

APPENDIX 4

Bridge Clubs in Canada: A Brief look at the situation and some proposals...

Report submitted to Bridge Canada Chez Nous
Feasibility study for an autonomous Canadian Federation

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This report has been prepared following a survey among Canadian club owners or managers. Twenty clubs have received the questionnaire and 9 have replied. I thank those who did:

Linda Holland: Halifax

Ian Gibson: Ottawa

Laval Dubreuil: Québec

Luc Gagnon: Baie-Comeau

Paul Thurston: Niagara

Kamel Fergani: Montreal

Merv Adey: Victoria

Jean-Pierre Bilodeau: Chicoutimi

Gord Murray: Ottawa

Randy Brueur: Sarnia

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In the following text, the term club owner includes owners of for-profit clubs as well as those of non-profit clubs.

Canadian bridge clubs have seen their environment evolve considerably during recent years. Although the ACBL membership has decreased since the end of the 70's, bridge - an inexpensive social activity - recruits more and more players. Better teaching methods, easily accessible, more and more teachers as well as more and more clubs have contributed to make bridge a popular leisure for retirees and pre-retirees.

The average age of bridge players keeps increasing and, with age, competitive spirit decreases. At the same time, bidding methods have evolved, tending to become more aggressive if not destructive. With time, two types of clientele have appeared: ACBL affiliated clubs and non-affiliated clubs. The latter compete with the former, attracting players with lower fees while offering the same services, often using ACBLScore, but without masterpoints. In Quebec, the appearance of non-affiliated clubs became noticeable in the early 80's, and they have now reached an importance which could not be foreseen a while back. In Montreal, it is estimated that 66% of bridge clubs are not affiliated. This situation exists in various degrees all over Eastern Canada.

In this context, ACBL affiliation or non-affiliation is an important factor of market segmentation and club owners, affiliated or not, are well aware of this fact as proven by a recent survey. Affiliated club owners are very interested in offering masterpoints while non-affiliated club owners are not interested at all since, if they did, they would attract players who are too competitive, if not truly unpleasant, for their regular players.

Also, in the mid-90's, Internet clubs appeared on the scene: a new type of service - available at all times - which also contributes to significantly reduce the market share of ACBL clubs.

In this very active universe, the worries of club owners are not limited to the above. They must pay ACBL dues in U.S. dollars, which drastically affects their profits. All of the club owners whom we have contacted for this study made a point of telling us that the exchange rate is presently the number one problem with the ACBL and took the opportunity to bring to our attention the great disparity between services and costs.

With time, ACBL's image faded considerably and its monopoly on organized bridge no longer exists since players now take advantage of adapted services available from various suppliers, at very competitive prices. Many club owners have told us that they do not promote ACBL membership anymore. Should we be puzzled by the decrease in membership and by the stagnation of the number of players in ACBL clubs? If ACBL wants to see membership increase significantly in Canada, it must have a close look at its costs and services. Considering the age of its players and the advantages they get from belonging to the ACBL, it is essential to make the membership cost more affordable. Club owners are unanimous on this subject.

However, many clubs have found a way to function in this environment by offering quality services (teaching, supervised play, prepared hands, summaries, competent directors, etc.) as well as social activities (parties, lunches, etc.). But ACBL clubs which have the most success are without a doubt those who have understood that their club's survival depends on developing new players. With this in mind, they have developed their own training and integration program.

Teaching and Integration

Important differences exist from one club to the next with regard to teaching and integration. Although the Grant Series is still very much used to teach newcomers, most club owners consider that it is insufficient to prepare players for the type of competition they will face in clubs. Therefore, they have come up with various programs, a kind of continuous training: supervised play, duplicate sessions for novices, mini-conferences, etc..., where a student can develop his skills at his own rhythm, quite apart from regular competition. Indeed, it is important not to let novices face experienced players until the former have reached a good confidence level with regard to their playing ability.

According to their experience, many consider that it takes around three years for a player to be ready to face competition with some success. There is no doubt that this time period is affected by the age of the newcomers, yet this is representative of the perseverance and investment required by the teacher and its pupil to reach their goal. It goes without saying that the players who learn at those Bridge Schools have a much better chance of becoming competitive players and, consequently, ACBL members.

Teaching and integrating new players requires good skills and lots of attention must be given to the students. This represents hard work and benefits, which are measured by the number of regular duplicate players, are uncertain; the best programs have a retention rate of about 30% after three years. Club owners are very critical of the lack of ACBL support in this area:

- In 1999, the ACBL realigned its pedagogical program by proposing a new teaching program (Easy-Bridge), quite expensive, and which seems to better serve non-affiliated clubs, social players (non-members of the ACBL). According to many club owners, the ACBL would have done better by further developing Audrey Grant method which, although good, needs to be updated.
- Sanction fees for novice competitions are inadequate. Why should a club owner pay for "Bridge plus" sanction, or for a limited masterpoints sanction when participants are not ACBL members? Would it not be desirable for the ACBL to offer these games free of charge but with masterpoints to incite players to become members?
- According to many club owners, it is essential that we recognize the difference between clubs that give bridge lessons and clubs that don't. Bridge Schools train future ACBL members and they should have advantages not given to clubs that don't have teaching programs. One of those could be sessions without having to pay a sanction, as mentioned above.
- Some club owners believe that a complete teaching system, with the necessary documents, should be available. The French pedagogical system, which teach the French Standard, could serve as a model.
- It is suggested that a teacher accreditation system more rigorous than the TAP system be instigated. The goal is not to put aside TAP seminars, which aim to

familiarize bridge teachers with ACBL teaching methods; however, clients should be able to recognize the difference between a TAP trained teacher (bridge initiator) and a "true" bridge teacher.

- There must be a greater distinction between novices and regular duplicate players. The present masterpoint rating is inadequate in this respect.
- Promote active ethics from experienced players.

Bridge Publicity

Club owners do not expect the ACBL to promote their clubs in their area. But they do expect the ACBL to invest in a national campaign which would give bridge a better visibility. And they are willing to help. In this respect, they would suggest a publicity week which would give clubs and bridge in general a better visibility.

Promoting membership

What should be done to promote membership? This question remains open for debate. As mentioned earlier, bringing the membership fee down to an affordable price is a high priority. But we must do more and some people believe that ACBL visibility in clubs must be increased. Here are some suggestions:

- Incite players to be faithful to their club by offering ACBL services to members via bridge clubs. The Bulletin, masterpoints update cards, results of various masterpoint races, such as the Ace of Clubs, could all be handed to the players by the clubs, thus creating occasions to publicize the ACBL.
- Elaborate a program which would involve clubs in recruiting members. Clubs are closest to players, not units.

Special sanctions

Another criticism made by more than one club owner: special sanctions. Some suspect that the very number of such sanctions (Charity, ACBL, IFG, IMG, etc.) has contributed to the loss of popularity of Canadian Championships (COPC, CNTC). Moreover, many have let us know that they have no choice but to increase the entry fee when having one of these sanctions.

Masterpoints

What do club owners think of the ACBL masterpoint system? All believe that the present system does not satisfy today's needs. It has become evident that it does not represent a valid classification system. It is hoped that a more objective method to classify players will be developed. Many give as an example the Lehman rating system, used on OKBridge. However, it is not suggested to completely put aside the present masterpoint system and it is recognized that points are the main reason for so many players to join the ACBL.

It would be interesting to use a more objective classification system in clubs, on an experimental basis. Competitive players are interested in comparison and a system such as the Lehman rating system would allow them to confirm their evolution. An additional benefit: such a system would allow a better stratification in clubs and, therefore, a fairer competition.

Bridge in French

Bridge in Quebec faces an additional problem: language. We cannot say it too often, if ACBL membership is not as good in Quebec as in other places - and it's not for a lack of players - it's without a doubt because the ACBL does not communicate with its members and its clubs in French. All communications to clubs and to members are in English. This creates administrative problems for club owners; it greatly decreases the value of the membership since players do not read the monthly Bulletin. I can personally state that this creates many problems. How many times have I had to contact Memphis to adjust invoices, to ask for sanctions, to check a membership, etc.,...What solution must we come up with? Hire a part-time translator/communicator? Lower the cost of the yearly membership for those who do not wish to receive The Bulletin? Solutions to be studied...

A Canadian Federation

The club owners who replied to the survey are generally in favor of an autonomous Canadian federation. However, it must be understood that they are primarily motivated by the effect on their income. There is little doubt that paying the ACBL for their services in American dollars weighs heavily on their preference.

I believe that a Canadian bridge federation independent from the ACBL is desirable, but this would require new sources of income, i.e. sanctions and direct membership. Until this comes about, the present CBF should offer more services, thus increasing its visibility with players, clubs and units as well as creating a feeling of belonging on their part. Many inexpensive projects could be developed, to name a few:

- Set up a Canadian bridge league with teams representing clubs. Local tournaments could be played in clubs and, when distance makes it impossible, on Internet. Such a league might revitalize Canadian championships and, at the same time, give players the opportunity to get to know other Canadian competitors and have a better idea of their playing skills. Two or three categories could be entered in order to favor the greatest possible participation. The calendar and results would be published on the CBF web page and in clubs.
- Publish a Canadian bridge magazine, tabloid style, 10-1/4 x 14-1/4, four or five times a year, distributed in clubs. Since printing costs are rather low (between 10 and 15 cents/12 pages/one color plus black), it is likely that, with adequate publicity content, it would finance itself.
- Develop an Internet site with one page for clubs and one for each of the units. Let's have our own Bridge Information Center !
- Carry on with the development of Audrey Grant's method with the cooperation of clubs that have regular teaching programs.
- Develop a rating system, such as Lehman, integrated with ACBLScore. This project would be developed jointly with ACBL.
- Develop an annual bridge campaign for the public at large.

Appendix

Dedication, hard work and good method make for good results. The Halifax Bridge World is, to me, a shining beacon, that others should follow... I wish to share the answers I received from Linda Holland.

Marc,

I am primarily responsible for Education at our Club and Paddy Gouthro is responsible for the day to day activities relating to games and conferring with the ACBL. Here are some thoughts for you.

Some background on Halifax Bridge World. Our club is a non-profit Society. It is run by a volunteer Board of Directors. Our only employee is a part-time manager, approximately 15 hours weekly. Our fiscal year runs June to June. Our annual table count for 2001 is 2337. We had approximately 1660 regular duplicate tables and @670 Novice tables this year. Table counts have gone from a high of 3395 in 1987 to a low of 1813 in 1999. I provide you with this background as our ideas and concerns with the ACBL are based on our needs.

Promotion :

Our bridge players are kept well informed about our club activities and the Unit sponsored events. For the general public we rely upon word of mouth (which has been very good for us!) and two advertisements per year re: lessons and game times. Newspaper ads are very expensive! Perhaps a National Bridge Awareness ad annually would bring more attention to the local clubs.

Education/Integration :

HBW offers bridge lessons all year. Our busiest time is September to April. We teach through the summer upon demand. Our policy regarding education is lessons will not cost the club anything, to make a profit is great. Our teachers are paid a set fee for each set of lessons taught. We teach the Audrey Grant Club, Diamond, Heart and New Spade series. This September is our first foray into EasyBridge. Personally since 1999, I have taught @ 400 students the Club, Diamond and Heart series. Our students pay full price the first time they take a course, can attend the course the second time for ½ price and if they like, attend a third time free. Our students become long time participants at HBW because of this policy and become better bridge players. Our approach to teaching is LESS is MORE! We keep it simple, allowing players to master beginning concepts. We can always add more information later. Players are encouraged to enter our Supervised Play game as early as the 4th week of the Club Series. In the Supervised Play format players are introduced to bidding boxes, scoring, Mitchell and Howell movements, Team games, etc. They get acquainted with all the gadgets that go with duplicate bridge at their own speed. We encourage questions, re bidding, opening leads, etc, believing that doing the right thing the first time is a positive step. We tend to keep newer players to a table with their peers and slowly introduce them into our Supervised Play duplicate game. We started the Supervised Play game in

1999 and had @ 202 tables. In 2000, @ 547 tables and in 2001 we had @ 670 tables. New players are where our future lies and our approach has paid off handsomely! Since beginning this program it has become evident that it takes 2 – 3 years to produce bridge players. We do not mix our Novice and Regular duplicate games. The present sanction fees for the Novice games are too expensive. Bridge Plus and Pupil games are limited to few masterpoints. There should be a greater distinction between newer players and rookies. It takes effort and time to produce good long term bridge players. Clubs should receive a break for their part in producing a new generation of bridge players.

Players are encouraged to attend other games when they feel ready. It is a slow process but a profitable one for HBW. We offer the two Rookie/Master games each year, and handpick our Masters for personality rather than ability! Rookie/Master games require a lot of effort! Sanction fees expensive. Dislike rookie/master games scheduled on our usual big nights, like Mondays and Thursdays. Better to have these special games on less popular evenings. More profitable for the local clubs.

This past fall, we introduced a weekly Rookie/Master team game where rookies only play rookies. It is a great format for introducing new players to the regular players without the stress.

We feel very comfortable with our Education program. I am not sure that the CBL could help us. TAP seminars: personal observation – anyone who has the money can be accredited! Doesn't mean you can teach!!

Retention:

Our concern at HBW is attracting and keeping new members to our club. Essential to our survival is new members who play regularly. We offer sanctioned games, discuss membership at the ACBL and sell ACBL memberships. Biggest problem - \$US dollar. Very expensive! Half price for first year helps yet renewal is pricey. ACBL membership not required to play in our games. Our novice program's average age would be @ 55 years old. Many do not believe they will ever attain Life Master status, therefore why buy a membership. Bridge is a social outlet for many and they are very happy being members of our club not the ACBL. In Halifax area we compete with many bridge games sponsored by Senior programs. Their games are cheap - \$2 or \$3. Our novice games are \$5. We have to offer the players more than they can get at these Senior games.

Masterpoints :

help to some degree – it gives the appearance of a more professional game. Our teaching is superior. Our club has great ambience and we create a feeling of belonging. It is hard work for a non-profit society!

Games Management :

Our manager is pleased with the ACBLScore. He believes a User Manual would be beneficial for the clubs. Help is need on the fields and with many directors for different games a manual would offer greater efficiency. Upgrades for directors should be available at the Sectional Level. We do add the sanction fees for special games into our entry fees. We can only add so much to the regular price. Example: Sanction fees for

Wednesday Night's game \$11 US! Our regular fee is \$6 so we will probably charge \$8. We always used to say "Can't go to a movie for the price of a night of bridge!" You can on Wednesday night! This year we will have two STAC events. A Unit one is January and the CBF one is February. We also have an annual sectional in February. It is a crowded winter. World Wide Game – two days in a row hurts attendance. Should spread them out. This year we had a Novice Section. Fulfilled all conditions of contest and 3 pairs placed in the top 10 in our club! Players tend to like hand records so therefore they generally like special games.

To increase membership – make it more affordable! Our concern is club survival. We need our own membership money. We need Unit support. All our energies go into producing new bridge players – we need the support of our Unit! We have a large social group and if the sanction fees were not so expensive we could continue to offer regular duplicate format. This is what makes us different compared to the other social bridge. We continuously offer mini lessons, tips, handouts which cost time and/or money. We shouldn't pay regular sanction fees for irregular games.