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To Affiliate or Not?

My name is Jeremy Dhondy and I am the Chairman of the English Bridge Union.

This column is to answer questions or comments about the EBU that you might have.

If you have a comment or a question, I would be happy to hear from you. jeremy@mrbridge.co.uk

Q My club is having a meeting soon. We will decide whether we ought to reaffiliate to the EBU or not. Can you help me with any arguments that might help win the day?

Q My club had its AGM recently and decided not to reaffiliate. I think it ought to. What can I do about this?

A A club should only affiliate to the EBU if its committee and members are happy that this is the right course. The AGM is a suitable place for such a decision to be made and perhaps if the committee are in favour they need to plan so that members are fully informed before they vote. It won't come as a great shock to know that the Chairman of the EBU thinks it is a good idea for clubs to affiliate. Whether you are as an individual or as a club swayed by the arguments may depend on your view of bridge and what you expect.

Money

One set of arguments is financial. It will cost some money. It's good to start from the point that an evening of duplicate bridge is a very cheap form of entertainment. My local club charges £2.50 per session for members and a further 20p for a cup of tea or coffee. That's outstanding value. Before 2009, individuals used to join the EBU and pay about £22 annually to belong. Now, although you can join directly (£29), most players become members via their club, if it is affiliated, and they pay a fee each

time they play. That's 38p a game and a small add on for the county which is about 4-7p. If you play once per week it costs about the same to be a member now as 10 years ago. Most clubs adjust the table money in sensible amounts and then pay the charge. Provided you play a certain number of times per year in any club or tournament, you get a number of benefits (the magazine, an annual diary, masterpoints, following progress via the NGS, online games etc). Obviously these benefits are more valuable to some players than others but it's a pretty cheap form of entertainment. Clubs also get benefits such as cheap insurance, discounted training for teachers and directors and free scoring software. They also get the services of our club liaison officer if there are areas they need or want help with.

The future of your club

There are arguments other than financial. Virtually all sports, games, activities, mind sports etc have a national body. Many players, but not all, are pleased to belong and much of the time any financial benefit is nothing to do with it. Most of us want our game to have a future and having a central organisation is one good way to seek to ensure this. If you look around your club and the majority of the members are aged 70+ then where will your club be in 20 years time? I had a letter from a club recently which, in effect, said that whilst they agreed with seeking to get new members it was difficult to get the help needed from volunteers as many players simply wanted to have their weekly game and nothing else.

That may be true in some cases but, with central organisation, help can be offered to those who might wish to do some teaching and also to those who have the job of directing each session. For sure, people like coming to a club which is pleasant and well run. People take pride in the performance of their country. I think many players will be pleased if our junior teams do well in the World Championship in China in August. Indeed a number of clubs and counties have joined with some sponsors in offering financial help.

The importance of teaching

I've banged the drum before about the importance of teaching. Whether this is to younger players or those who are older, it is critical. Yorkshire have been running a membership pilot project with an attempt to get new people to join. The clubs that do have teaching programmes have noticed an increase in those wishing to join courses and several areas with no previous courses have started to teach. The result is several hundred additional students. There is benefit to the clubs with new members and benefit to the EBU with additional members. The early signs of this project are very promising and I hope it can be rolled out to several more areas later this year (other counties have shown interest). One particular positive sign is the number of people, both teachers and students, who like the new *Fast Track Bridge* programme, aimed at getting players to the table after 24 hours of tuition. Responsibilities of the central organisation in this area include producing courses, having a syllabus, having a teacher's

association, training and accrediting teachers. Where a club has difficulty in getting a teaching programme going, then perhaps joining in with another club for this activity may help.

The club game

From time to time, clubs and individuals express dissatisfaction with some aspect of the laws and regulations. They are too complex, they change too often, they are wrong, they are wrongly applied. The laws are one thing that makes a game, so those who think a re-deal is appropriate if a hand is passed out will find themselves in conflict with the laws of the game. The laws are something the World Federation of Bridge produce. Of course, in the case just mentioned there are two points. The first is that it is only possible to re-deal in round 1 and second you may find players who use agreements such as a mini no-trump or just take a view and open a hand which others might not. They are clearly disadvantaged.

Having a framework is important for a game. Ignoring it is like playing football and ignoring off-side rules or playing cricket and deciding that being out LBW doesn't count. You may be playing a game but it isn't bridge. When it comes to regulations such as whether you alert or announce and what you may play, clubs have the authority to do as they wish but it is not surprising to note that nearly all follow the national body in this respect. It's a lot of work and effort to have different regulations and awkward for the players if they play at another club. It's amusing or annoying,

depending on one's mood, that many clubs that are unaffiliated use EBU regulations and procedures without thinking they have any need to contribute to the formation of them. It takes the time of, mostly, volunteers to put them together and whilst there will be some disagreement about some of the regulations or rules, generally a pretty good job is done by people who have only the good of the game at heart.

The majority of EBU members don't play in tournaments but their club game has been improved no end by technology. I went to my local club last week and they were using bridgetabs. These had recently replaced old small bridgemates where you needed your extra strength glasses to see the results. The preliminary result was available by the end of the last hand and full detail was on the web by the time I'd driven a short distance home.

Any affiliated club can use (for free) the EBU scoring program called EBUScore. Even if they choose to use something else, results can be found very quickly in the EBU members area and such things as NGS and masterpoints updated.

Technology

I wonder how much people will play online in the next decade. The EBU had done some work on how these games work and how they can be secure.

The EBU now runs an online knock-out competition which has increased its entries in each of the three years it has been held. The EBU has an online affiliated club in Bridge Club Live and as an EBU member you can

have a free trial. There is also an online game three days a week with Funbridge with masterpoints and a prize ladder. I'm not a great one, at present, for playing online, but as I write this article on a day where outside is deep in snow and the game at the club last night was cancelled, online looks to have an attraction. When the Thursday night Funbridge game started, a club manager wrote to the EBU to ask if they were seeking to specifically destroy club bridge. A rather intemperate observation and amusing to note that in the ten weeks or so since the online game has started, his Thursday attendance has gone up rather than down.

The future

In short I hope bridge as it is played survives not only my lifetime but that of those to come. It has challenges that weren't present in the early days and it is by adapting to these challenges that it will survive. It is best placed to do this if there is a flourishing central organisation to lead and develop the game. Of course if you approve of a national organisation but not the current one then members can agitate for a change. The Board are subject to election and re-election after all.

If you are seeking to persuade your local club to affiliate, go armed with material which not only suggests the pecuniary advantage to club and members of joining but also the wider arguments for the betterment of the game. Some will never be persuaded, perhaps because they have little or no interest outside their own game, but I don't think that applies to the majority. ■

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