



Steve Eginton

The national bridge teams should be privately sponsored

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at elena@ebu.co.uk

THE question of 'sponsors' has always been one of the most emotive issues in bridge. Over the years the numbers of playing sponsors has grown exponentially and it is now a good time to try and examine, dispassionately, the ways in which this has changed the game, and whether that impact is beneficial or destructive.

To do that it is important to define what we mean by a 'sponsor' and how we use the expression. Only then is it possible to analyse the effect that they have.

Image and definition

In fact the word 'sponsor' is a misnomer. No one would object to a sponsor who invests for commercial or altruistic reasons, like Vodafone in motor racing. But this is rare in bridge because commercial opportunities are limited and it is not a spectator game. Although there have been occasional altruistic sponsors, these are a rarity. In reality what we are discussing are 'patrons', who create a team about them in order to improve their success rate and personal standing in the game.

But the word is also used as a euphemism because there is an underlying assumption that a patron is buying success and is a weaker player than his team mates. This is not always the case: patrons in the USA, some Nordic countries, and here as well, are often as strong as some of their team members – but often they are not called 'sponsors' when this is the case.

Originally, patrons were deprecated at all levels, but at national, county and even at club level, they are now quite common and the client-professional relationship has become indistinguishable from the teaching relationship, so the issue revolves almost exclusively around international teams.

There is a view that including a patron results in a weaker team than if all players were the 'best' players, and that this is the root cause of the decline of British teams' performance at international level.

Empirical evidence

The question of the 'decline' of our national teams, however, is really quite simple. In the open game we have won one world championship in 1955 – in the days when only two teams contested the Bermuda Bowl and there were only about half a dozen front-line teams. We have never won an Olympiad and in Europeans our one success since the mid-60s was in 1991. The fact is that in the early days there was much less competition, and we have dropped down the ladder.

In the women's game we have fared better but are not as strong as we once were. I would say that we have not been underperforming in either series as a result of patrons. In fact the open team has rarely contained a patron, whilst recently we have had three patrons of women's teams (two undoubtedly of international standard).

Almost all USA teams and many other successful teams have included patrons.

How can we perform better in the international arena?

The other change in recent years is that virtually every medal-winning team is entirely professional and, as in every other sport, professionals require payment. If they do not have patrons, they will go where they can find them. Obviously the USA is a draw and many top players have gone there, from Britain and other European countries. However, the patronage here

attracts players too. Five players of the semi-final teams in our last European trial have represented other countries.

I believe that if we wanted to improve our international teams' performance we could do it easily, but it would require finance. The advantage that we could give our teams is in preparation. We could provide round-the-year coaching to squads, full logistical and medical support at events, and the best accommodation. If we had the funds of the LTA or the ECB we could have central contracts as well.

However, the membership wouldn't wear it. Several EBU members complain about the current spending, despite the fact that the funding was originally planned (in the '50s) for two series and is only now being exceeded for the six series in Olympiad years – and about 40% of that is spent on the three junior teams. In fact there is pressure to put the 2008 Olympiad team out to tender, because of this view.

In my opinion, if we want competitive professional international teams, we need them to be funded and managed, and that in practice means patrons. In a recent article, one patron, Janet de Botton, pointed out that an advantage of patronage is a stable team and also one that gets on well together, rather than a group that may be thrown together as a result of a trial or subjective assessment.

In fact, I think that the wealthier patrons could, and sometimes do, add more than that and probably always would if attitudes towards them were less hostile. In most sports being a professional is a full-time occupation. Putting an international team together could involve a much more structured long-term plan, involving regular training and analysis, full back-up services, acclimatisation periods at events and ⇒

The national bridge teams should not be privately sponsored

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Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

SHOULD we have a private sponsor for the England team?

At first glance, this seems like a simple question. What possible objection could there be to some altruistic person voluntarily sponsoring the England bridge team, thereby saving the Union (i.e. the members) a significant amount of money?

However, first impressions can be misleading. Further examination suggests that the answer is by no means clear-cut, and that private sponsorship is, at the very least, a mixed blessing.

For what is meant by the 'England bridge team'? Does it just mean the players, or does it include the captain and coach, essential adjuncts to a team? Unless everyone is treated equally, friction will inevitably result. Yet the position of the non-playing members may not be uppermost in the mind of a potential sponsor.

As long ago as 1949, there was comment in the bridge press about perceived divisions in the ranks of the Great Britain team (which won that year's European

Championship). It was noted that the team members were split amongst a number of Paris hotels: in those days, the team were responsible for their own expenses, so it was perhaps inevitable that the more moneyed members stayed in better accommodation.

More recently, in 1988, three members of our Open team stayed in the best hotel on the Venice Lido, leaving the other members (and the entire Women's team) in the perfectly adequate, though not luxurious, hotel paid for by the British Bridge League. As might be imagined, this was not conducive to team harmony. I know – I was there.

Unless one is extremely fortunate in obtaining sponsorship from a wealthy person who wants no more than for the team to do well (there are such people, but not many), the sponsor will be a playing member of the team. This means that the team will be weakened, since it is not at all likely that the sponsor will be an international-class player.

⇒ so forth. Where the patrons are less strong than the rest of their team, their involvement in this would be certain to bring them closer to standard, assuming they have any natural ability at all.

If we have any ambition for our teams' success, we cannot seriously expect gifted amateurs, or underprepared and underfunded professionals, to deliver it for us. To produce world-beaters requires a professionally structured plan, preparation and cash. Expecting a fairy godmother to materialise, as in Australia, is unrealistic.

It would be nice if the EBU were able to dedicate itself to its international teams, which after all is a fundamental task of

national bodies in all sports. However, without both the ability to provide funding and the will at all levels to do so, we have to accept that this is not going to happen. The national body can perhaps assist by investing in coaching standards and, if requested by patrons, some levels of consultancy and logistical backup.

But when it comes down to it, patrons are our best chance to create and prepare English teams that are consistently competitive at the top level. □

The views expressed by Steve Eginton are his own and do not represent the policies or views of the Selection Committee of which he is a member.



Richard Fleet

THE DEBATE

Although playing in better company will of course improve someone's standard, geese do not turn into swans. Someone who has not been good enough to warrant selection for a county event will not suddenly become a world-beater. The notion that a wealthy person can buy a seat on an international team is deplorable – the England team should consist of the best players, not the richest ones. And it is no solution for the sponsor to become non-playing captain or coach: these are difficult roles requiring skills and effort, not sinecures.

There is already private sponsorship in the game – the entry list for the Spring Foursomes in recent years bears ample witness to this – and it causes problems. One of the perennial issues faced by the Selection Committee is practice and preparation for international events. It is difficult to find free dates in a crowded calendar, and disheartening to be told that one of the pairs will not be available on any weekends because of their pre-existing commitments to a generous sponsor. Of course, he who pays the piper calls the tune, and no criticism of the players involved is implied.

In summary, the only form of private sponsorship that is acceptable is one that:

- Treats all the members (playing and non-playing) of the team equally;
- Does not weaken the strength of the team;
- Leaves the players free to prepare properly for the event.

The Italians are fortunate enough to have such a sponsor (Maria Teresa Lavazza), and the results are there for all to see. Who will find us our Lavazza? □