



# Bring on the Juniors

*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](mailto:jeremy@mrbridge.co.uk)*

**Q** What are the EBU doing to encourage more juniors to play bridge? Isn't it the key to the future of our game?

**A** Are the young the future of bridge? Will they be the only way to keep the game going? Actually no, I don't think they will although the EBU and more recently EBED have had a commitment to bridge in schools. The short term fix, to avoid clubs dying out as their membership ages, is to get teaching and increase the numbers and target those coming up to retirement who may have more leisure time. I am quite heartened by the reaction to EBED's new product 'Fast Track Bridge' and hope that this and the more traditional way of teaching will prosper in more clubs over the next few years.

Juniors pick up bridge and minibridge quite quickly and are an important part of strengthening the roots of the game but, of course, the juniors that learn often give up for some years after leaving school or university because jobs and families intrude on their free time. Some come back after a number of years and it will be good if they have clubs and an EBU to come back to.

## To boldly go

There are some encouraging signs

around the country. Sussex hold a junior weekend event, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire also co-operate in running something similar.

As well as these initiatives there are groups of schools who have signed up to initiatives offered by a small number of clubs and counties. One such example is Stamford Youth Bridge Academy ([www.syba.org.uk](http://www.syba.org.uk)). They started their work with nearly 300 young people and starting this academic year have extended this to another 400+. If most of our bigger clubs could do the same the future of the game would be in safer hands.

The Tom Bradley award is given to a non-school teacher who does most to develop junior bridge in their area and this year it went to Jessica and Anton Mauve who are involved in a scheme in the Weald of Kent to get schools and clubs involved in junior bridge.

A significant part of the role of our sister charity, EBED, is to assist and promote these initiatives and run their own events. Two examples are: the Junior Teach In held in Loughborough which brings together all from raw recruits to junior internationals and the Youth Bridge Challenge held each March. [www.ebedcio.org.uk/junior\\_calendar](http://www.ebedcio.org.uk/junior_calendar) has details of junior events around the country. The All Party Parliamentary Group for Bridge led by Bob Blackman MP is keen on helping and, amongst other things, the group

invites schools to send students to the Houses of Parliament both to look around and also to play bridge against MPs and Peers.

## Junior Awards

An important recent development is a national junior award scheme formulated by one of our squad leaders, Alan Shillitoe and administered by EBED. The scheme breaks down the skills required to develop from raw rookie to serious contender into a set of steps and milestones which can be easily understood and evaluated in the classroom.

These skills (covering bidding, play and defence) are grouped into six progressive levels of attainment: Minibridge, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum and Diamond. Each level requires the satisfactory 'demonstration' of about twenty increasingly difficult elements of technique. So, at the lowest minibridge level successful candidates should be able to (in the play category):

- Count the total number of winners
- Knock out high cards to establish winners
- Draw trumps in a suit contract
- Count the points to work out where the outstanding cards lie
- Take a finesse against an outstanding card

As players go through the levels it gets more difficult and at the top level (Diamond award) those who are successful might well be in a junior squad and perhaps playing for England. So you can assess the card play skills required (there are other tested skills also) I have listed them below:

- Demonstrate a trump coup
- Demonstrate *coup en passant* and elopements
- By playing, show that you are counting every deal you play
- Be able to explain Smith Peters
- Demonstrate a simple squeeze

The last skill listed reminds me of the player in a local duplicate who at about trick nine laid her cards down and said, 'The rest are mine on a squeeze.' Sadly this wasn't true but this sort of ostentatious claiming can lead to problems. I enquired as to exactly what squeeze she had in mind. After a short break and a sigh or two she gave in and gave us the trick to which we were entitled.

Teaching people of any age to play is good for the EBU, the counties, the clubs and the players – we all need to do more. If your club offers teaching does it advertise? If it doesn't has it thought of co-operating with another local club? As far as juniors are concerned does your club welcome and encourage juniors?

Some juniors who learn at school are happy to play a little in school, perhaps at home and don't desire to spread their wings but others have a strong competitive desire.

The EBU has four squads of juniors (U16, U21, U26 and U26 Women). There are 58 juniors in the four squads at present. If you are thinking that 25 years old is quite old then be aware that a) when junior bridge first started in the late 1960s the maximum age was 35 and b) in many countries the average age of the membership today is quite advanced. In the ACBL in North America it is said to be 72.

As an aside there are now so many seniors aged over 60 that from the 1st January 2018 the minimum age will start to rise until it reaches 65 in 2026 so not only will people wait longer for

their pension but also to play bridge in seniors events.

## Junior Internationals

In each of our junior squads a squad leader organises training and this is not just for the team but others who want to participate. We had four teams, one in each category go to the European Junior Championships in July of this year.

All four of the teams qualified for the World Championship (you need to finish in the top six to do this) and two of the teams, U21 and U26 Women, won bronze medals.

A fine performance and one unmatched by any other European country. Couldn't be better you might think. The World Championships are in Wu Jiang, China which is around 100km from the centre of Shanghai. To get four teams there plus captains and coaches together with accommodation, food and other expenses will not be a cheap matter. The EBU will be putting up money for this not least because one of its duties as an organisation is to further our representation in international events and it is particularly pleasing that we have juniors doing so well. If they are to do well in China, and there is every hope that they will, then a programme of training and other squad activities will be taking place between now and next August.

We are also going to have a fund raising drive and some clubs, counties and individuals have already offered help. There is detail at [www.ebu.co.uk/sponsor/WYB2018](http://www.ebu.co.uk/sponsor/WYB2018) for anyone interested.

Back to the original question. Encouraging more juniors to play is one key to the future of our game. It's one where there are now more centres of excellence such as the ones mentioned above but we also need more to develop to have coverage for all the country. It is, however, only one part of the strategy. Teaching those who are older to learn to play or to come back to bridge is another part. Organisations such as U3A have bridge clubs in some of their branches. Making clubs pleasant environments is another. ■

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