



How to Encourage More People into Bridge

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 How can we encourage more people into the game?

A I think bridge clubs have a problem with our ageing bridge population and not enough people from 20-45 or so playing. Some young people are playing poker online – but most simply don't have the time. Younger people today are often not home from work until 7pm or later. So how can they go to a bridge club in the week starting by 7.30pm? I think there may be a case for some bridge clubs to offer 18 board movements, starting around 8.15pm. More weekend afternoon sessions too. Some original thinking is certainly required – not just by the EBU. Bridge clubs will die out unless they find a practical way to welcome “younger” professional people.

What's the problem?

Bridge, whether organised by the EBU or not, has come under pressure in all sorts of ways in the last thirty or so years. Young people have many more competing demands on their time and many schools are not all that supportive. More competitive players, as they get older, are a bit less inclined to travel and if you need to depend on public transport to get you home after a club game outside a big city, then you can forget that. Some newer players find the club environment unappealing because experienced

players can be aggressive and rude. The net effect has been a drop in the number of players at tournaments and a drop in the number of junior players. Add to that the perception that some bridge clubs are unfriendly places and the internet now provides a very real alternative, you see that thus far it is all gloom and doom.

What can be done?

Noting a decline is one thing we can probably agree on. What to do is less easy to agree on, not least because the problem is multi-faceted. There are things to make the everyday game of club bridge more attractive. Perhaps an increase in the number of daytime games, perhaps experienced players being nicer to newcomers, perhaps, in larger clubs, games for relative beginners. All important, but rather at the periphery. Similarly, efforts by the EBU to win its VAT case would result in a reduction in entry fees and better value for those who attend tournaments. Helpful, but not revolutionary.

Getting new players

At the heart of what needs to happen is a push to teach more new players. Teaching young people of school age attracts good headlines but it is a brutal fact that many who are keen give up when job and family become a higher priority. Still, many do come back later

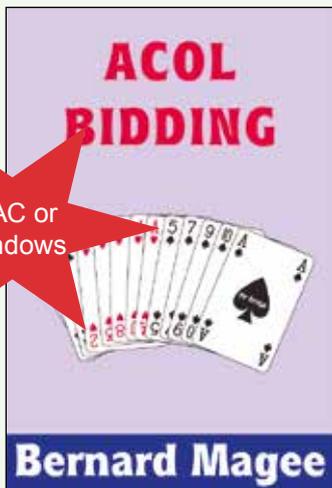
in life when their children have gone off to university and retirement is on the horizon. That is, however, rather too long a pay back period given the health of the game. The charity EBED ran an advert last August in the *Daily Telegraph* which attracted hundreds of replies. It was for those who wanted to learn to play bridge. Those who replied were put in touch with local teachers. The first thing revealed was that there are parts of the country where there are few teachers so that leads to another need: to train more teachers. Some of those students will go off to learn in a bridge club and others to learn with someone who teaches privately. What will be the quality of the teacher? There are some horror stories of people with no qualifications teaching systems that haven't been played for 60+ years such as Modified Beasley. That means having a system whereby teachers can be assessed and a student knows that the teacher they are going to has some sort of validation is useful. That is the role of EBTA, the English Bridge Teacher's Association although, of course, there are also good teachers who don't choose to be certificated or join.

Irrespective of the quality of teaching, I think the place of teaching is quite important. Those who learn in clubs are likely to play in the clubs. Those clubs who have a teaching programme are more likely to survive and thrive than those who don't.

Another relevant issue is how long it takes to learn. A friend of mine learnt at a 'Bridge in a Weekend Course'. ▶

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He enjoyed it and wished to continue, but unlike many players, recognised he was not yet very good and probably not up to the standard for a normal duplicate. He made enquiries of a local club, which was very dismissive of where and how he had learnt and noted tuition for at least six months would probably be required to correct some of the 'nonsense' he had learnt. Fortunately, he is made of sufficiently stern stuff that this did not put him off. The other relevant factor was how long some courses can be. The cynic in me says that some teachers outside clubs get a captive audience and wish them to come back for as many lessons as possible. EBED are currently developing something called 'Fast Track Bridge' which will be available later in 2017. The idea is that people can function at the table after a dozen two hour lessons. I think the days when people wanted to commit to a couple of year's lessons have gone. Of course, even if this is a success some people will drift away unless there is a suitable game for them to play in. One club I know of runs a game each week for inexperienced players. They play slightly fewer boards, they don't allow the more esoteric systems, they expect good behaviour and it is very popular. Of course, you have to probably have both your own premises and enough students to make this likely to be a success. The message of this club and others is that first you have to get the teaching right, then you have to get the game right that students will play in. The hope is that once new players have learnt a bit, played in supervised lessons and played in a novice duplicate, they will be ready for the full game. The club has to get this right too.

Is Bridge enjoyable?

Will you go to a game where you are amongst the worst players, get 32% each week and then have to suffer players complaining about your speed, your failure to alert, announce and stop appropriately and worst of all lecturing you, uninvited, on how you should have endplayed your left hand opponent or should have bid 6♣ because it was 'obvious'. The answer

is not for very long. That means the club committee has to create the right atmosphere. Everyone will get upset from time to time, but what happens if it is a regular occurrence. At my local club they introduce guests and newcomers at the start of an evening. Nearly everyone will greet people and tell them their names when they sit down. Few people proffer advice unless asked. The net effect is that the club (and there are plenty more like it) will more than likely prosper. About ten years ago, the EBU introduced Best Behaviour at Bridge. It evolved from a US code of 'zero tolerance'. Does your club use it or something like it? You can find detail at <http://www.ebu.co.uk/documents/laws-and-ethics/articles/best-behaviour-at-bridge.pdf>. But it is about creating the right atmosphere of which this is only a part.

Flexibility

One of the questions posed at the beginning was related to flexibility. Is there a case for starting earlier, playing fewer boards or playing at a different time of the day. There is no doubt that the daytime session has become very popular in some parts of the country. It won't suit those who work regularly, but it will suit some players who may be getting to the point that travelling at night is no longer at all enjoyable. A weekend afternoon session may appeal to working players and others. Certainly, events taking place at weekends attract those too busy during the week. Those who have more limited time in the evening because of pressures of work may prefer that, at least some of the time, they play online where a shorter session or even one that starts at a seemingly very anti social time is preferable. There is an affiliated online Bridge Club (Bridge Club Live at <http://www.bridgeclublive.com/>); it gives master points and the EBU also organises an online knock-out tournament each year.

Like most games, bridge will have to be more flexible in years to come if it is to survive. A good starting point is to teach more new players and be nicer to them and more encouraging when they arrive at the club to play. ■