



# Playing in the Club

*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** Are Life Masters and other highly ranked players killing the club scene by deterring newcomers?

**What is the point of handicap pairs if the ranking of the event is ignored for master point purposes? This shows me why the club scene is dying out with ever smaller numbers attending. Why bother to be cannon fodder for players who are already overloaded with master points? Such players only want to pair with each other and not act as friendly partners or mentors to newbies.**

**A** When players learn and feel confident enough to attend a normal club session they are, at first, going to struggle to get a good result but with practice their results will improve. In those clubs which have a strong teaching programme there are often players who will act as mentors for those who are inexperienced. In large clubs there may be a novice game to provide a stepping stone to the main game.

## Are clubs dying?

The idea that the 'club scene' is dying does not accord with facts I've seen. Indeed clubs affiliated to the English Bridge Union have seen attendances increase since Universal Membership was introduced in 2009. Clubs

do however have a battle to keep membership on an upward curve because new members are needed each year to replace those who have grown too old or infirm to come to the club and it is certainly true that we have had an ageing membership for some years.

As I have remarked before, those clubs who have a sound and successful teaching programme are the ones which will survive and prosper in the medium or long term.

Where clubs are too small or don't have their own premises this is obviously more difficult, but groups of clubs or the county could offer teaching which would benefit all. It's one advantage of belonging to a national organisation. One large county is undertaking a membership promotion campaign at present and decided it wished to offer help to one or two unaffiliated clubs as well as the affiliated ones. Sadly one that it targeted closed down through lack of members just before the programme could start. This will happen to clubs affiliated or unaffiliated unless they take steps to secure their own membership.

## Masterpoints and the NGS

I played a game in an American National in Toronto a few years ago

and at the end of a session a player approached the tournament director and said, 'When are you going to announce it?' He didn't really understand what she was talking about and explained where the results would be displayed, but it turned out she had done well enough in her match to become a life master after many years and wanted to know when this would be publicly announced. The director was not overly sympathetic when he finally understood but it does show, at least in North America, how seriously some take master points.

In England the scheme has been going for just over 60 years and if you play a couple of times a week and never venture outside your club then becoming a life master is not likely to happen.

One criticism of masterpoints is that they are a reward for longevity as much as they are for quality of play.

Nearly seven years ago it was decided to try something else to run alongside masterpoints and that is the National Grading Scheme.

This works by calculating a current grade for each player based on the last 80 or so sessions that they have played. The value of your current grade is the scheme's estimate of the percentage score that you would achieve, on average, if partnering another player with the same grade. If you partner a strong player you will need to do better

to keep your grade and if you partner a weaker player you won't have to do so well. It does provide interest and apart from the front page is the most popular page on the whole of the EBU website. People like looking to see if they have improved (or perhaps if their friends and acquaintances have dropped).

## Handicapping and stratification

If you play twice a week at the same club then 104 pairs' duplicates per annum, all of which are very similar, might be a bit samey after a while. Some clubs run simultaneous pairs (EBED ones and charity ones eg for Children in Need), others run an occasional teams competition or individual. All of this is to provide a bit of variety.

The idea of a handicap is not new or exclusive to bridge and it provides a change and may see some different players at the top of the field. Golfers play off a handicap and so do croquet players. It means you can still have a game even if you are mismatched to some extent. If the 24 handicap golfer is playing someone who is quite good and plays off six then he or she will have to give one stroke per hole. If the handicap is realistic it should make for a competitive game where one might not exist otherwise.

A club competition using handicaps can be organised on, say, a monthly basis for a championship. The handicaps can be worked out by someone in the club or be based on NGS ranking. However, masterpoints are awarded on the unadjusted ranking.

If masterpoints are important then a slightly different alternative is to try a stratified tournament. This divides the players into categories A, B and C according to masterpoint rank. At the end of the competition there is an overall ranking for masterpoints and a separate ranking for B and C also with their own masterpoints.

The EBU run a week of stratified pairs each March in clubs across the country. This might not work in a small club with only a few tables but can provide an alternative in medium and larger clubs.

## The role of the club Committee

Belonging to a club committee can be a thankless task but it can provide an opportunity for those who want to make their club more successful.

So far this article has talked of practical things that can be done, but there is also the element of making the club an inclusive place where people want to come.

If there isn't a mix of players then what about doing something to encourage this and make the club a friendlier place?

What about a Xmas party where it is the done thing to play with someone who is not your regular partner? What about an event like the ones suggested above which encourages players to mix? If the club is big enough how about a game once a week or month restricted to players of a certain rank or perhaps running two distinct sections on the same night?

There are many possibilities open to clubs but perhaps the biggest one is the atmosphere created to make newcomers and relative beginners welcome to the game. If they go round the room and are told they played or bid a hand wrongly or are sneered at for their inexperience, then perhaps they won't be so keen to come back and all the work done to create a good atmosphere and provide a programme players want is spoiled. Does your club use the Best Behaviour at Bridge code and make sure it is followed?

Let me end by telling you the story of two successful unaffiliated clubs.

The first has a strong teaching programme, a novice duplicate twice per week and a successful ordinary duplicate. Most novice players won't move to the more experienced game because some of the members are not very pleasant.

The second is similar but the owner won't allow this sort of behaviour and asked a few players who would not change not to return. In his club novice players do move up to the stronger game. They don't always do well to start with but they have a pleasant time and are encouraged to return. There is a lesson there somewhere. ■

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