RESOURCE

Carry, Total, and Realistic Club Distances

Almost every useful bag decision starts with an honest answer to one question: how far does each club actually carry for you. Not your best-ever shot, not a number you saw on a manufacturer's website, not what a friend claims to hit the same club. A useful bag map begins with an honest carry range built from your own data, and this resource explains how to collect that data and use it without fooling yourself.

Carry versus total distance

Carry distance is how far the ball travels through the air before it first touches the ground. Total distance adds whatever roll happens after landing. These two numbers can differ by a small amount on a firm fairway with a low iron shot, or by a large amount with a driver on a firm, downhill landing area. For club-selection decisions, especially with irons and wedges into a green, carry is almost always the more useful number, because it tells you whether the ball will clear a hazard or reach a landing area, independent of how the specific ground you are aiming at happens to be playing that day. GolfVectorLab's gapping and estimation tools default to carry for this reason, and keep total distance as a separate, explicitly labeled concept rather than quietly blending the two.

Typical versus best

A golfer asked "how far do you hit a 7-iron" will often answer with their best-ever shot, struck perfectly, downwind, downhill. That number is real, but it is not the number you should plan a layup or an approach shot around. A more useful number is your typical carry on a reasonably well-struck shot under normal conditions, which is usually shorter than your best shot and more representative of what will actually happen most of the time you swing that club. When you measure your own distances, note both: your typical carry for planning, and your best carry as a ceiling, not a plan.

Uncertainty bands, not false precision

A single number invites false confidence. A range communicates the truth more honestly: "my 7-iron typically carries between 150 and 158 yards" is more useful and more accurate than claiming a single number like "155." GolfVectorLab's Club Carry Estimator labels every value as measured or estimated for exactly this reason, so a provisional interpolated number is never mistaken for a real data point.

How to capture a practical measurement session

You do not need a launch monitor to get useful data, though one certainly helps. A rangefinder and a driving range with distance markers, or a home simulator, can both work. Hit five to ten shots with a club under normal conditions, ignore obvious mishits, and average the remaining carries. Note the date and roughly how many balls you hit; a number based on three good shots last season is worth less than a number based on eight balanced shots from a recent session, and both are worth stating so you and any tool using the data can weigh it appropriately.

A worked carry-band example

Suppose you measure your 7-iron across eight shots on a calm range day and get carries of 148, 151, 153, 149, 155, 150, 152, and 154 yards. Your typical carry band is roughly 148 to 155 yards, centered around 151 to 152. Rather than entering "152" as a single fact into a gapping tool, entering the band, or at minimum noting the spread mentally, keeps you honest about how much variation to expect on any given shot with that club.

Obstacle clearance versus landing-area use

When you are deciding whether a shot clears a hazard, use something closer to your minimum reliable carry, not your average, since coming up short has a real cost. When you are deciding which landing area to aim for on a shot with room to work, your typical carry is more useful. Conflating these two uses of the same distance number is a common way golfers misjudge a shot that "should have" carried a hazard based on an average that was never a guaranteed minimum.

Why GolfVectorLab avoids tour and population averages

Publicly available "average golfer" distance charts describe a population, often skewed toward stronger players who volunteer their data, not you specifically. Two golfers with identical clubhead

speed can carry the same iron 15 or more yards apart because of strike quality, attack angle, and spin rate. Using a population average as if it were your number produces club-selection and gapping decisions that do not match your actual game. Every distance-based engine on this site, including Bag Gapping, starts from data you supply rather than a lookup table.

Where this data goes next

Once you have a trustworthy carry band for each club, the Bag Gapping Map shows you where your coverage has real gaps or overlaps, and the Club Carry Estimator helps you provisionally fill in clubs you have not measured yet using a gap size you specify, never a population default. Build the measurement habit itself with the Bag Mapping Session, use the Carry and Total Distance Planner once you also have a total-distance range to separate roll from carry, and compare a specific target distance against your bands with the Casual Club Selection Planner. See the sources and assumptions page for how this measurement-first approach fits into the site's broader methodology.