



The Future

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 Do you think bridge has any future in England or anywhere else?

A Bridge, as we know it, is not all that old. Contract Bridge dates back to the mid 1920s, Auction Bridge for 30 or 40 years before that and the EBU to 23 May 1936. When the game first got going both here and in the USA, it was a world with relatively few other distractions.

Compare it to 2018 where TVs have 500+ channels to view, the internet, online gaming and 101 other things. Many activities that have been popular for many years are undergoing a challenge. If you go into most bridge clubs you'll see that most competitors have reached middle age or more. There will be few young people. When I started playing one event held was the Young Players Pairs (for those who were U26). This had three heats across the country and upwards of 200 pairs entering. Today, the same competition attracts only about twenty-five pairs. Some clubs have suffered declining numbers and a few have had to close because of lack of support.

Bridge may have problems as a pastime but it is hardly the only activity to do so. In the last decade participation in golf has declined from 1.54 million to 1.13 million. County Cricket grounds are nigh on empty for many first-class matches and since the Olympic Games were held in London

in 2012 the numbers participating in a sport once per week or more has dropped by around 9,000 – contrary to hopes at the time that they would markedly increase.

Adapting to the modern age

To know other activities may also have their problems isn't all that consoling, so where can bridge go if it is to survive? It can start by embracing modern technology. Most clubs have websites and many use electronic scoring. Clubs which are affiliated to the EBU can get grants to assist with scoring devices such as Bridgemates and, of course, EBUScore is free to all affiliated clubs.

Quite a few people both watch and play bridge online. Bridge Base online allows you to watch world championships and also to play without leaving the house. Funbridge organise competitions each weekend which attract 200+ participants (no partner needed). The software is free, you don't have to be an EBU member (although you do if you want to win masterpoints) and you can get details from www.ebu.co.uk if you want to know more. I suspect that more people will use computers, phones and tablets as time passes so becoming more involved in the online world is one way to both survive and prosper.

When the new laws came into

force earlier this year, explanations of the laws and how they would affect players were covered in traditional courses. The world of YouTube has also been used for those who want to learn remotely and those who wanted to seek clarification. A new laws forum has been set up for directors and organisers to discuss problems that arise with the laws and scoring (www.ebu.co.uk/forum). You have to register before you can comment but anyone can read.

Volunteers

Not everyone is keen to play online and for many the visit to the club is a good way to meet people as well as having fun. Most clubs are members' clubs and they rely on volunteers. Typically your game costs a lot less than most social activities. £2.50 and perhaps a cup of tea included is quite common but your club needs a committee to help it plan and organise events, it needs people to collect table money and direct and make the tea and coffee. It's getting harder to find volunteers, something that is also seen at national level where people who sit on the Board, committees etc are all volunteers as are the many people who work at county level. Of course if the person collecting table money or membership subs is confronted with moans from people who think they ought to get their game for next to nothing and make clear their

resentment at having to pay 25% of the cost of a cinema ticket instead of 20%, then said volunteer may well decide to do something else like skydiving! Being a director can also be a thankless task as some bridge players can be quite argumentative and that doesn't just apply to the more competitive ones. Running a successful club which welcomes people and gives them a good time is also a way to help the game continue.

Attracting more people

People are finding other things to do and the bridge population is ageing. How can this be countered? Teaching people to play is key in this area. I wrote several months ago about *Fast Track Bridge* which is a new product designed to get people to the table much faster than conventional teaching methods. It suits some and I am glad to say has attracted a number of teachers to run the courses. The more traditional route is supported by courses such as *Bridge for All* and there are also teachers who don't use any of those products who teach successfully (I think that is a shame as they are very good teaching products). Clubs can promote teaching and get themselves a new supply of members. The EBU and its fellow charity EBED have taken on the job of producing teaching courses, helping to train teachers, keeping a database of existing teachers in order to help maintain the supply of students who will end up playing in our clubs. That's a good example of why a national organisation is needed if the game is to prosper. The short term fix is to teach people who are coming up to retirement age who find that they have more leisure time than previously. In the long term, of course, something that attracts the young is important even if many leave the game when job or family becomes quite demanding on their time. Many will return later.

Improving the image

At a local level if you have taught beginners they will only enjoy the

club game if the club has a pleasant environment and the members are also pleasant. Why join a club to be abused? Any local club has to give consideration to this and whether that means a code like Best Behaviour at Bridge or some more stringent action against those who offend is for the club to decide.

At national or international level it may be a matter of improving the image of the game. The stories of cheats and their methods over the last couple of years may bring some adverse publicity which may mean that a school thinking of introducing bridge is discouraged. In an ideal world, bridge would be a part of the curriculum as it is in other countries eg Sweden and Poland. I mentioned a few issues ago that there were areas as Stamford, Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, Sussex and West Kent where there are successful projects to involve schools with both bridge and mini bridge. Getting more areas involved and expanding this project is key to the future. At international level there is more acceptance of the idea of 'Mind Sports' and IMSA (the International Mind Sports Association) was formed over a decade ago. It held events at the same time as the Olympic Games in 2008, 2012 and 2016. One strong hope for the future is the East. Deng Xiaoping, when leader of China, gave bridge good treatment (he was keen on the game) and from this foundation has come many thousands of junior players. There was a tournament held in Lyon a few months ago alongside the world championships and the junior field was over 50% Chinese. Bridge will be a 'sport' in the next Asian Games.

Where do we go?

Bridge is a game which has survived the test of time. It is on a list of preferred activities by people all over the world perhaps because it is an inexhaustible game of skill. With 635,013,559,600 different hands you are unlikely to see the same one come round again soon. There are signs especially in the West that it is a game more for the old and fewer young people are playing. I've suggested above a few ways to slow

the decline and indeed by embracing new technology how the decline might be reversed. Things are significantly brighter in other parts of the world. We might look at how the game could change. When bridge was younger, although most thought the game was fine as it was, there were those who wanted to change it. Five-suit bridge lasted a short time.



The Eagle Suit

A variant of introducing a new suit (the Rex suit) to sit between spades and no-trumps but the ace was low lasted an even shorter time. It is a game where even if you have learnt the fundamentals, there is a sizeable step to learn the various regulations and procedures which follow. Perhaps we should look to simplifying the game to increase its attractiveness. The book of regulation in England is 32 pages today, not 72 pages as it was a few years ago, and I am not sure the game is any the worse for it. Indeed there are those who think two pages would be even better.

We need to build on the things the game has such as its element of competition. It isn't unique in the world of mind sports for that but it is perhaps more sociable. Many players also like to chat about the game and that used to involve meeting, but now the online world can assist with this. When the cheating scandals broke a couple of years ago, whatever the downsides (and there were many), it was the making of Bridgewinners (www.bridgewinners.com) allowing players from all over the world to comment, discuss and argue. So yes, to answer the original question, I believe bridge has a future. I suspect more will be online but face to face has many years left and the better it is looked after, the longer that will be. ■