day would be accepted, it has highlighted the potential for confusion, in circumstances where many people do not read detailed terms and conditions.
65. It is therefore recommended that a new concept of Allocation Deadline, defined as the day before the Allocation Date, be introduced. Both would be shown in the detailed Fixtures Calendar entry, but only the Deadline in the list.
66. This would bring the two cut-off dates displayed (for Allocation and Closing) into line with each other, whereas currently, the drafting provides that entries received on the Closing Date itself will be in time to get any remaining places, but that entries received on the Allocation Date itself will be too late to be allocated places if the event is already oversubscribed.
67. More importantly, it reduces the adverse impact of confusion, as there is no adverse impact of mistakenly doing something a day too early but there is of mistakenly doing it a day too late.

Format for Grade 1 and 2 Championships

68. The format for Grade 1 and 2 Championships is required to be a best-of-3 (or more) knockout or draw and process, possibly preceded by qualifying rounds in the form of blocks or a Swiss. This has the effect that it is impossible to be eliminated from the second stage on a single game loss, and it has been widely understood that it should not be possible to be eliminated from the qualifying stage either on a single game loss.
69. However, on at least two occasions when the number of entries made a suitable format difficult to achieve in the number of days allowed, the format chosen involved blocks of 3 with one qualifier from each block, which could and sometimes did result in a player failing to qualify with only one loss. On both occasions, the players were content with the format chosen, which is in accordance with the provisions of the Regulations.
70. The group did not think this should be acceptable for a Grade 1 Championship, and it is therefore recommended that an additional provision be introduced, imposing a requirement that the planned format may not allow a player to be eliminated after losing only one game in any qualifying stage. By making the requirement apply to the format, this would not prevent exceptional action, for example in the case of extended bad weather.
71. The group does not propose extending this to Grade 2 Championships, recognising that practicalities have to be accommodated.
72. This recommendation may require some Grade 1 Championships to be downgraded to Grade 2 Championships.

Consequences of an incorrect handicap

73. The current Regulations provide that if a player plays in a handicap event off a higher handicap than they are entitled to, or plays in a handicap-restricted event they were not entitled to enter, they may be disqualified.
74. The group recommends that this should also be the case for players without a Dynamic Grade where an incorrect handicap results in a higher proxy grade than the player is entitled, which in turn results in them being allocated a place they should not have been

allocated. This ensures that no player can benefit from failing to keep their handicap up to date; it is not a punishment, but simply seeks to restore the status quo.

75. For the scenarios in the current Regulations, the Tournament Manager has a discretion not to disqualify the culprit 'if it is in the best interests of the tournament', in which case the culprit may not win any prize. The group recommends that in addition, there should be a prohibition on qualifying for the knockout from a block, progressing to the second round of a knockout, and earning any points for the purpose of a Series.
76. The group does not propose that these penalties should apply to new players who gained an unjustified place as a result of an incorrect proxy grade. In the scenarios in the current Regulations, the problem is that the player wrongly has a greater chance of winning games, either by having more bisques or extra turns than they should, or by being present at an event they are too good for. In the case of a proxy dynamic grade error, if the Manager chooses to exercise the discretion to allow the player to play (which might be less appropriate if the player who should have got the place still wants to play, but more appropriate if no reserves still do), the player will be the weakest on paper of those in the event, and if they perform better than expected, should be able to take the benefits.

Lateness

77. Regulation M2(d) deals with lateness. It gives Managers various powers to adjust the schedule or the game, but if none are possible or practicable, to declare the late player to have lost the game (or match). It provides that normally, a player would need to be at least an hour late for this to apply for a first offence. It seems likely that this was set with AC in mind, where games can frequently be twice or three times that long, and there are typically only 3 or 4 games a day. It seems less appropriate for GC, where many games finish within an hour and where there are typically 6 or more games a day.
78. It is therefore proposed to change this to half an hour for GC. It is also proposed to spell out that lateness is calculated from the appointed start time of the game and to highlight the existing provisions that if a player arrives after (or only shortly before) the appointed start time for the first game, they may be restricted to a shorter (or no) warm up before the game.

Issues where no changes are recommended in more detail

Start times

79. A proposal to change the default start times for the second and subsequent day of a multi-day event to 9am was considered.
80. The benefits are that it makes more use of daylight (particularly for early or late season events), gives a bit more room for slippage if games run on, and gives players more chance of leaving earlier either for dinner or to get home on the last day. While many players do travel reasonably long distances to the venue on the morning of the first day, most are already nearby by subsequent days.
81. However, this can place an increased burden on the volunteers or staff who prepare the lawns (particularly for clubs with more lawns), or do other tasks such as prepare refreshments. In addition, not all accommodation serves breakfast early enough for a 9am start of play; some players commute fairly long distances even on subsequent days (and

given the costs of accommodation, their ability to do this may make the difference between them entering or not); not everyone likes getting up early; inconsistent start times could be confusing; a later start allows more time for dew to evaporate; early starts can give rise to complaints from neighbours; traffic may be more of an issue earlier in the morning; and standardised earlier starts make it harder for the manager to get a late-running schedule back on track by asking particular games to start early (although an earlier start may make a late-running schedule less likely).

82. Feedback from clubs indicated that many would not follow a changed default of 9am on later days. No change is therefore proposed, but guidance will be given to clubs on factors to consider when deciding start times, both in the special conditions and at the event.

Reserved places for club members

83. Clubs can of course reserve places in their own non-Series events, and no change to this is contemplated.
84. A large majority of respondents to the survey (77% of those who expressed a view) supported retention of the current position that for Series events, clubs should not be permitted to reserve places for their own members. This was the case at all handicap levels, with the majority increasing the higher the handicap range.
85. Many of the comments echoed the group's own views, that allocation provisions should be identical for all events which are part of a larger whole, that it could weaken an event whose purpose is to find the best players to go to a national final, and that it would give an unfair advantage to members of clubs large enough to host a Series event. It was also suggested that not allowing reserved places for club members might encourage clubs to put on more non-Series events which might help meet demand.
86. In light of the feedback, the group does not propose any change.
87. However, it was notable that the comments supporting permission to reserve places for club members almost all supported only a very small number or percentage of reserved places, in contrast to the usual reserved places provision which reserves 50% of places for club members. Reasons given included: encouraging new players, who may feel more comfortable entering their first tournament at their own club, or encouraging rapid improvers; supporting players who for personal reasons are not able to travel; reflecting the sacrifice clubs have made in giving up their lawns; generating more interest and attendance from club members (presumably as spectators); and encouraging clubs to host Series events.
88. It may be that a more nuanced question, asking whether there was support for a small number of reserved places, a large number or none, would have received a different response. Conversely, it may be that the change proposed to facilitate entry to tournaments by players who do not yet have a Dynamic Grade, coupled with the planned change to the threshold of the B-level from 3 to 4, will resolve some of the current issues identified.
89. The group therefore recommends that this question is reviewed in a few years' time.

Priority entries

90. The group considered that it remained appropriate to reserve places for the Manager and the winner of the event when it was last held (noting that this was the winner of the main event; the winner of a consolation event was the winner of a different event at the tournament). This is of course subject to meeting the eligibility criteria for the event. It does

not apply to Series finals, as entry for those is by selection from the points earned in Series events, not under the provisions of the Tournament Regulations.

91. The group considered the risk that a reserved place for the Manager could result in an inappropriate entry, but considered that this was a risk worth accepting in order to encourage people to manage events. It seems unlikely that anyone would want to play in an event where they will be uncompetitive, but if the organising body feels that would be a risk and has an alternative management option, they can decline the offer to manage.
92. The group also considered a suggestion that the winner of a Series event should not be allowed priority entry to that event the following year unless they played in the Series final, but did not agree. Winning a Series event earns the player the right to play in the final, not the obligation to.
93. The group also considered whether maximum handicap thresholds should be set for Under 25 players getting priority entry to some events, such as championships. However, this was felt to be an unnecessary complication. Again, it seems unlikely that anyone would want to play in an event where they will be uncompetitive, and setting a threshold would be complicated by the fact that young players often improve extremely rapidly.
94. The group also considered whether priority entry for overseas players should be introduced but did not think that it should. It would be complex to decide who qualified as an overseas player, it could be divisive for other affected players such as those in the north for whom fewer tournaments are available, and it would not have any additional benefit for booking travel and accommodation unless there was an earlier allocation date for overseas players which would be even more complex. The recommended changes to allocation dates should ameliorate their position.
95. Finally on this aspect, the group agreed that clubs should be free to specify additional categories of people getting priority places, except for Series events and Championship events of any grade.

Grade 2 and Grade 3 Championships and GC Series events

96. Allocation to all these events is currently by highest Dynamic Grade (ranking for ease of reference). This is uncontroversial in respect of Championships, but the survey supported anecdotal evidence that there was a wider range of views in respect of GC Series events.
97. As might be expected, there was strong support for allocation by ranking for the Championship, Open and A-Level Series, although the levels of support diminished as the target handicap range increased.
98. For B-level and above, less than 50% of respondents supported allocation by ranking, and levels of support continued to diminish as the target handicap range increased.
99. It was notable that for every Series, support for ranking was markedly higher among respondents who typically played 10 or more games of GC a year. Conversely, for every handicap restricted Series except A-Level, the level of support for ranking among respondents in the target handicap range was lower than the general level of support, although not by a significant amount in the case of the B- and C-level.
100. There was no clear consensus on the favoured method of allocation for B-level and above. For B-level, the most popular of the options suggested was ranking, attracting support from 42% of those who expressed a view, with handicap coming second with 28%. For C- and D-level, the most popular option was handicap, with support from 40% and 45% of respondents respectively. For C-level, ranking came second with 25%, followed by 50-50 lots and ranking with 22%, with lots alone the least popular with 12%. For D-level drawing

lots came second with 21%, then ranking with 19%, and finally 50-50 lots and ranking with 16%.

101. 47 respondents made comments about allocating by ranking, of which 10 were supportive and 37 opposed the use of ranking. 7 of the 10 supportive comments were from players with GC handicaps of 2 or below, but only 11 of the 37 comments opposing ranking. 21 of the comments opposing ranking were from players with GC handicaps of 3 to 9.
102. The group has serious reservations about allocating by handicap, given the high level of inconsistency in handicapping between different clubs, particularly at higher handicap levels among players who do not play much outside their own club. This concern was also raised by a number of respondents to the survey in a variety of contexts.
103. The group also noted that 19 of the comments opposing ranking commented on the barrier to new players without a ranking. The proposed change to facilitate entry for new players by giving them a proxy dynamic grade for allocation purposes should address this problem, and amounts to allocation by handicap for new players. The change in threshold for B-level from 3 to 4 should also reduce the current problems of over-subscription.
104. On balance, the group therefore recommends retaining the current arrangements of allocating by highest Dynamic Grade, including for the new D-Level Series. This also has the merit of consistency which is helpful for simplicity.
105. That said, the group is conscious that the two changes will not resolve all the difficulties, notably where there is a disparity between handicap and Dynamic Grade, for example where a player has improved dramatically through practice, handicap or club games, or playing AC, and their Dynamic Grade has not caught up. It is therefore recommended that this too be reviewed again in a few years' time.
106. From a drafting perspective, the group recommends that the allocation provisions for Series events be included in the Tournament Regulations, since they comprise over half the GC tournament offering².

Other events

107. Currently, the default for all events other than Championship, First-class and Series events (each discussed above) is allocation by lot. The two principal categories are handicap events and handicap restricted level play events.

Handicap play events

108. For handicap events, drawing lots was just more popular among all survey respondents than handicap (41% of those who expressed a view compared to 40% for handicap; surprisingly 19% favoured ranking even for handicap events³).
109. However, for higher handicap players, particularly in GC but to a lesser extent in AC, there was a clear preference for allocation by handicap (62% of those with a GC handicap of 7 or above who expressed a view compared to 26% for lots, and 49% of those with an AC handicap of 8 or above compared to 26% for lots).
110. As indicated above, the group has serious reservations about allocating by handicap for any events, but particularly for handicap events. As a number of respondents commented,

² In 2024, of 121 relevant GC tournaments in the Fixtures Calendar (excluding non-domestic ones, team events, selection events and championship events), 74 were Series events

³ This option was available as the question was combined with one for handicap-restricted level play events

allocating places by handicap defeats the purpose of handicap events, of enabling players with a wide range of skill levels to play against each other with an equal chance of winning.

111. The group therefore recommends that the default remains as allocation by lot, but that options for allocating by handicap be added to the Tournament Regulations, and clubs advised both of the popularity of this option and the reasons for the group's reservations, so that they can consider adopting this method instead.

Handicap restricted level play events

112. There was no clear consensus among survey respondents on this. Slightly more respondents preferred allocation by ranking (36% of those who expressed a view) than lot (34%), with 29% preferring handicap.

113. On balance, there does not seem sufficient reason to recommend a change from the current default of allocating by lot unless stated otherwise in the special conditions. If the new field to make allocation method clearer is adopted, this will make future monitoring easier, and if a majority of clubs choose a different method, this can be changed in due course.

Requirement for Allocation Dates

114. As indicated above, a number of survey respondents expressed a desire for allocation to be on a first-come, first-served basis. This is already possible (except for Series events), by not having an Allocation Date, but very few clubs choose this. There is no proposal to change this, but the option (and its drawbacks) will be highlighted in the communication to clubs.

Which date's grades to use when allocating by highest Dynamic Grade

115. The group discussed the problem that sometimes there is a delay in the results of tournaments being added to the rankings, particularly for Federation events and particularly for those aimed at lower ranked players. This can affect the allocation process if the games are played before the Allocation Date but not added to the rankings until after. It can also mean that allocation could be affected by whether it is conducted on the Allocation Date itself or afterwards, although very few allocations take place late so the risk of inconsistency is low.

116. An option of specifying that the grades as at an earlier date should be used, to allow more time for all results to be entered, was discussed but rejected. It would be significantly more onerous on Tournament Secretaries, since the grades as at today's date can be easily downloaded in bulk from the rankings website, but to find grades as at an earlier date requires the Secretary to go into each individual player's record⁴. While this is acceptable if the Secretary chooses not to take the download on the Allocation Date itself, it seems unreasonable to require them to do so routinely. Furthermore this would increase the amount of recent play disregarded.

117. Continued communication to managers and Federation officers about the importance of reporting results promptly, and encouragement to appoint someone to enter results on Croquet Scores, will hopefully help to mitigate this problem.

⁴ Which would allow any games played before the Allocation Date which were added to the rankings after the Allocation Date to be taken into account.

Grade 3 Championship status should be retained

118. A suggestion was made that Grade 3 Championships should lose their championship status. The group did not consider that this was sufficiently problematic to justify change. In addition, it serves a useful purpose particularly for events such as the Students' and Schools' Championships where the cachet of a Championship label might encourage entries.

Gabrielle Higgins (Chair)

Keith Aiton (Chair of the International Committee until 12 October 2024)

Richard Bilton (Chair of the Golf Croquet Tournaments Committee)

Brian Havill (Chair of the Association Croquet Tournaments Committee until 12 October 2024)

Chris Roberts (Chair of the Handicap Committee)