

What is the EBU doing for non-members of the organisation?

Jeremy Dhondy - Jan 2017

My name is Jeremy Dhondy and I am the Chairman of the English Bridge Union. This new 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. <mailto:jeremy@mrbridge.co.uk>

The EBU has about 54,000 members. The estimates of the number of bridge players in England is several times that number. Some, of course, play only irregularly and at home and never visit a club let alone play in a tournament. Many are not duplicate players. Others (including readers of this magazine) may play at an unaffiliated club.

Charity begins at home The EBU is the regulating body for duplicate bridge in England. The first thing needed is players and lots of them, so a significant responsibility is to organise teaching and teacher training. About two years ago, all our education activities were moved to our new sister charity: English Bridge Education & Development (henceforth EBED). This, I hope, gives them a higher profile and stresses the importance attached to them. Part of being a charity requires EBED to promote activities to all players, not just EBU members. EBED, amongst other things, runs the teaching association: English Bridge Teachers Association (EBTA). The association publishes materials and runs courses.

Teaching the young is a sound investment for the future, but there is also a need to attract older people to the game. Perhaps they are moving towards retirement or their children have left home. In either case, new social activities are often high on the agenda and learning or refreshing skills at bridge is one way to get players into a club and breathe fresh life into it. Many clubs, both affiliated and unaffiliated, are suffering from a decline in membership mostly caused by an ageing membership. How to replace these members, and even increase the totals, is a key concern.

I think people are less patient these days. Better the 20-20 cricket match over in an evening than the five day test match for many, and the same applies to activities such as bridge. Some who played in clubs are now playing online. It gives them the flexibility to play only a few boards if they wish and to drop out, drop back in again, and even play at 3am if that is their wont.

EBED are developing a course to teach bridge to run alongside traditional courses. It will use accelerated learning and will become available in Autumn of this year. The idea is to get people playing in a club sooner than with a traditional course. The materials will be available to all. Of course, if your club is big enough it might be able to run games for beginners who often feel, initially at least, intimidated by experienced players. Both in the North and Midlands new events have been run to seek to attract improvers to a competitive game whether they are members of the EBU or not.

Acquiring new players In August, EBED ran an advert in the Daily Telegraph for those interested in learning bridge. When interested people were in contact they were directed to lessons being organised near to where they lived. Teachers registering for this were members of the EBU, members of EBTA, affiliated club teachers but also non-members and those who teach in unaffiliated clubs. Preliminary analysis shows this to have been worthwhile (indeed enquires are still coming in) and it is likely to be repeated in 2017. Interestingly, it also showed that there were some parts of the country where little or no teaching was going on.

Setting the rules Of course, having got players into a club you will only keep them if they like the activity. All clubs are required to follow the laws which are set and promulgated by the World Bridge Federation. So, if you fancy re-dealing a board if it is passed out, bidding when it is not your turn or making an insufficient bid then whether you are playing in an affiliated club or not, you are bound by the law book. On the other hand, there are regulations. These are set by the EBU and it is generally up to a club, affiliated or not, as to whether to use them. Examples of these are announcing or alerting. You might imagine that unaffiliated clubs would get rid of some regulations, but if you look on many club websites you will see that they often use the EBU regulations. Clearly, unless you disagree strongly, it is easier to adopt a set of regulations someone else has already thought about. When I was Chairman of the Laws and Ethics Committee of the EBU, it was my view that the book of regulations was too long and complex (72 pages of it). Now we have something that is half the length and I don't think we are worse off. There are some who think that is still too long, but I think it is a step in the right direction, not least because much bridge is played without anyone worrying about which conventions or agreements they may have or use. The EBU provides advice on regulation and law to clubs whether affiliated or not.

Above all, you have to create the right atmosphere in the club, so restraining the barrack room lawyers and those whose idea of a good evening is to belittle beginners is also a good idea. Clubs, affiliated or not, hope not to have to invoke any disciplinary processes but occasionally they do and a model constitution is available for those who want to use all or part of it. It makes life simpler if you have something in place before the nasty incident takes place. They say that the best referees are those who aren't noticed and the same may well be true for tournament directors. It is a thankless task but if we are to have a smooth and harmonious game, then a director is a key part of that. They will likely benefit from training and courses are run for all, whether they be members of the EBU or not and whether they direct in an affiliated or unaffiliated club. You might want to test whether you would be any good at this. If so a free online short course is available here: <https://goo.gl/YnxeJu> Younger players The number of juniors in the EBU has risen in the last couple of years, but from a low base. Getting those who are at school to learn bridge (often, at first, through the vehicle of minibridge) is a positive way forward. It has to compete with many other activities. Many who do become involved and play for a few years then perhaps give up as work and family life takes precedence. Hopefully, they will return later. One positive recent move is the Junior Award Scheme. This is available to be used in schools, clubs, indeed almost anywhere there are juniors learning. What is it? It is an initiative from EBED, designed to stimulate enthusiasm for junior bridge among young players, parents and educators. It is an award scheme that offers graded attainment levels, dependent upon teacher assessed ability, demonstrated at the table. There are award levels all the way from minibridge to the top Diamond level.

Belonging To some extent the question posed in the title of this article is odd. Any national organisation has a responsibility for the whole game, how it is regulated and how it develops. It needs to develop a strategy which makes its offerings attractive and makes clubs and people wish to join, but in the end, if there are those who would rather continue to play in their own club without being involved in the national game then that is their prerogative. I think it is a sad and negative position to take. The EBU, like many national member organisations, depends on some very hardworking volunteers. Sometimes their work, perhaps because it is good, is taken for granted by those who don't contribute. Look at some websites for clubs who are not affiliated to their county or the EBU. You will find reference to EBU ideas and policies. Sharing is good but so is contributing.

That may not be a universally popular view, but it is one I believe in quite strongly. We all want our game to both survive and flourish. I think a national body is a key to that, whether you are in or out of it.