

Competition Strategy Sub-Committee

Remit and Background

The remit of the sub-committee is to develop the EBU's Competition strategy as part of our overall strategic development. In order to survive and thrive in the next few years the EBU needs the right mix and balance of competitions to meet the requirements and aspirations of the membership.

The Memorandum of Association of the EBU is unequivocal about the role of the Union as a body responsible for the 'promotion and control ... of all duplicate and other competition bridge'. The Memorandum goes on to state that the role of the EBU is to 'promote, organise and manage, or provide for the promotion, organisation and management of contests, competitions and congresses whether national, international, or otherwise howsoever'. The final section of the Memorandum states that the EBU should do what is necessary 'to elevate and maintain the status and procure the advancement of the game of Bridge in England'

There can be little doubt that the competitive game has suffered a period of decline over the last few years. Fewer and fewer players playing in EBU competitions. This includes both teams and pairs events. However, the news is not all bad as the number of players playing in one-day County events seems to have held up which suggests that the market for bridge competitions has become segmented. One example of this is the international trials which are now being treated by many more players as a way of competing at a higher level.

The period since March 2020, has proved a difficult period for the EBU, particularly in terms of managing its financial viability. Having said this, the online game has afforded a number of new opportunities. For example, there is some evidence that the lockdown has ignited a passion for the game in a significant number of new players and that this has generated possibilities for membership development, online teaching and competitive play. This was clearly articulated in the last Annual Report of the EBU.

In November 2019 membership development was about extending our scheme of supporting clubs in recruiting new members and teaching, as well as plans to put on a best practice training event for clubs about how to grow. Then in March 2020 everything changed. Clubs stopped meeting and it was clear that we faced a huge challenge. The number of EBU player sessions plummeted, with the April figures being more than half composed of sessions run directly by the EBU on Bridge Base Online....

The success of EBU virtual clubs on BBO has persuaded some clubs to affiliate. However, the arrival of new online bridge platforms such as Real Bridge and clubs on Bridge Club Live means that the distinctive advantage of EBU virtual clubs will probably lessen and now that the renewal of club affiliations is under way, we can expect some to decide not to renew. We also noticed something else: that during lockdown fewer people are playing, but those that are playing, are playing more often. If you compare October 2020 to October 2019, for example, the number of player sessions is 61% of what it was, but the number of unique players only 46%. (Annual Report 1st Sept 2019 to 31st August 2020).

What had been a slow drift to the online game has become the new normalcy. The percentage playing online has continued to rise and currently stands at 50% of the membership (January 2021). It is likely that some proportion of the rest are playing casual (non UMS) bridge online. Those that are playing online are actually playing more bridge than they were when playing face-to-face bridge. All of this begs the question, how can we achieve the best mix of events in the future – face-to-face, online and hybrid, to meet the aspirations of the EBU and its membership. Appendix 1 contains some thoughts on the different between face-to-face and online games in different contexts.

In order to clarify the points in this paper, we have used the following terminology:

Competitions is a generic term to describe all of the competitive programme offered under an EBU banner and are subject to regulation by the EBU. It includes stand-alone competitive sessions of duplicate bridge (EBU Club and County **Games**) together with tournaments and congresses, and includes knock-out events.

Congresses are gatherings (primarily physical but also virtual) of bridge players at which a number of events take place over a limited period of time.

Tournaments covers events which take place over multiple sessions often on different dates, and includes championships, trials and knock-out events. It includes the Ranked Masters Pairs (a championship held over a weekend)

The EBU does (and should) run those competitions with a National rather than a County or local reach. This includes Pairs and Teams events in National Congresses. Most of these carry Green Points as an attraction. The intent of the EBU is to make sure enough, suitably controlled, opportunities to play bridge are available to the population of England. Some of this is left to others, some centrally controlled. The EBU minimises what it needs to run centrally and runs events when the following reasons apply -

- a) National championships need a national guardian, and have a history and status which needs to be retained.
- b) There is a gap in provision (style of game, spectrum for progression) not satisfied by clubs or counties. For example, where only nationally can you get the critical mass of players at this standard.
- c) On request, to aid in International Team selection.
- d) Only nationally can you get the organisational skills to run this game.
- e) As a fund raising venture to support the EBU.

The primary role of **bridge clubs** is to provide what opportunities they can to satisfy the appetite of their members. (Earning revenue for a proprietor also leads to this). The volume can be limited by their organisational capacity or by playing rooms, and the satisfaction delivered can be limited by inconsistency in the standard of play. Clubs generally run local events that invariably carry local points but also Blue Points, and generally attract a local audience.

One role of the **County Bridge Association** is to ensure that enough suitable opportunities are available for all the bridge players (and potential bridge players) in the county. They fill gaps clubs cannot fill:

- a. This often means higher standard events as clubs rarely have the critical mass for these. But it can mean events at other standards too where clubs lack the critical mass (eg 6-high or 9-high events).
- b. Cross-club games benefit, and are attractive to, all clubs, and CBAs are needed to organise these.
- c. Counties may run games to select players to represent the county in national events.
- d. Counties may run games as fund raisers - for themselves or for charitable purposes.
- e. It can mean events for which clubs lack the organising capability.

Counties run competitions that are regional and County based. Though they might well be Green-pointed the nature of these competitions and their lack of National reach has meant that in the past they did not attract the same kudos as their National counterparts.

The Competition Programme

In reviewing the programme, we have been cognisant of the need to plan for the future. We see this as a rolling and iterative programme starting in Year 1 (2021-2022) through a five year cycle. This planning will involve consultation with different users through focus groups and club and county representation who will have the opportunity to input into the decision-making process. All of the decisions and planning will be consolidated as part of the overall strategy of the EBU.

The baseline assumption in our thinking has been that the bridge calendar is too congested and we need to look at matters such as the location and the number and variety of tournaments and crucially whether they are suited to the online, face-to-face or a hybridised format.

In order to help with our analysis we identified a number of cohorts of player, though we recognise that these cohorts are not discrete, but perhaps more of a continuous spectrum.

Cohort 1: (relatively new players) this is a large group but they are often not 'hooked' enough to travel for bridge and in practice a critical mass can usually be found within a county. Events for this cohort are few in number, primarily because the natural organiser (the CBA) is populated by players from cohort 3.

Cohort 2: (mildly competitive players) there are many suppliers for this group, including county congresses and holiday bridge. Swiss formatted events allow this group to be supported alongside Cohort 2 at times. This is the largest group.

Cohort 3: (good competitive players) the critical mass in this context can only arise regionally although the largest counties might come close. There is a limited amount of bridge organised at this level - the predominant sources being (a) the inter-county leagues, and (b) the nationally organised Summer and Bank Holiday congresses. This is the group which has been decreasing most in numbers in recent years.

Cohort 4: (strong competitive players) only the national (or an international) body can muster the critical mass to make games for these players viable. The EBU is therefore the primary supplier to this community. The international trials (and Premier League) have become very popular games for this audience.

This breakdown offers us some useful tests for any programme proposals.

In planning the future, we were cognisant of how we need to:

- a) balance the decline in numbers against the need for income generation.
- b) take advantage of an expanded role for team play in the new online world (lockdown league for example) whilst recognising that in that world Counties have extended the reach of their games to a National/regional audience.
- c) manage the balance between face-to-face and online competitions.
- d) facilitate a programme for less experienced players to learn to negotiate the tournament world in a non-threatening environment.
- e) extend/modify the system and structure so that all categories of players are encouraged to participate more.
- f) develop the link between competitive play, teaching and learning - to build on the idea of linking competitive sessions to a teaching seminar focussed on a few of the issues arising from the hands (run by experienced teachers rather than bridge experts).

THE BALANCE BETWEEN LIVE AND ONLINE GAMES

CONTEXT	LIVE GAMES	ONLINE GAMES
For all categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Becomes a more special event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Much less expensive to run ● Greener for the environment
International games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Very expensive ● Allows interaction with players from other countries ● Some cheating worries go away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allows poorer nations to compete ● Different cheating concerns ● Needs cross nation coordination
National Competitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allows interaction with a wide group of peers ● Some cheating worries go away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Much cheaper to participate ● Less time consuming as no travel ● Encourages more participation in higher level games ● A useful funding source
Regional Competitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allows interaction with a wider group with limit travel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Much cheaper to participate ● Less time consuming as no travel ● Encourages more participation in higher level games
County Competitions	-- as for regional --	
Club Competitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Helps build/maintain a sense of community ● Encourages pre/post-game social interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A useful funding source ● Supports members nervous about health or about travel ● Requires less effort to arrange