Sharpening Your Focus:  
Tips on Grant Proposal Preparation

Stay Out of the Hazards!  
What Do NIH and Golf Have in Common?

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I have often wondered why NIH chooses to use a grant scoring system that is the reverse of the traditional 0 – 100 scale.

At NIH, the closer the Impact score is to the perfect 10 (on a scale from 10 – 90), the more likely it is to get funded. Being a fan of the game of golf, I often think of it as an analogy to NIH grant competitions – the lowest score wins.

The analogy makes sense when one realizes that to attain a low score, the golfer and the researcher have to be clear about the objective (get the ball in the hole! test the hypothesis!) and have the skills and experience to meet that objective most efficiently (keep the strokes – or mistakes – down!).
The golfer’s best odds of winning are when he or she is playing on a team of skilled players who have varied strengths – someone may be able to drive particularly well, while someone else is a great putter.

Likewise, the successful investigator is likely to be on an interdisciplinary team, where players not only have varied expertise to get the work accomplished, but someone also will know how to salvage the effort if the study goes off course (e.g., let’s hope someone on the team can hit the ball out of the sand).

Sometimes the champion is not the person who stays out of trouble, but the person who is the most creative in visioning an alternate route.

Wouldn’t it be nice if NIH had a golf handicapping system, which equalizes the score between the best and worst players? Think of it - no matter how poorly you consistently performed in the past, you would get credit on your score to make up for your shortcomings.

No such luck in the competitive NIH review process – like in professional golf, the competitor gets into a tournament based on great performances in the past.

However, on the amateur level (e.g., pre-NIH funding), the young or inexperienced investigator is often given extra consideration in either the funding opportunity or funding review process; for example, there are many fellowships and foundation grants restricted to grooming the next generation of investigators (the pre-professionals). But if the investigator attempts to compete with the best in the field in the country, he or she foregoes a handicap!

The game of competitive golf requires skill, practice, patience, passion, perseverance, and a bit of luck. Does this sound like any NIH investigators you might know?