



Changing The Guard

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 We are now living in a time when instant gratification is important to many, including especially the younger generation. Whether it is video gaming, instant messaging or something else, this is a far cry from the genteel world of a nice game of bridge accompanied by tea and biscuits.

Unless we make bridge more enticing, even exciting, we will struggle to attract the influx of younger players we are looking for. This problem is not confined to bridge. I know little about cricket but it seems to me that the authorities, around the world, have felt it necessary to make major changes to bring in the crowds and enliven the game. In this respect, I am thinking particularly of limited over cricket including Twenty20. And now, I think I read that a 100 ball innings game is being considered. This is all a far cry from two-innings county cricket on a peaceful midweek afternoon in Olde England. Perhaps the Indian Premier League (IPL) is an example of major change?

I think that making bridge more exciting is part of what is required if there is to be a better approach to attracting younger players. Which brings me to the scope for making changes to bridge, at least in relation to introducing them to

a starter's version of the game. Changes could include:

- Find ways to speed up the game.
- Eliminate as many rules as possible.
- Adjust dealing algorithms to generate livelier, bigger hands.
- Scoring: consider changing the game and slam bonuses; penalties etc. to make it more attractive to bid games, slams and to make sacrifices potentially less expensive.
- Throw in part-score hands.

I recognise that my suggestions are probably not new and that you and colleagues may already have given considerable thought to all this. But, maybe, just maybe, it would be worth looking again at how it might be possible to make bridge more exciting.

As for the purists – maybe it is better to get more people actively playing, whether online or face-to-face, than it is to preside over the terminal and accelerating decline of the old game.

A The place to start is to imagine where our bridge clubs will be in, say, 30 years time.

A look around many clubs suggests that the majority of the membership is aged over 60 now, so it's clear that

unless something happens many if not most clubs won't be viable by that time. If we want the basic structure of our game to continue, then we need more players and that will only come about through teaching. Many clubs can't or won't teach and they are in the most danger. Clubs who do have a successful teaching programme are putting off the evil day and some are expanding year on year.

It is important to identify the appropriate age ranges to teach. Much energy in the past has been devoted to young players, but in club membership terms for a tiny, not to say, infinitesimal, return.

Yorkshire are currently piloting a membership campaign. The early returns are encouraging and it will spread to some more counties next year.

It's not cricket

Those who follow cricket are used to seeing stories about the possible demise of test cricket and the new formats which attract sizeable crowds. Sadly, many test matches outside England, India and Australia are played in front of tiny crowds. Those who do watch are not patient with a five-day format which may not end in any result. This societal impatience can also be seen in those who don't want to spend a significant length of

time learning to play bridge. That's one important reason for the development of the new Fast Track Bridge teaching programme. In cricket the new shiny glitzy IPL attracts big crowds and big money, so are there any lessons to be learned here?

Slow play in the game does annoy people and put them off. It is perhaps one reason why some desert to the online game. Does your club address this? When I used to live in London I was put off a club that always seemed to start 8-10 minutes late and finish 20-25 minutes late all because no-one attached any priority to progressing the game. It became a chore not a pleasure so I went less often. I imagine I was not alone. It's only a small step but doing something via the director or the club committee or by introducing some technology might help speed up the game.

The laws of the game are the province of the World Bridge Federation, although the EBU gets blamed for bits people don't like. The WBF have devoted their energy to the concept of rectification rather than punishment in the laws, so getting the board played wherever possible is a priority.

Although we should rely on our directors to know the laws in detail rather than the players, a simpler code would probably help everyone. Similarly in the matter of regulation, which is in the hands of the EBU, there is a case for greater simplicity. Whilst I was chairman of the Laws & Ethics Committee I helped organise for the regulations book (the Blue Book) to go from 74 pages to 32. Removing verbiage and a host of exotic agreements helped this. I don't think the world has changed much so the extra pages are not missed. There is scope for greater work here I suspect. Whilst most regulations have a sound reason for existence, the resulting complexity is undoubtedly a barrier, especially for beginners. The American authority (the ACBL) got rid of the stop card on January 1st 2018. That doesn't mean removing the obligation to pause appropriately in an auction, but it does mean one fewer card in the bidding box and one fewer process whereby beginners are lambasted by some for a small technical infringement.

Ringling the changes

Scoring has been relatively static for some time, with the last significant change involving penalties and redouble bonuses being more than 30 years ago. Would the game change, and if so for better or worse, if the bonus for, say, a grand slam, was doubled or penalties increased? Backgammon has a doubling cube that allows games to be played for 16 or 32 times the original. Is this an idea for bridge?

Are there other changes to scoring or other formats which would re-invigorate the game. In clubs nearly all games are matchpoint pairs and some players are reluctant to try other things. Handicap Pairs, IMP Pairs and Speedballs are all ideas which have been floated in some places with varying degrees of popularity. Teams leagues have become popular in some clubs and counties.

When bridge first became popular in its current recognisable form in the 1930s it wasn't long before some started tinkering. Five suit bridge was one such proposed variation. Somehow having to hold more cards in the hand did not appeal and it did not last long. I quite liked another idea of having a 'Rex' suit which came between spades and no-trumps (no extra cards) and the only difference from no-trumps was that the ace was low not high. It didn't catch on either, but would have given rise to some interesting problems of hand evaluation – my 16 count has become a 0 count!

One change that is here to stay, I suspect, is the online game. Those who like bridge but don't wish to travel to the club on a wet and windy evening have a place to play. Generally the game has as many hands but does not last as long so is ideal for busy people who get home from work and can't make it to the club for 7 or 7.30.

I mentioned Funbridge in my last article and that is the game the EBU run, but it is open to non-members. Bridge Club Live and Bridge Base Online also run similar games. If you are an insomniac you can still play, as many of the series are worldwide and attract players from many countries.

As an aside, the biggest expense of international competition is travel

and accommodation. If the problems of security can be resolved we may yet have championships where people don't have to travel to the other side of the world.

What's next?

I suspect we can take two approaches. The current game will improve if we employ more technology as we have been doing for 40 years. Computer deals and scoring, websites, tablets to score at the table, instant results etc. All of these changes have come despite some players saying they won't catch on or that they are a bad idea. Technology does, however, require more expertise at the club and some expense. The director used to worry about a revoke or worse the movement going wrong. Today his worry extends to whether the laptop and Bridgemates survive the evening.

It is the case, however, that more root and branch reform is needed to take our game into the second half of this century. If bridge in any form is found to have a significant role in delaying or preventing the deterioration of mental processes e.g. dementia, then this will be good publicity for bridge and can be used to promote the game. The bridge charity, EBED, is commissioning some research on this topic.

Maybe the time has come for some invigoration. After all, the bridge of the 1930s had far fewer alternatives than can be found now, so we need something to make our game develop, prosper and appeal to a wider audience. Maybe then the newspapers will give up on the picture of four people dressed as if in an Agatha Christie novel, sipping a G+T whenever bridge is mentioned. ■

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