



What to do about Declining Numbers

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 has declining numbers. How can we stop and reverse this?

A I answered a question a few months ago which focused on making the club a more welcoming place for people to attend. If the behaviour is good, members are welcoming and the club committee's view is to ensure the game is enjoyable. This will all help, but to me the key for the long term is the ability to attract new people to the game. I was taken to task by one reader after my previous article for allegedly suggesting that only some people were welcome as new members (young middle-class professionals). This is far from the case for most clubs which have seen a decline in membership in recent years. They want to attract new members from anywhere locally, young or old and irrespective of class. There are some shining examples of clubs whose membership has increased and these clubs are vibrant and successful, so what is the secret?

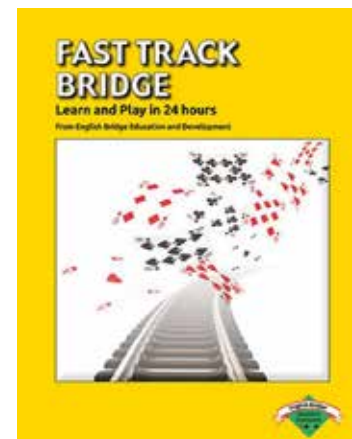
New members needed, please

I think the key to attracting new members is teaching. Some clubs will have premises in which they can run lessons and attract new members, whilst other smaller clubs may not have the facilities to be able to do this and will need teachers from the surrounding area who teach privately. Perhaps one of the first things to do is to establish the most likely market for lessons and members. Teaching

those in schools may well attract some new players, but inevitably many will be lost to the game as family and work commitments take priority. Of course, they may return to the game later, but by that time what may have happened to the clubs? A better short term policy may be to seek to teach people who are coming up to retirement and are looking for an increase in their leisure activities and pursuits. If your club has the facilities to teach, then the next questions are: who does the teaching and what do they teach? EBED, the bridge charity, runs a teaching association and it also runs courses to help people teach. The main method is called *Bridge for All* and any prospective teacher who does a course is automatically enrolled in the teaching association EBTA (English Bridge Teachers Association). You can find more detail here: <http://www.ebedcio.org.uk/teach>. The courses are open to both members and non-members of the EBU. The course comprises modules over a two year period. That has been the traditional way to teach bridge and EBED have materials to support this for those who wish to teach the *Bridge for All* course. This is not the only way of learning and there are some perfectly good teachers out there who don't follow this method and weren't trained by EBED, or in the past by the EBU. However, it is a bit more pot luck and there are bad as well as good teachers out there. Ask any existing teacher just how much time it took to prepare all their material and you will quickly realise that the answer is, 'a great deal.' *Bridge for All* provides teachers with a complete set

of professionally produced teachers' notes, including supporting resources for each topic with student exercises, quizzes, selected hands to play and commentaries. *Bridge for All* is much more than just a set of course materials. You will also be offered training in the use of the materials and how to adapt them as necessary to suit your individual style. Advice is provided on how to set up and organise your classes; with guidance on how to develop your students to become players and gain maximum enjoyment from their bridge activities. Your students will become EBU members and will be able to participate in the EBU's Really Easy Events, geared towards the newcomer to the game. Perhaps your club may be able to identify some people who wish to teach bridge, wish to earn a little money from it and will end up benefiting your club by attracting new members. Win-Win, as they say.

Learning the fast way



The traditional way of learning may not suit everyone, so EBED are

introducing a new course called *Fast Track Bridge*.

It's ready now and, by the time you read this, there will be some (free) preview sessions, for any bridge teacher, to launch it. There is one at the Summer Congress in Eastbourne on August 8th if you happen to be playing, or live nearby, and are interested. Other areas of the country are also served (see <http://www.ebedcio.org.uk/Fasttrack>). So what is the difference between this and ordinary established ways of teaching?

The course seeks to get participants to the table and playing very much more quickly than the traditional course and may appeal to those who don't want to spend up to two years learning to play. The course can be done in environments which don't lend themselves to the traditional approach, such as on holiday or over a weekend or as a stand-alone course. One way or another, participants should be able to play more quickly than at present. Of course, they won't be ready for the cut and thrust of the club duplicate after a weekend and a couple of follow up sessions, so those clubs which can offer duplicates for relative beginners, perhaps with a slower pace and fewer boards will assist in developing these players. The idea of learning bridge in a shorter time is not new and there have been *Learn in a weekend* type courses around for a while. These have helped the clubs that have run them to attract new members, many of whom have gone on to participate at club level.

Learning to play bridge is pretty demanding as there seem to be so many aspects: the bidding, play, defence, regulations, etiquette etc. Getting across only the essentials and accepting that those who have learnt won't be experts in such a short period is critical and I think we have to try something different to attract new players. If you doubt this, then look at your club membership and ask yourself some questions. Is the membership increasing or decreasing? What is the average age? What is the weekly attendance? If you are depressed by some of the answers then perhaps this is a possible way forward. If you doubt that learning is complex then consider this list:

- Say what suits, tricks, trumps and scoring are.
- Understand how the game is played.
- Plan how to take the tricks in a simple no-trump contract.
- Draw trumps and play a simple suit contract.
- Defend a hand, making leads and following suit as required.
- Open the bidding with a 1NT bid and make appropriate responses.
- Open the bidding with a suit and respond to the opening bid.
- Recognise whether this is a game or part-score hand.
- Play a social game with friends or in a small friendly game in class.
- As a declarer, plan and play the hand.
- As a defender, choose and play a sensible opening lead.
- Work out how contracts might be beaten.
- Compete when the opponents open the bidding, choosing between suit and no-trump overcalls and take-out doubles.
- Respond after partner opens or overcalls with one no-trump.
- Be able to open the bidding with 2♣ to show very strong hands and respond.
- Be able to open the bidding with long weak suits and respond.
- Enjoy playing bridge at home or in the classroom and know about the opportunities for playing with others.
- Play bridge, not needing the teacher standing by.
- Enter a simple duplicate competition at the club.

All of these would be covered in a course, learning to play over a couple of years. A few of these are necessarily trimmed in *Fast Track Bridge*, but, they can be picked up later. Indeed, one aspect of a club's teaching can be the follow up lessons for players wishing to develop. It's not reasonable to expect each teacher to spend time by preparing their own materials, and one responsibility of a national bridge organisation is to promote the learning of the game by offering a variety of courses, helping to train teachers and increasing the number of students. ■

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Signals, Discards and Basic Defence
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27-29 Dec £252

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Competitive Bidding
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hosted by Bernard Magee

Ramada Resort Grantham

Marston, Lincs NG32 2HT



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Just Duplicate
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Twixmas

27-29 Dec £215

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Overcalling

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