



Bring on the New Players

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 In my local area, I see the same people all the time at the club and also when I venture out to local tournaments. How can we get new people involved?

Teaching is important

I was recently invited to Preston Bridge Club to open their newly refurbished premises and I thought they provided an object lesson in how to both maintain their current membership and also to get new players into the game.

First of all they have a pleasant refurbished environment and a lot of the work and planning was done by volunteers in the club. This creates a great atmosphere.

Secondly, you have read previous articles by me going on about the importance of teaching before and it won't surprise you I am about to mention it again. The club has not only beginners' lessons but also consolidation lessons for those who have got to the end of the beginners' course. Once you have taught new players, those taught there and perhaps elsewhere need somewhere to play.

Often relative beginners are slow and unsure so need a welcoming environment to start with where, perhaps, they play fewer boards. Even before this there can be some supervised play in order to make students feel more comfortable about playing.

The progression is lessons, consolidation, supervised practice, gentle duplicate, full duplicate. That's a lot of organisation not only to put on and teach lessons but for the club to have the necessary number of teachers.

Far-sighted clubs help volunteers get the training necessary for them to become teachers. EBED run courses precisely for this. Have a look at <http://www.ebedcio.org.uk/teach> if you or your club are interested. EBED doesn't mind whether your club is affiliated or not. I think it is important to have someone on the club committee who is responsible for the teaching programme and the students. It sends the right message about the importance of this.

When the new players make it to the normal club game it can be difficult if they encounter players who are terse and unhelpful, so it is important to create the right atmosphere. I asked a club manager about his success in getting relatively new recruits to the normal club game. He replied that the first thing he had to do was to chuck out about 6-8 long-standing club members who found it hard to be polite to anyone let alone relative beginners. That's probably a lot easier if the club is a proprietor owned one rather than a members' one and I'm not sure a major cull is necessarily the way to go but it does point to the importance of creating the right atmosphere whatever your club's aims are.

Involving new players

One thing I am frequently told is that club players have no ambition to move on, that new players do not want to play in the better game at their club let alone go to a tournament. Whilst not everyone wants to visit a tournament 150 miles away, it is important to stage events that are suitable and enjoyable for less experienced players. Getting outside your immediate circle has much to commend it. Two new initiatives to mention are, first, a national one. The EBU has just put on a 'Jack High' tournament to go with the Easter Festival. It is what it says on the tin, ie available only to those who have an NGS rating of Jack or below with some prizes reserved for those with an NGS of nine or below. The tournament costs less than usual and the players should feel more comfortable as fewer boards are played.

In my local county they have decided to put on a tournament aimed at newer players who may not wish to travel a long way to play. Again it is restricted, this time, to those 10 or under on the NGS. The county have contacted clubs who have teaching programmes, whether they are affiliated or not to invite entries and at the time of writing it has already attracted a decent size field with some weeks to go.

Is it safe?

Famously this is a line delivered by

Laurence Olivier, a dentist and also a war criminal, whilst holding some very unpleasant dental equipment next to Dustin Hoffman, who has no idea what he is talking about. It's something which applies to games for new players in my view. Is the event, whether in a club or further afield, likely to be something you want to go back to? If an event has too many boards or the experienced players complain about slow play, bidding, the laws etc, then the newcomers will be discouraged from attending in the future.

A fundamental is that your club has to have a way of welcoming new players into the game. If you are big enough to organise supervised play, a newcomers game, perhaps with fewer boards will likely help, but if not then your regular players will need to adapt if there is to be a game at your club in years to come. Similarly even if there is a newcomers' game, eventually the idea will be for players to graduate.

So to go with the welcoming bit, the new events and the club committee member charged with ensuring some teaching happens, you also need a firm code of conduct. We could call it 'Best Behaviour at Bridge' but any name will do. You must expect your members to be pleasant to newcomers and to be tolerant if they don't get every little nuance of the game right. In general, for example, if there is a hesitation then a) it probably doesn't mean all that much and b) it is unlikely that in most cases beginners will know how to take illicit advantage, so the only harm comes when the experienced player makes a couple of cheap jibes about ethicality and follows that with a stentorian call for the director. Then he describes the situation to the director in the most unflattering way. Really this is just bullying. It is a good idea for beginners to have something brief about ethics in their lessons, not so much as to be off-putting but enough to know that one doesn't give the thumbs up to approve of a bid or play! It is also a good idea to have the aforementioned code of conduct and to deal with any players who make the lives of others unpleasant. When you have your code you need to enforce it. To avoid losing members, a gentle

campaign may be more effective than a draconian one. Try asking for any call for the director to be below 75 decibels and accompanied by the word 'please'. In one club I play in you hear a call for 'technical director' which is the player's way of saying something has gone wrong with the scoring machine or someone has 16 cards and nothing ethically challenging has happened at the table. In short you don't need the Witchfinder General to deal with the recalcitrants but you do need to create the right atmosphere in the club.

Bring on the robots

If beginners feel unsure and they know they are slow then one possibility might be to play some bridge online to build up confidence. These days you can play with robots. One example game is Funbridge (<https://www.funbridge.com/en/>). You can play at a time of your choosing, at a speed you want and as frequently or infrequently as you wish. You can start, stop for a couple of hours and then pick up again. Your robot is most obliging and will play any system you want. Funbridge is French in origin but its grasp of Acol has improved in the last few months so weak no-trump and four-card majors is fine as a system.

If you enjoy the game then there is also a more competitive game run via the EBU. You don't have to be a member unless you want to register the master points that go with it. Best of all no robot that you play with will be critical or sigh in a meaningful way if you go down in a solid contract. The robots themselves are not completely beyond criticism on occasion although they are getting more reliable. Just as you learn whilst going along, the engine which determines the robot's play is updated quite frequently to correct errors and improve bidding. You can play on your computer or laptop, tablet or phone. It even understands the Apple system so iPads are OK to use.

If you feel that robots are a touch impersonal then perhaps going away with others for a bridge weekend with like minded players might help. I'm told Mr Bridge organises a few of those! ■

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