



Towards a New EBU

Ned Paul analyses and comments on the EBU Membership Strategy

Plans by the English Bridge Union to reorganise its membership and financing (“the EBU Strategy”) have now been public for three months. The EBU Strategy document was published in full in BRIDGE 84 and was circulated with the August copy of *English Bridge* magazine to affiliated members and clubs.

The Strategy affects everyone who plays organised bridge in a club, whether or not an EBU member.

Key Features

- Annual individual membership subscription to the EBU to be abolished.
- Membership to be through affiliated clubs. If you play at one or more affiliated clubs you will automatically become an EBU member. There will be no charge for this (see below).
- Clubs choosing to affiliate will pay an annual fee between £50 and £150 pa, depending on the number of club duplicates held each week.
- Affiliated clubs will, in addition, pay a levy for each player playing in a duplicate session (the ‘Pay to Play’ or ‘P2P’ fee). The P2P fee will be in place of the current charge for issuing master points but at a higher level.

The cost of financing the EBU is thus to be shifted from the individual to the clubs.

The normal expectation is that clubs will adjust their own membership and table money arrangements to cover the

club’s cost of affiliation. The proposed P2P fee is an increase of 30p per player per session over the current charge for master points. The present masterpoint charge is equivalent to approximately 13p per player per session, so from the published figures the P2P fee will be 43p per player per session. The EBU have confirmed that the 30p mentioned in the Strategy document is an increase over the master point payment and that 43p for P2P is what is on the table.

The first draft of the Strategy proposed that players playing at an affiliated club for the first time would pay a one-off £5 registration fee to have their details recorded by the EBU. This proposed charge has been deleted and it will thus, if the Strategy is accepted, be free for individuals to join the EBU

Benefits

The tangible benefits of joining the EBU as a registered member include: receipt of *English Bridge* magazine and the EBU Diary/Competition Handbook; master points automatically recorded (paper master points are to be discontinued); and a nationally recognised ‘rating’ in a new computer-based Rating System, running alongside the master point scheme. Members will also be entitled to receive a proposed monthly email newsletter.

In case readers find this list less than compelling, may I add several valuable intangible benefits from joining the EBU.

- The EBU is the recognised National Governing Body for bridge in England. As such it is

the point of contact for the internationally agreed Laws of Duplicate Contract Bridge and is responsible for upholding them in this country. The EBU also sets down procedures for the standard conduct of bridge tournaments nationwide, so that we may happily play in each other’s clubs, knowing that the game will be the same. The EBU sets ethical standards to which it is hoped that all players will readily adhere. The EBU regulates the untrammelled use of conventions and unusual bidding systems.

- The EBU runs an annual calendar of significant national events; this gives keener players the chance to test their mettle against their peers at venues such as Brighton, Bournemouth, Hinckley, Scarborough, Blackpool, etc. The EBU also co-ordinates county level competition so that clashes between neighbouring counties are minimised.
- The EBU sets up procedures to select teams for international events – home internationals, European and World Championship events, and finances teams that represent us in those events. Representative international teams are the tip of the pyramid, the base of which is represented by the mass of ordinary players in clubs around the country. The possibility of representing your country in your chosen competitive sphere allows aspiring players to ▶

dream dreams. While many of us cannot dream that particular dream, we all are – or should be – pleased when such teams achieve significant success. It is by testing play at the highest levels that improvements in playing standards are made, and these trickle down through articles in BRIDGE, *English Bridge* and other media. I do not think there is anyone who has not benefited mightily from improvements in their bidding over the last quarter of a century.

- The EBU maintains the following programmes:
 - Education – providing bridge teacher education through the EBU Teachers Association (EBUTA).
 - Youth – support for those providing in-school bridge education, and a programme of young persons' events at county, national and international level, culminating in selection for the World Youth Bridge Championships.
 - Tournament Director Training – so that the Laws are universally applied. [The worth of this may be measured in part by the number of letters in BRIDGE answered by David Stevenson.]
 - Marketing – generating initiatives that raise the profile of bridge in the community. Such initiatives, when successful, make it easier for new clubs to start, easier for clubs to find or retain premises, easier to find advertisers and sponsors who would contribute to the costs of running the game, easier to put on prestigious events that would raise the profile of

bridge... In recent times this particular programme has not been marked by any great success.

If this list of reasons inspires you to re-join the EBU – and for many players it should – then under the new EBU Strategy your membership will be via an affiliated club. So what are the

Timetable of Change

Autumn 2007

Revised proposals will be issued after the 'final county consultation meeting'.

October 3rd – EBU AGM

The revised proposals to be discussed after the normal business of the AGM.

October 2007 – January 2008

Further consultation.

February 2008

Extraordinary AGM of the EBU to vote on changes.

April 2010

Implementation of the proposals.

benefits to clubs of affiliation? The EBU Strategy document (see BRIDGE 84) sets out a list of 15 'Club Services'. Unfortunately, many of these are marginal ('free club constitution') or easily accessible elsewhere (scoring software, website provision): the only unique and exclusive benefit is one not included in the list of 15 – namely, the issue of master points.

Club Membership

The bridge club structure most widely understood by the EBU is the members' mutual club, putting on one or more

sessions of duplicate pairs a week. Members pay an annual subscription, elect a committee of volunteers, the club hires or owns the premises and owns the equipment. Certain bigger clubs employ a paid manager, but this employee is answerable to the committee. There may be paid non-playing tournament directors. To such clubs, an annual fee to the EBU will just be seen as part of the overhead of existing.

Not all clubs fit this model. Another very common model is the club run by a proprietor as a commercial service to the bridge community. I need to declare an interest here – I run two such clubs operating on different days in different parts of London. One of these is affiliated to the EBU and gives master points. The other doesn't.

Clubs that affiliate to the EBU under present arrangements pay an annual subscription of £27.00. A few years ago an earlier EBU Development Plan highlighted the need to encourage non-member clubs to join. This has not been followed through. At present there is no club membership form available on the EBU website and the EBU is not actively recruiting new clubs, except in the teaching arena with the recent Partner Clubs teaching initiative.

Perhaps this is because specific benefits to clubs joining are a little hard to see. As the proprietor of an affiliated club, what do I receive for the club's annual £27 fee? Copies of *English Bridge* and a diary (already sent to me personally as an individual member); the right to issue master points; to enter the National Inter Club Knock Out, and to stage a heat of the National Pairs; and to hold heats of EBU simultaneous pairs contests (sims). For all of these the club has to pay fees. In short, the club has to pay to affiliate, so that it can pay more money to participate. I get some publicity for the club on the EBU website and the county handbook and this is, hooray, included in the annual fee.

While £27 is not hard for a successful multi-table club to find, it is a fair ►

chunk of cash for a small once-a-week club on the cusp of the EBU radar. Under the new Strategy the annual fee will now rise to £50 for a once a week club, and up to £150 for a club that plays daily sessions. Will new clubs want to pay this at the outset; will existing clubs want to take that step?

My recommendation is that the EBU should significantly lower, not raise, the club fee, to include as many small clubs as possible within the system. If necessary set two fees – for large clubs and small clubs – but keep the entry-level cost down. I'd say about £12 is the mark for small clubs and, at that price, I would write the cheque now. For this I would not expect *English Bridge*, but a twice a year mailing of EBU information, fixture lists, entry forms, individual membership forms and other stuff would be appreciated. Spending by a club that joins will not stop at the annual subscription.

Individual Membership

The EBU Strategy anticipates individual membership being subsumed within membership of an affiliated club. There are various issues here.

First of all there must be many keen higher-level bridge players who would be only too happy to continue a direct relationship with the EBU. As a competitive club player, I number myself amongst them. I enjoy the competition programme. I enter one or more of the annual knock-out team events, and go to EBU weekend events about three times a year. That leaves me a long way away from being the most active EBU member but it satisfies my need. I also enjoy *English Bridge*. I would be very, very happy to go on paying an annual membership fee to receive these benefits.

Most bridge players are below this level. Of the 26,000 approx current EBU members only about one-third are active in the EBU competition programme. The rest join to register master points, to take part in the county programmes, or out of loyalty to the national organising body, an unquantifiable benefit that I characterise as 'the warm, wet feeling of belonging'.

Below this 26,000, there are may be three times this figure who are active in club bridge, but are satisfied by what is on offer at their club and do not collect master points. I suspect that the typical reader of BRIDGE falls within this category. That you all love your game is clearly shown by the support that you give to BRIDGE, the one magazine that does cater for your needs.

Master Points

A key benefit of EBU membership is the master point scheme. Points awarded for success in duplicate competitions can be accumulated towards various ranks of master player.

The scheme is popular and somewhat addictive. Many players active in clubs collect master points and more would do so if no membership fee were required. As with all addictive activities we like to deny we are hooked, but the truth is that we enjoy climbing the ranks. The published list of new promotions is eagerly scanned for our own name and the names of our friends. A new rank achieved can lead to a good deal of friendly joshing at the club. Master point achievements have a modest correlation with skill; rather your rank is a lifetime measure of your bridge activity, but the scheme offers players, in the words of the late Jeremy Flint, 'a harmless conceit'.

People tend to stop collecting master points when promotions become too slow to achieve; and, if membership of the EBU is lapsed for a few years, this also tends to kill interest in master points. After you have discarded master points for a few years, restarting collecting may not be as motivating as was collecting from the outset of one's bridge 'career'.

In the last decade or so, the issue of master points has become largely electronic. Many of the larger clubs now do not distribute printed masterpoint certificates, but make direct submissions to the EBU. According to EBU minutes, 44% of clubs do this and presumably, as these will be the larger ones, more than half of master point certificates are registered in this way. This requires clubs and the EBU to share membership

data.

This raises privacy issues. Not everyone or every club is happy to have all member details passed to the EBU automatically. Those clubs who are already submitting master points electronically have crossed this particular Rubicon but it doesn't mean to say everyone is comfortable. It is hard to convince instinctive centralisers that such doubts are valid or should be accommodated.

Clubs not making direct submissions can buy books of paper certificates from the EBU but the use of these has declined markedly. Instead clubs that use computer scoring can use the program to generate and print the certificates. These are given out to the winners, who need to submit them to the EBU for registration within three years. I personally prefer this method of giving my players their master points. Collectors get a little extra buzz when they are given their points at the table and another little buzz when they can futz around with them at home and count them before sending them in. I said master points were addictive; do not underestimate these little ways of keeping people interested.

No More Paper Points

If the EBU Strategy is adopted, paper certificate master points will be abolished and direct submission will become the only way to register points. Clubs will be required to submit duplicate results electronically. Presumably separate provision will be made for events that don't fit the club duplicate template, such as league matches played at home.

Electronic submission will allow accurate P2P invoices to be raised and master points automatically to be credited. Revenue control is one of the benefits to the EBU. One hears that there are concerns that not all master points issued are paid for. There are doubtless some club scorers who issue master points from their computers and are blithely unaware they should be paid for. If you issue master points without paying for them you may be laying your club open to action by the EBU and your members to disqualification from ranks achieved. The current rate for master points is 38p per certificate including VAT. Your scoring program will produce a log of certificates issued. ►

Affiliate or Not?

I am surprised at how many clubs, some quite sizeable, are reportedly considering withdrawing from the EBU if the Strategy goes ahead. One county chairman who I spoke to said he thought it quite likely that only one club in his county would affiliate. If a critical mass of clubs stay out, the chances are high that they will find a different way of organising. One unspoken expectation is that clubs that initially stay out will, within two or three years or so, change their minds and re-affiliate. This is a dangerous assumption to make if clubs are able to organise outside the EBU structure. Once we start playing in non-master point club duplicates we may find we don't miss them.

As far as individual members are concerned, it's a no-brainer. If services are free at the point of delivery then we will all find ways of becoming 'free' EBU members whether or not we play much P2P bridge.

Summary

I think the EBU is playing with fire. The P2P scheme has some merit, but the EBU needs to convince us that the services the Union provides and will provide are relevant and valuable to the widest possible audience, and that it has meritorious plans for spending the extra money raised (or coping with the shortfall!).

In December 2006 EBU Chairman Peter Stocken wrote in *English Bridge* of the need for 'radical change' to address the way the game is played and meet the needs of club members. These proposals do indeed mark radical change in the way EBU sources its revenue, but so far, detail has been short on radical change in the way EBU spends it. The EBU has a lot of running to do to make its case. ■

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Another Way Forward

The Strategy as it stands needs modification. My own preference is, as well as the cheaper club affiliation outlined above, for multi-tier individual membership. I know this has been looked at before, but inconclusively, and I would like it looked at again. I think three tiers of membership would be optimal. I am going to call them "white", "orange" and "green", the latter because green master points are what the higher-level players enjoy collecting.

Green Members

"Green" level members are, in my mind's eye, national members of the EBU. They are the keen higher-level members mentioned above. They (we, because I count myself amongst them) should pay an annual subscription. I think about £25. Mr Bridge tells me that if my subscription were to cover the true cost of the tournament programme, and its share of EBU overheads at the office in Aylesbury, I ought to pay about £250, but I think that's exaggerated! And if it isn't, I doubt whether many people would pay that much anyway!

I would suggest that only "green" members could enter green-pointed events, or register green-points won in county events or simultaneous pairs. Only "green" members would receive *English Bridge*, which should continue as it is now, reporting the higher levels of bridge. "Green" members should have direct voting rights in EBU affairs and be eligible to attend an individual members' AGM. Existing members of the EBU would be encouraged to stay as "green members" but some melt-down would be anticipated as the lower tiers began to function.

Orange Members

"Orange" members" would be 'local' members of the EBU. These are the players who just want to go the club a couple of times a week for a game of bridge, yet want to play it properly and expect their club to be properly run. They enjoy their bridge, have chums who play bridge, are keen for their children or grandchildren to learn the game, don't collect master points, and don't read *English Bridge*. Most are still interested in improving their game although they recognise this is a slow process. These are the people who are currently leaving the EBU in droves. They need to be re-connected and convinced that paying a P2P fee is both fair and beneficial.

The new editor of *English Bridge*, Elena Jeronimidis is, as readers of BRIDGE know, superb. She's the best, so doubtless *English Bridge* will improve, but it would be grossly unfair to Brian Cook and Elena's other predecessors to lay the blame for disaffection with the EBU on the contents of *English Bridge*. It simply has had too wide a brief. So "orange" members of EBU need their own publication, one that ordinary players can happily relate to, and that makes them feel part of a community.

If we adopt the main thrust of the EBU Strategy, the P2P proposal, then "orange" members will pay no subscription, but will be able to register local master points through their affiliated club. If – but only if – the level of service is correct, the P2P payments will not be resented. I think with the EBU currently in disfavour of its own making, service for this level of member should start before the P2P fees kick in.

White Members

"White" members are the student members. This level exists. These are students either following Bridge for All courses or in the EBU Partner Club scheme. Their membership is included in their tuition fee.