



As we start down what we hope will be the road to normality, I am sure that we are all asking ourselves where that road will lead. The mass migration from face-2-face bridge to virtual bridge set an unprecedented adventure for many into a world they had never before experienced, not to mention getting to grips with new technology and even, for some, email! I say well done to all those who had to overcome some really tough challenges to get through not only a worldwide pandemic, but also a very steep learning curve to get themselves online playing the game they love.

Many of us have lost friends and loved ones - and not just because of the pandemic, during lockdown, bringing some of the toughest times many of us will have experienced during our lifetimes, particularly those who were not around for the Second World War. I am sure that we all value, and thank, the many organisations and individuals who were able to mobilise and make available to us the one thing we can rely on to take us away, at least for a short time each day, from the many trials and tribulations of everyday life. Of course, every time we play our wonderful game, we experience new trials and tribulations, but that is what keeps us going back for more! I would particularly like to thank Elizabeth, Cathy and Myra for their commitment and support in the running of the Circle during this time.

The road to normality... I think the new 'normality' will vary depending on whether it is local (club), county, or national, bridge. Our unexpected experiences of online bridge highlighted that some events online can be as, if not more so, successful as face-2-face bridge. I think that this is definitely the case for national events, less so for county events, and even less so for club events.

The major benefits of online bridge are the absence of travelling and the much lower costs involved. Not only are fees lower, for many players, travel (also reducing our carbon footprint!), meals and, for events of more than one day, overnight accommodation costs can be almost eliminated. These are a huge plus for participating in national and county events, but not so much of an issue for local club bridge.

Club events are very different. The term 'Club' suggests a group of people coming together for a common interest and forming an organisation to operate within. This provides what, for many, is a very valuable opportunity to interact socially and convivially - most of the time! - with other players, with very positive benefits to a person's wellbeing, something which online bridge can

never replace, so the importance of maintaining our physical clubs is, wherever possible, paramount. We thank all those people who have worked, and are working, tirelessly to ensure that our clubs can reopen at the appropriate times with, undoubtedly, many new health and safety regulations and requirements on those attending.

One huge drawback in bridge, just as in life, are those that seek to gain an advantage through dishonesty. Whilst this is not by any means absent in the face-2-face environment, it is far less of a problem and much more difficult to perpetrate, unlike playing online. We have all, I am sure, seen or heard of a number of cases worldwide where individuals and partnerships have been prosecuted for online cheating, and we particularly commend our own National body, the English Bridge Union, for stepping up their efforts to deal with such abhorrent actions that damage the reputation of the game. Online platform development has also seen an increase in features to combat and detect cheating, and I am sure we shall see further improvement there too, especially in the development of algorithms to analyse results and identify interesting and concerning patterns.

You will all know that the Circle was set up as a direct result of the pandemic to provide, at the time, no cost online bridge for all, which later became low-cost bridge for all when we were faced with, perfectly reasonable, platform charges. I am pleased to say that we achieved just that, with many players joining us including those who had previously been unable to continue to play in clubs for various reasons (health, mobility or financial).

The future of the Circle depends on the support of its members and I can assure you all that the Circle will continue to operate, making adjustments to sessions, timings, etc, as necessary, for as long as you wish to support it. Many of our charter members will recall that when charges were introduced back in August 2020, I gave an undertaking that my interests were wholly altruistic; I was not seeking to personally gain financially from the Circle's activities and that position has not changed. Consequently, and thanks to the support of so many of you, we have been able to support Children in Need, and may support other worthwhile entities (like Warwickshire Air Ambulance; now The Air Ambulance, which we shall be supporting), and have just run, and have planned, events with prize money in the form of BBO\$ to bring some variety to our programme, and have still built up a healthy reserve that will allow the Circle to operate with minimal numbers for a period of time.

I personally think that the future of bridge events is destined to be a mix of face-2-face and online. Perhaps, even, a mix in the same event, with players playing at the venue, with others joining online, but time will tell.

I thank you all for your support and commitment to the game in whatever aspect that might be, whether as national/county/club administrator, tournament organiser/director, or player, you are all important to the game and its future. Please do keep yourselves safe and well.

With my very best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Darren', with a small horizontal line extending to the right.

Darren Evetts
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