

Minutes of the District 6 Board Meeting

Virtual Meeting, Wednesday, November 10, 2021

Twenty-one Present:

- Officers:
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| President | David Rodney |
| Vice President | Barry Fratkin |
| Secretary | Dan Koch |
| Treasurer | Doug Grove |
- Unit Presidents: Anne Atwood (Unit 109), Karen Crowley (Unit 110), Ed Rothenheber (Unit 135), David Butler (Unit 139), Peter Haglich (Unit 146), Hadi Abushakra (Unit 147), Georgette Weiss (Unit 218), John Markey (Unit 231)
- Other Voting Members: Barbara Doran (ACBL Board of Gov. Rep.), Margot Hennings (District Director), Steve Robinson (1st Alt. D6 District Director, Recorder/Competitions & Conventions), Shawn Stringer (Regional Manager, 2nd Alt. D6 District Director), Jane Farthing (Immediate Past President)
- Non-Voting Members: Bill Cole (Grass Roots Chair, GNT/NAP), Lucy McCoy (District Tournament Coordinator)
- Guests: Jay Simon (Vice President, Unit 218), Ron Kral (Webmaster, Unit 218)

David Rodney convened the Zoom meeting at approximately 10 AM. He announced that because several attendees needed to leave early, we would take agenda items out of order.

Regional Management

Shawn Stringer said that we need a Tournament Chair for the Baltimore regional in August; some decisions, such as placing an ad in the ACBL website, require a Tournament Chair, although others, such as the schedule of events, might not. Shawn is working on the schedule, and David Butler is closely reviewing comparisons with previous sectionals and regionals, even though there are not many regionals and they are not strictly comparable. In general, tables are down over 50%. Shawn explained that anyone can serve as Tournament Chair (the person need not be from Maryland), and that the hotel contract is all set. Georgette Weiss and Barbara Doran expressed some interest in serving as cochairs, but with concern about lack of previous experience.

Ed Rothenheber said that volunteers are generally unwilling to commit for an August regional until the status of the pandemic is clarified. A recent blast to his members and consultation with his board revealed the same attitudes.

Grass Roots

Bill Cole reported that the NAP qualifiers have been completed. Overall attendance was up 20-25% in the Open and C events, with the B about the same, so online attendance was up compared to the last live event. There were no credible complaints of cheating. Finances are good for now, because we did not have to pay for trips to last year's GNT, but it will be tough going soon because \$8-9K of the funding derives from club qualifier events and sectionals, which will not be forthcoming for 2021. For the GNT qualifiers next year, BBO and ACBL together take \$19/table. Right now Bill has not decided whether to

play in the event online or live, but plans to convene a committee at the end of November or early December to decide.

Online bridge at night

Since the last meeting, we have made progress in playing evening events. Many members of our district are participating in the team event run from Cleveland, which has about 60 teams in about six divisions; and we are starting our District-wide online pair event on the third Wednesday of each month. It will be starting next Wednesday. Barbara Doran noted that her draft Conditions of Contest contained many questions and she has not heard any responses.

Treasurer's Report

Doug Grove stated that the first order of business was approving the financial report for the year ending August 31. [The Agenda erroneously listed Ron Spieker as Treasurer -DK] The report Doug circulated by email before the meeting showed a Statement of Assets, comparing assets at the beginning and end of the year, and a Profit and Loss Statement for the year. In summary, our financial condition did not deteriorate during the pandemic, because as Bill Cole said, we saved by not spending to support trips to the GNT. However, going forward our financial position may be in jeopardy, with lost revenue from regionals and grassroots events likely. A motion to approve the report was passed without objection.

For the next year, the Baltimore Regional will occur just before the end of the fiscal year, so we will need to have a projected budget. The ACBL provides basic travel subsidies for the NAP in Reno, with D6 augmenting subsidies for the 1st and 2nd place pairs in each flight; the ACBL does not provide subsidies for the GNT winners, but D6 has traditionally subsidized the winning teams. For the GNT in Providence next summer, based on what we did in previous years, we should expect \$9600 in trip subsidies. As Bill pointed out, we would normally expect to collect about \$8000 + from events that will not be forthcoming during this cycle.

Approval of the minutes of previous meeting

The minutes from the previous meeting [August 10, 2021, listed erroneously in the Agenda as August 19, 2021 - DK] were approved without objection. [The Agenda also erroneously lists Kay Hughes as Secretary - DK]

District Tournament Coordinator

Lucy McCoy stated that she has scheduled several STAC weeks for next year.

Goodwill

Barry Fratkin stated that Committee Chair Winnie Fratkin is planning a reception at the Baltimore regional, if it occurs in 2022.

Education Committee

David Rodney stated that we still lack a chair. He has been talking to several people about accepting the position.

Website

Barry Fratkin reported that some people are dealing directly with Lauren Brown, and others are working through him, so that she does not get inundated from people she does not know. Information about the new District-wide pair game is on the website, but will be highlighted. Margot complimented John Markey's unit in Southwest Virginia for the way in which its website highlighted the event, and everyone agreed that unit websites should announce the new game prominently as well.

District Director's Report

Margot Hennings said she will send a link to the motions to be considered at the upcoming Fall National Tournament in Austin. She also noted that the proposed Conditions of Contest for the NAP and GNT contain some statements that have not been updated from previous versions: for example, we certainly do not require finals of online events to be played in person at sites with supervision to prevent cheating.

A committee of the Advisory Council (formerly the Board of Governors) did numerous investigative interviews about online cheating, and compiled a report with recommendations, which is available on the ACBL website. In addition, the New York Times had a recent article about online cheating in bridge. [<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/arts/contract-bridge-cheating.html?searchResultPosition=1> – DK] The ACBL Appeals and Charges Committee Chair has been involved in trying to realign cheating cases, especially high-level cases, by bringing them into the American Arbitration Association. In addition, lower-level cheating cases, those involving players with less than 50 MP, may just be matters of education, i.e., they may not know what is and is not permitted. In addition, she noted that it may be difficult to prove cheating at a lower level, because they make strange bids and leads anyway!

In advance of comments on David's discussion document, she posited that most people wanted a return to robust face-to-face competition, but that there was a vocal minority that just wanted to play online, and that the challenge will be to find the balance between online and face-to-face bridge. An online issue was that the ACBL was not enforcing the previous Visitors Policy that limited non-club and non-unit members, such that large online clubs had many visitors, beyond ACBL guidelines, thus hurting local clubs that were complying with the rules and correctly limiting their number of visitors. The ACBL finally clamped down on this, bringing many complaints from players. Subsequently, they have eased limits on the number of visitors, while still imposing a ceiling as well as offering other online opportunities for players at all MP levels.

Margot also noted that starting next year, she will no longer be a District Director, but rather a Regional Director, incorporating a larger geographic area, including District 5 (western New York, western Pennsylvania and northern Ohio), which represents many more people. This year is the last that the District/Regional Director will be appointing D6 members to the National Goodwill and Charity Committees, since these appointments will become the responsibility of the District President starting in 2022. This year, Margot appointed Carolyn Baird from Northern Virginia and John McAllister from central Virginia to the Charity Committee and Susan Britton and David Butler to the National Goodwill Committee.

New Business -- The Future of Bridge

As a prelude to the next discussion, David Rodney asked David Butler to report on attendance at tournaments. David said that when sectionals resumed about the beginning of August, for a few months attendance ran about 40% of previous levels. Then it improved to about 55% by October. There have

been two regionals that recently concluded. One was a 5-day regional in Detroit, normally a small regional anyway, that ran about 47% of attendance two years ago. The other was a 3-day midweek regional in Chicago that just concluded last week. The regional in Las Vegas just began, and the comparison, because there was a national there in 2019, is to 2017, but for the first two days attendance was running just under 50%. Each of these comparisons may not be entirely valid, but show trends. I

David Rodney offered his view that based on current expectations, one would have to be optimistic to expect 60% of previous levels. David Butler added that attendance at Gold Rush and I/N events has fallen much more than attendance at events for higher MP levels. But Jane Farthing countered that 3-4 years ago, they had huge turnouts and had to expand events at their sectionals for newer players. Shawn added that the I/N-only regionals were very popular, perhaps because there was a comfort level for those players to be in their own element, but that as these events get smaller turnouts in regular tournaments, the I/N events get absorbed into events with higher limits, perhaps causing attrition. Ron Kral said that it depends greatly on the marketing effort for the I/N events; strong marketing will bring good attendance.

The Future of Bridge

David Rodney then turned to the main subject of the meeting. David Rodney said everyone has been talking about these issues, so he circulated his ideas in writing before the meeting. These thoughts are his alone, and he recapitulated them briefly for discussion.

In summary, ACBL membership has been aging, leading to a decline in membership, members traveling less for tournaments and playing fewer sessions, over the last 5-7 years. Covid perhaps accelerated these trends. The growth of online bridge has worked a fundamental change, with some members now preferring to play online. Online bridge will now never go back to the fringe thing it was three years ago. ACBL leadership did a great job in moving online at the onset of Covid, to keep the game going, but right now decisions are tough. Not to make a decision is to drift. The ACBL has expressed a preference for returning to face-to-face bridge, but there has not been a vision of where we ultimately want to go. We need a vision and then can plan steps to implement it. In an uncertain environment, we will never know whether any decision was right, but we should nevertheless plan. We should articulate where we think bridge should be going, because we are the voice of District 6, and pass our views up for consideration.

It cannot be face-to-face vs. online bridge, but rather how can they complement each other? What events are best face-to-face, and what are best for online? Tournaments in-person for the highly competitive events may lessen concerns about cheating. And we might all like to go to club games, but they must be of reasonable size; holding club games that attract only 4-5 tables have caused some people to go back to online bridge. What events are suitable for online? The NAP showed that eliminating travel led to increased attendance for that event. Online events may also help revive bridge at night. Online events could attract appreciable numbers of I/N players, so that they could remain in their comfort zone. And online events allow partnerships to play when partners are far from one another.

Once we decide where we want to go, we can set MP awards to incentivize desired results; attendance is sensitive to awards, and we could stop experimentation. Certainly online bridge should be centrally managed, but David has been advocating centralized management for regionals at the ACBL with little success to date, because the organization has historically been extremely decentralized. Should we

penalize online bridge, to support face-to-face games that would not otherwise be viable? These are questions to which there are no obvious answers. Finally, should the hierarchy of districts, units and clubs continue? Is there a continuing role for districts, particularly if bridge will be half live, and half online, or some such percentage? For example, disciplinary proceedings formerly took place mostly at the unit or district level, but for online bridge are only at the national level.

Because David Rodney then solicited comments on this important issue, these minutes recapitulate the comments in some detail.

Hadi Abushakra complimented David's analysis, agreed that the overall vision is lacking, and agreed that bridge cannot simply return to face-to-face games but must be a hybrid with online play. He compared the organizational situation to the rise of Amazon, which eliminated wholesalers and retailers, directly connecting product suppliers and consumers. He liked a proposal ascribed to Larry Cohen, whereby players would play in person but on tablets, allowing socialization but eliminating some expenses for boards and cards, etc.

Barry Fratkin also supported hybrid going forward. Online bridge will allow gratification of quick bridge fixes, but it should limit MP awards, and particularly pigments, thereby requiring winning the pigmented points at tournaments to attain higher ranks. At tournaments players will encounter players at their level.

Pete Haglich said we should be careful about hampering online bridge to preserve an outdated model of face-to-face play. Jane agreed, noting that Unit 110 has at least one online game every day of the week. Going to a regional may be a vestige of the past. The unit is aging and may lose attendance not only because of disinclination to travel but because players feel safer at home. On the other hand, some older people do not readily use computers and so play social games face-to-face.

Jay Simon said the virtual clubs have seen a dropoff of 30 to 40% attendance in the second half of this year, partially attributable to competition from the ACBL. The ACBL has been paying (although the amounts are being reduced) to support clubs, but they may never reopen, and the future of the virtual clubs is in question. He understands that the 25% point premium for online club play will end at the end of this year. He supports equalization, and supports allowing online players to earn pigmented points.

Doug Grove asked whether, assuming clubs reopened a year from now, we are likely to see either two distinct camps of online and in-person players, or rather a heterogeneous flow of players engaging in both modes. He also asked whether the answer to this prediction should or should not guide our choices today.

Karen Crowley analogized the situation to her work delivering social services to veterans. Initially all services required in-person visits to a service center, then when the pandemic hit, many were available online, and now she must decide which services can best be delivered in which mode to each client. She said that while upper levels of the Army debated a vision statement heatedly, down at the ground level services had to find a way to continue delivery, equating to continued bridge playing in our district while we discussed this issue.

Dan Koch said that we have been assuming that the pandemic relents, and that a plan for the future may be premature until we know whether or when face-to-face play will become accepted. He also said that our current conception of online play is only BBO. In a previous email, Margot had explained to Dan that when the ACBL urgently needed an immediate online solution, it entered into a 4-year contract

with BBO; nevertheless, other formats, including one in which players saw other players' faces via Zoom may capture more of the face-to-face experience, make online play even more popular, and might lure younger players; Dan's friend overseas found that experience very enjoyable.

Shawn Stringer said we need data from tournaments: for example, we need to know how many players at a regional previously attended regionals, or sectionals, prior to the pandemic, vs. how many were new players, etc. A survey of 6000 members in a district, when 75% never played in a regional anyway, would not yield useful information. Also, we need to define hybrid. Does hybrid mean that there is an online-only evening game at a regional? Or does it mean that there is an afternoon event with an online event at the same time?

Barry Fratkin agreed with Dan and Shawn, saying we need to know how much of the decline in club games results from the pandemic, vs. online bridge, vs. other causes. He thought we needed at least five more months of experience to gauge this question.

Doug Grove said that in 2001, the Baltimore-DC region experienced not only 9/11, but the anthrax scare and the sniper terror. Club games were not affected, but sectionals in that area took three full years to recover to table counts before those events. They were not down 40%, but player insecurities lingered.

John Markey said that to play in a club game was a five-hour commitment, including travel and playing time, with no flexibility about the time bloc. By contrast, online he could play one or more shorter or equivalent time periods, scheduled at his convenience. The convenience of online bridge should not be underestimated.

Barbara Doran said her friends in Georgia and Memphis were playing in 20-table games, so there is great geographic variation.

In conclusion, David Rodney said that the presidents of all the Districts have a periodic Zoom call, and he planned to incorporate some of the flavor of these comments into his document and to circulate it as the views of District 6. He may hear very different views from some of the other parts of the country, and eventually may pass the document to Margot to share with the Board.

Margot said she had heard many of these same sentiments articulated at the national level again and again and that District 6 is a microcosm. Likewise, she has heard from other parts of the country that face-to-face games are almost back to normal. There is also a lot of experimentation going on, such as trying Realbridge and another platform called Lovebridge at the tournament in Chicago. She hopes to send us a report on these issues after she returns from Austin.

A short discussion revealed that District 6 is entitled to three seats on the Advisory Council, and we have only filled two of them with Barbara Doran and Barry Fratkin. Anne Atwood expressed interest in the open position. Anyone else interested should contact David Rodney.

David Rodney scheduled the next Zoom meeting for Wednesday, February 9, at 10:00 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Dan Koch

Secretary

Attachments: #1 Agenda; #2 Treasurer's Report; #3 The Future of Online and Face-to-Face Bridge