

Notes of EBU/OBA/Clubs meeting held to discuss EBU “Pay-to-Play” strategy proposals, on Thursday 29 May 2008, at the Oxford Bridge Club, Banbury Road, Oxford

Present were:

Guest Speaker

John Carter (EBU Board Member and Chairman of Hampshire OBA)

OBA officers

Mary-Ann Sheehy (Secretary), Brenda Harris (Publicity Officer and OBA shareholder, chairing the meeting), Lynn Hayes (Treasurer), Maxine Henry (Membership Secretary), Alan Grunwald (Tournament Secretary, also representing Wantage), Alison Nicolson (Education Officer, also representing Blewbury), Peter Baxter (OBA shareholder, also representing Wallingford), John Slater (Chairman elect, also representing Wallingford)

Club delegates and representatives

Abingdon – Gordon Carroll, Ian Van Maanen

Aylesbury Vale – Sue Maxwell

Charlbury – Roger Farrow

Chipping Norton – Pat Perry

Diamond – Doreen Rankin, Gill Read

Oxford - Richard Sills, John Briggs, Kathy Talbot, Peggy Manuell, Carol Benzie

Summertown - Sandra Nicholson (also taking notes of the meeting), Krysz

Kazmierczak

Tuesday – Hubert Allen

University – Ian Angus

Wantage - Avis Roberts, Arthur Jones

Witney – Peter Perry

Woodstock – June Parker

Including Blewbury and Wallingford (see above), this meant that 13 OBA clubs were represented.

Brenda Harris welcomed those present. She said that John Carter would make a short presentation and then take questions, after which he would retire and there would be a discussion amongst those present, followed by a vote. The result would be used to guide the three county Shareholders (including Sandra Claridge, who was not able to be present) when they were asked to vote on the proposals at the Extraordinary General Meeting to be held on June 4th.

John Carter thanked the OBA for inviting him. He explained that, in addition to being an EBU Board Member, he was a member of the “Membership Development Action Group (MDAG)” which had formulated the strategy proposals. However although he personally was strongly in favour of them, he had not come to the meeting to canvass but to answer questions as impartially as he could – bearing in mind that he might not always know the answers.

He said that the MDAG had been asked to put together a proposal to initially stabilise, and eventually hopefully reverse, the declining trend in numbers of EBU members

over the past few years (between 1000 and 1500 fewer per year). Their immediate target was to bring in more from the 'middle aged' group (approx. 35-50) but they also wanted to concentrate more on teaching young people, recognising that they would probably not have time to play much in their twenties and early thirties when they were establishing careers and starting families, but hoping that they might return to the game later in life.

He said the EBU was trying very hard to break away from its old elitist image and focus much more on providing a better service for all those who participate in organised bridge. Apart from the opportunities for sponsorship etc. arising from a larger membership base, and financial efficiencies at Aylesbury resulting from more automated payments, he felt that one of the main benefits for clubs, if the proposals were accepted, would be an inevitable move in the power base towards club level. This was because all the new members created by Pay-to-Play (which would approximately double the existing number of EBU members) would automatically be typical club players. In recognition of this, the EBU had recently made a commitment to form a new Clubs Committee, probably regionalised, to give more representation to clubs directly as well as through the county associations.

He then mentioned some popular misconceptions:

- the strategy was not about raising extra funds: the amount of money to be collected would be the same as from existing subscriptions and master point charges
- if agreed, the strategy would not change how the EBU spends its money, that would still have to be decided (as now) by the shareholders who needed to approve the budgets proposed by Aylesbury
- clubs would not necessarily have to collect 29p extra in table money at every session but could decide whether to fund the charge through table money, subscriptions or other means. Aylesbury would either send bills two months in arrears, or clubs could pay by monthly direct debit with a discount of £2 per month. In either case it was not intended to make a lot of extra work for club treasurers
- finally, he said he believed it was a mistake to argue that "the EBU cannot change its spots". The board was no longer entirely made up of bridge experts and there was full recognition that if the strategy was accepted, the services provided (e.g. the content of English Bridge) would have to change to be more relevant to club players.

Q. (*Mary-Ann Sheehy*) When don't we have to pay?

A. Club celebratory events such as Christmas parties; charity sim pairs etc; teaching/educational sessions.

Q. (*Kathy Talbot*) Can you give master points at supervised duplicate sessions, without attracting the P2P charge?

A. Yes.

Q. (*Gordon Carroll*) Concerned about the contracts the EBU wants clubs to sign. Will this create extra liabilities for them in future if the EBU gets into financial trouble?

A. The contracts have to be there to ensure financial stability for the EBU. Don't believe there could be extra liability for clubs but not an authority on this aspect. However amounts for annual contracts beginning in April each year will be set at the AGM the previous October, so there will be time to withdraw if unhappy.

Q. (*Alan Grunwald*) What is plan B if the strategy is not accepted?

A. The status quo: there is no alternative at present.

Q. (*John Slater*) What about the rest of the UK?

A. The EBU covers England only.

Q. So what about Welsh, Scottish and Irish master points which are presently transferable – also the Gold Cup which is run by BGB not the EBU? It seems there will still be MPs which cannot be automated.

A. There will definitely be a transition period to allow for paper MP certificates issued up to 2010 to be registered, not sure what happens after that, will raise this.

Q. (*Alison Nicolson*) Believe the working group have confused the issue of how to raise income with that of how to run the EBU. Loss of members is demographic and will still continue, so surely overall income will still fall, unless costs go up by 5% more than inflation? And couldn't the financial savings have been achieved independently?

A. Yes, but this is just the first step, we believe that by improving services etc. we can stabilise membership and then hopefully start to increase it in future.

Q. (*Roger Farrow*) Our club has half a dozen tables once a week, doesn't give MPs and has only 1 existing EBU member. We currently pay £20 a year for associate membership and calculate that P2P will cost us about £300 a year. How can we convince our members that this is worth while? They appreciate that there needs to be an infrastructure but don't see why they should have to pay for it!

A. Bridge is a relatively inexpensive night out and 29p per person is really not very much.

Q. Our table money now is only £1.

A. Agree it is bound to be more difficult to convince this kind of club.

Q. (*Sue Maxwell*) Aylesbury Vale now has almost 200 members counting Bridge for All – I make it compulsory for them to join EBU/OBA when they join the club and don't get any resistance from beginners. People coming from other clubs sometimes say 'what's in it for me' and I say it's not for you, it's for the game of bridge. Duplicate players don't grow on trees, we need to invest in teaching. Believe EBU should have made this change years ago as a more equitable way of funding.

Q. (*Richard Sills*) Looking at the 'say no' campaign – any views on the likely balance between loss of members/clubs through disaffiliation, vs. gain from new members?

A. Have conducted survey of existing affiliated clubs and asked which would disaffiliate. Nationally 65% answered and 60% of those said they would stay in. We didn't ask if they thought they would lose members, but we're sure people will still want to play bridge – the question is, how many of them would play at disaffiliated clubs only, and we don't know the answer to that.

(NB in Oxfordshire, there are 26 clubs listed in the prospectus: 13 responded to the survey and of those, 10 said they would expect to remain affiliated.)

Q. (*Gill Read*) We have 46 members of which only half a dozen are in the EBU. The rest don't want magazines, diaries etc but we would still have to pay the extra costs.

A. Services are still not fully developed, but we realise they will have to be relevant to the average club member.

Q. (*Ian Van Maanen*) We are told the cost of implementation could be up to £170k so if the income will be financially neutral, what activities will be dropped?

A. No services will be dropped. Costs will come from reserves and efficiency savings.

Q. Then how will extra activities be funded?

A. They are mostly not high cost. The main extra cost is postage for double the number of copies of English Bridge – we may look at distributing this via clubs (still in individually addressed wrappers).

Q. (*Maxine Henry*) How will counties collect subscriptions? If collected via P2P not everyone will pay the same, and we would lose disaffiliated clubs.

A. Counties will have autonomy to do as they wish, either via an extra element of P2P collected by the EBU and sent on to them, or through annual subscriptions, or perhaps via competition fees etc.

Q. (*Hubert Allen*) We have 80 members and a waiting list but don't think we have more than 20% who are EBU members or interested in MPs. Also, our Treasurer believes P2P will create a lot of extra work.

A. We really don't think it will be that difficult.

Q. (*John Briggs*) The issue will be one of data capture and data integrity. Will there be some form of common system that all clubs will use?

A. The scoring software used will return a complete list of players from each session (instead of just the MP awards as now) and that will generate the billing. Clubs will still be able to use their own software provided the suppliers can produce a file which meets the (as yet unwritten) EBU specification.

Q. (*Peter Perry*) How will EBU finance new software etc? IT projects often overrun budget – if this does, will the EBU be in financial trouble?

A. IT cost in itself is not a major element – there will be more of a cost in helping clubs to come up to the necessary specification and training them to use software if they don't already do so.

Q. (*Arthur Jones*) Do you have a complete list of what you expect clubs to do?

A. Not at present.

Q. (*Krys Kazmierczak*) It will be a very small change in the way existing software works, especially if a club is already direct crediting MPs.

(NB out of those clubs present, just under half are presently doing so).

Q. (*Lynne Hayes*) Will the software be provided free?

A. Yes.

Q. (*Kathy Talbot*) Some clubs currently don't do anything online and will be unwilling to adapt.

Q. (*Avis Roberts*) Shouldn't you be aiming more at schools and teenagers?

A. Yes, our target market for clubs is the 35-50 age range but we will also be trying to get schools to include bridge in the curriculum, as they do now on the Isle of Wight.

John Carter was thanked for his input and withdrew.

Brenda Harris read out the wording to be voted on:

“Does your club accept the main tenets of the proposed EBU strategy, namely that all members of EBU-affiliated clubs should be EBU members and contribute via the Pay to Play scheme?”

She explained that even if the strategy was voted in, individual clubs would not need to be bound by the way they voted on this and would not have to make a final decision on whether or not to remain affiliated until the end of 2009.

Some further discussion took place about the merits of the strategy. Alison Nicolson repeated that she thought it was putting the cart before the horse and that the improvement in services should be delivered before changing the method of income collection, otherwise many clubs would disaffiliate and be lost for ever. Alan Grunwald supported her and said that although he believed the game needed a national organisation and players should be prepared to fund it, he could not see what benefits clubs would get from the change and John Carter had not said anything to convince him. Ian Van Maanen added that he felt members needed far more detail about what the EBU spent its money on, particularly “overheads” which were not listed in the accounts.

Krys Kazmierczak pointed out that when the same thing happened in Poland, 40% of clubs disaffiliated to begin with but almost all of those were now members again. Kathy Talbot said that all clubs benefited from services such as director training and the work of the Laws and Ethics committee.

Not all those present, particularly from smaller clubs, had been aware that a formal vote would be taken but Brenda emphasised that the shareholders needed a vote in order to help them decide what to do at the meeting on June 4th, and that they wanted to use their votes at that meeting in accordance with the ratio of votes from those present, rather than just deciding themselves what to do.

It was clarified that the number of votes per club should be the same as the number of OBA delegates that the club was entitled to (see OBA brochure), whether or not the club had sent that many representatives to the meeting. If clubs had not mandated their representatives, they should vote according to their own views, unless their club had specifically instructed them not to participate in a vote. Clubs with fewer than 12 OBA members did not qualify for a delegate and therefore should not vote.

On this basis, the total vote recorded was 21 in favour and 4 against.