



Not the content you might have expected! – Neville

A grateful thanks to all those who have revived my flagging spirits when required, and to all of our volunteers who work so hard and in reality receive little thanks, but often instant criticism. Appreciation and thanks to our outgoing President who has helped me on many occasions, bringing me down to earth with his own particular brand of sanity. To all the members of the Management Committee who have been so supportive and given helpful advice when asked. To those who have helped keep me on the 'sunny side', and you know who you are, thanks; I could not have continued holding this position without you!

The current workload has become almost intolerable and demands much more than double the time per week as set out in the original contract terms. I thus consider myself first and foremost as a volunteer worker and such volunteers seem to be getting fewer and fewer, whilst expectations of what they can or should achieve increases.

The WBU exists to promote and organise the game of bridge in Wales. It is the "promotion" part that we should be interested in here. Bridge is a great game: the more people that play it the better. If the WBU can do something to increase the number of people playing then we can rightly say that we are a successful organisation. In fact it seems that the number of people playing bridge in affiliated clubs is declining, whilst social clubs are reported to be on the ascendency. The WBU Management Committee is understandably worried about this and is trying to do something about it.

Constitutionally as a NBO we are charged as follows :-

1.2 The objects of the Union shall be:

1.2.1 the promotion of the sport of contract bridge for Wales.

1.2.2 the control of the sport of contract bridge in Wales.

Let us be clear about this - what we should care about is the total number of people playing the game, whether or not they are members of the WBU. The success of the WBU is not defined by the number of people we have on our membership list, but by the total amount of bridge being played in the country. That is what it really means to promote the game.

The way things are at the moment, with the annual subscription at a level which does not produce sufficient income to match the expenditure of the WBU, means that the WBU membership as a whole are subsidising those who demand the most attention and this inevitably means our International teams and tournament players. Under a Pay-to-Play scheme similar to the EBU everyone would be contributing but the net effect is to make bridge more expensive for the casual player; and their money still goes to make bridge less expensive for the few serious players. This is why I think any introduction of such a scheme would be a bad thing if we want to promote the game. The keen players are going to continue playing whatever happens. We want to get more people playing the game, but the newcomers are the people who are worst off under a Pay-to-Play scheme, since at the moment they would tend not to join the WBU until they are more experienced.

My opinion is that the keen players should subsidise the promotion of the game. Because I enjoy playing the game, I am keen to see other people learning to play, and I am very happy for my money to be used to get them started. Admittedly the amounts of money involved are quite small, but one of the attractions of the game is that it ought to be a relatively inexpensive hobby. When the table money is typically £1.50, even a small increase such as that now levied by the EBU is noticeable.

Many of the people paying annual subscriptions at the moment do so because they play in Area or WBU events or collect Master Points. But really it is not so much about the money anyway. People have strong feelings about the element of compulsion. If people currently are not members of the WBU, that's because they don't want to be members. If you force people to join an organisation that they don't wish to belong to, then that is surely going to be very unpopular. The fact that they have to pay for the privilege will just makes things worse.

Let's face it - very little of what the WBU does actually benefits its members directly. You don't need the WBU in order to have a game at a club. But as a national bridge organisation, the WBU has some important obligations. The obvious example, and the most expensive, is sending teams to (and occasionally hosting) international events. Money is also needed to promote the game and this is where I feel that some of the money received from BGB should have been used. International teams deserve our support, and many chosen have had to help partially fund these things through their own resources, but other members might not value these things so highly. That's unfortunate, but it should be their choice to make.

The WBU already tends to get a rather bad press. There is a significant group of players, including both members and non-members, who are distrustful of the WBU, generally feeling that it is involved with the game without giving them anything of value. Some feel that the WBU concentrates too much on serious players at the expense of the ordinary club player. Some serious players seem content to receive any funding available, whilst others see it as their right to be funded; and not all give anything back to the WBU and the overall membership in return. The majority of those chosen to represent Wales in Home, European or World events do not play in WBU clubs at all. Generally I do not think the WBU deserves the criticism it gets, but I worry that any introduction of compulsory membership for players at WBU-affiliated clubs will only add to the antipathy that already exists. The critics will see it as just another way in which the WBU is trying to impose its influence on people who do not want anything to do with it.

The WBU membership is not made up of a disproportionately large numbers of serious players. Suggestions that the WBU cannot address the needs of the casual club players unless they are members is utter nonsense. Of course the WBU should be listening to the club players; they should find out what these players want from their NBO and make sure that the WBU works for the benefit of everyone. This has absolutely nothing to do with whether those players are members. The WBU should be working for all the bridge players in Wales, whether they are members or not. If the WBU has in the past ignored the large body of bridge players who are non-members, then that is a terrible failing, but it is something that can be put right.

Further musings

Is participation in high level competitions worth it, then?

It certainly seems so, and at times I have been attracted to the competition circuit. . And every time, I guess it's because I perceive organised competitions as better than other social bridge events. When I stop and think about it, the strategic depth, complicated systems, psyches and downright game play used by some players' awes me in much the same way as advanced mathematics or natural wonders do.

In spite of all that, though, the ordinary, day-to-day side of me prefers to play games that are neither very complicated nor very deep. At the end of a long day, or for a couple of leisure hours on a weekend, I'm usually more in the mood for entertainment than another load of work.

On the whole, then, I guess I'd have to agree with what I've heard so many others say: games are for fun--and if you're not having fun with a game, it's not worth playing. Have fun, find a fun game, or go do something else that's fun. Maybe life's too short for any game that's become too deep or complicated and attracted more than its fair share of unsociable participants.

However, life's also too short to waste. Occasionally doing something just for fun is probably wise; doing that too often is foolish. Playing Bridge well is something I've always wanted to do a lot of. Hence, I'm always looking for some way to justify that. I find it easier to justify when I'm considering seriously competitive Bridge Sessions. Those I have to work at, and the brain work is rewarding.

But fun is rewarding too, in a different way. And I suppose I could go back and forth forever on that work-play seesaw, trying to balance Club and Competition Bridge .

Instead, I'll just stop here and leave the question open: Is participation in high level competition worth it? I am still wondering about that.

But to me, it has never seemed like there was any choice in the matter. I don't actually like light, casual, just-for-fun games of Bridge; my partner however holds a slightly different view. I say that even though I've often played Bridge that way. I've played it while teaching it to someone new to the game, and I've played it against computer with the opponents set on Easy. But in both cases, I felt like I wasn't really playing Bridge; I was just fooling around with a hand of cards--doing something other than playing an actual game of Bridge. Online Bridge does not appeal to me at all as I like to sit at a table with my partner and the opponents.

I don't recall ever sitting down with other Bridge players and playing casually and lightly, just for the pleasure of it; other than at Xmas parties, and I hate party Bridge! Anytime I've ever played against someone who knew the game Bridge has felt like a serious test of brain power. I was compelled to work hard at it, even if the only thing pushing me was my own heart or mind. I want to do well and win and I am not daunted by failure so long as I can see where I or we went wrong in play or defence. Like most other newcomers to the game my partner and I were soundly bashed on most occasions and for some long time in our early days of playing.

So, from my point of view, if you're not trying to play Bridge and do well, you're not playing Bridge at all.

The WBU needs a competition program that addresses the desires and aspirations of the majority, rather than the minority of our members. We need competitions that will appeal to partnerships like my own which are commonplace throughout our membership. Whether we will achieve this I just do not know but we should certainly not be afraid to try a new and even revolutionary approach even if it upsets some of our Grand Masters or rank newbies! We cannot please all of our members all of the time but should be trying to.