



Is Bridge a Sport?

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 Why is it important that bridge might be recognised as a sport? Is there much chance of this happening?

A This is a timely question as, in January of this year, the High Court ruled that the English Bridge Union could not proceed further in its quest to have bridge recognised as a sport. That represents the end of the road as far as legal action is concerned, at least for the moment. So why does it even matter? Is it just about money?

What is a sport anyway?

When this topic is discussed, it frequently starts with a pub-like disagreement as to what constitutes a sport, with points about physical activity and competition being made. There was a good moment in the EBU's first hearing against the imposition of VAT on competition entry fees, when the HMRC lawyer went on at length about anything that was a sport, not only involving physical activity but having participants who were fit and healthy. 'I expect you mean darts,' came from our lawyer (sotto voce) to the amusement of at least one of the judges. I suppose the first point is one of fairness. Why is bridge defined as a sport in some countries, including ones in the EU, but not in the UK? Why are some activities defined as sports and others not? The list of those that are in England is more than a touch arbitrary. Baton twirling? Model Aircraft flying? Dragon Boat Racing? It sounds like an evening in watching Eurosport 2. Of course, widening the list means the funding may have to go more ways, but it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that the list should be a bit more consistent and logical.

One of the ways in which bridge's status as a possible sport might be determined is by reference to Parliament. The last time they spoke on the matter, it was to include bridge in the definition of sport used by a body such as the Charity Commission. Bridge now has a charity EBED (English Bridge Education and Development) and around 20 affiliated clubs are now registered as charities. One argument put forward by our lawyers was that Sport England should use a modern definition made by Parliament, rather than relying on an 80 year old law. The IOC and Sport Accord both recognise bridge. Erasmus+, an EU sport funding programme also recognises bridge.

Sometimes people use the expression Mind Sport, which includes not only bridge but other activities such as chess and go.

Why does it matter?

Sport, Mind Sport, Game, Activity. What's the difference?

In the 1930s, when bridge was relatively young, it got a lot of publicity at national level. Bridge matches between Great Britain and the USA were widely publicised as tests of skill, yet the police arrived at a bridge congress in Harrogate in 1935 because of, they said, the existence of gambling. Last year, a number of bridge players, including UK expats, were disturbed by the police in Pattaya during a duplicate and arrested. There was apparently a crackdown on vice ordered by the military government.

The battle to have bridge regarded as a game of skill and not a gambling game went on in the UK for more than fifty years. As long as people, in general, and the Government, specifically, regarded it as a gambling game, it wasn't going to be promoted in

schools, for example. The view of some head teachers was that all card games involved the 'devil's play things' and were not to be countenanced. However, this battle has been won and you should not expect the police to turn up at your weekly game, well not for anything to do with gambling anyway.

In 1970, over 250 schools took part in a national competition sponsored by the *Daily Mail* and Peter Donovan, its bridge correspondent. In some schools, teaching bridge is linked to mathematical skills, but there is no formal link to the national curriculum and nor will there be until there is more formal recognition of the game. That battle has been won in some European countries such as Sweden. A quote from a USA citizen who came to observe a youth training event, 'To see seventh and eighth graders sitting and concentrating for three hours, it never happens except in bridge.'

It would be foolish to suggest that money has nothing to do with the arguments. Bridge clubs benefit from grants from, for example, local authorities. Recognition would unlock greater possibilities of funding from the National Lottery. There was a story in the press at the start of this year about a bridge club (unaffiliated), which applied for and got funding to help some club members participate in a director training course, run by EBED and the EBU. This council may have been more enlightened than some, but a rise in recognition and reputation can only help. As to why there should be recognition and funding – it is a good idea to look at how our game can assist society.

Benefits of bridge

Introducing bridge, or its younger brother mini bridge, into schools can

improve mathematical skills and social skills. It gets volunteers involved. However, the two hardest things in increasing this do not include funding. It is a matter of getting volunteers and once that is achieved, being able to get into schools and past those who think of bridge and smoky rooms, green eyeshades and dubious practices in the same breath. Is it fair? Of course not, but when our national press illustrates a story on bridge with photos showing some retired colonels dressed in plus fours in golf clubs, sipping large gin and tonics before the sun has gone over the yardarm, it is perhaps not that surprising. I invited one of the bigger press photo agencies to the EBU Summer Congress to take some more realistic pictures for their libraries but was ignored, sadly.

It is not, of course, just about schools. We are living longer and many want more social and leisure activity after retirement. Taking bridge lessons from scratch or, perhaps going back to something you learnt forty years ago, can give you access to a whole new social environment, so when we hear government bang on about social inclusion, then bridge has an important part to play whether it is at home, in the local club or at the local U3A group.

Then there are health benefits. There is some evidence that activities such as bridge (or the Sudoku puzzle for that matter) can help to delay the onset of dementia-like illnesses by keeping the brain active. Bridge, on the whole, is more sociable than some other activities like completing the crossword. Much of the evidence comes from the USA, such as the

2008 finding published in the *American Journal of Public Health*. It suggested that social ties through community groups, involving activities such as bridge, can preserve brain health, therefore EBED's attempts to add to the body of evidence, in England, will be important in the fight for greater recognition.

Participation

The number of universities with bridge clubs is smaller than it once was. The winning team, in the British Universities Championship for the Portland Bowl, qualifies to play in a European Universities event, except that it doesn't. Because bridge is not recognised as a sport by the British Universities and Colleges Sport, participation for our teams in this event is denied. I think that for the first time in quite a lot of years, the EBU will have more than 500 junior members in 2017 (still not quite 1% of membership). That's a welcome landmark but when you compare it with countries such as France, Poland or the Netherlands, it is a drop in the ocean. In Poland, bridge is recognised by the Polish Olympic Authority. Bridge is taught and played in many schools, they have well over 10,000 juniors, they pick up a disproportionate number of medals in the junior events and, in due course, this will filter through to the full open team.

For the future

If we can get to a position where there is more recognition for bridge and other equivalent activities, then we will all be better off. Those who play will get help and acknowledgement. Society as a whole will benefit from

mind sport-type activities both in the field of health and also social inclusion. It's already happening in other countries. I've mentioned European countries already, but bridge will be a part of the Asian Games next year and it was on the short list, but not eventually chosen, for the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020.

In short, I would argue that whether you end up calling bridge a sport, a mind sport or neither of those, it should be high on the list of activities to be promoted by our government to all age groups, because it has a public benefit. The EBU may have lost its recent court battle (not the first time this battle has been fought), but I think the national organisation should be seeking to raise the profile of the game and promote it. If you agree let your local MP know. Several MPs turned up recently at a match between school children and members of the House of Lords, organised by the EBU, and they were impressed by what they saw. If bridge got the recognition it asks for and perhaps some access to funding or relief from VAT, then amongst the things that could happen would be:

- A nationwide programme of minibridge in schools using accredited teachers.
- The production of learning material for beginners at all levels.
- Grants for clubs to help them upgrade their facilities.
- Reduced entry fees for competitions.
- Training weekends for players at all levels.
- Training programmes for bridge teachers. ■

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