

# District 21 Director's Report

## Stu Goodgold

March 2021

The ACBL Board of Director (BoD) held its first normally scheduled meeting for 3 days in mid-March. These regular meetings normally precede each of the 3 NABCs held during the year. But these are not normal times, and the last 4 NABCs have been cancelled. The BoD had to revert to Zoom meetings, much like we are all doing. Here is a synopsis of the BoD activity.

### **Face-to Face bridge:**

First and foremost, when we can hold face-to-face bridge once again is on everyone's mind, and the earlier the better. The light at the end of the tunnel has appeared and it is not an oncoming train. Realistically however, no one wants to have anybody contract COVID-19 in the process, and given the demographics of our membership, caution is the prudent approach.

ACBL management has stated this month that all ACBL sanctioned face-to-face tournaments are cancelled through July 2021. All tournaments have been removed from TourneyTrax and ACBL Tournament Directors will not be available to run any face-to-face tournaments until August. The current plan is to allow sectionals to start sometime in August and regionals in October. An exception was recently made for I/N sectionals since they can be run by non-ACBL-employed directors. These dates are subject to change, either earlier or later, depending on how the pandemic pans out (or 'demics' out).

Of course, this has nothing to do with club games. Clubs are legally not under the control of the ACBL; they are free to run their games how and when they want. Granted, clubs are sanctioned by the ACBL, but that is specifically for awarding Masterpoints to ACBL members. There are currently clubs that are running face-to-face games across the US and Canada. They are few and far between and do not add up to a large number of tables.

This will no doubt change as 2021 progresses. ACBL has no special knowledge of when conditions will ease as more of the population get inoculated, and no one knows how fast clubs will return to live play. As they do, it will surely not be in a uniform way across all of North America.

The BoD has been considering the near future of bridge, although no formal decisions have yet been made. However, we are working on the assumption that everyone wants face-to-face bridge to come back when it is safe. The BoD is also considering what incentives should be offered to make the return to face-to-face bridge successful for clubs. Online bridge will continue to be a factor with Virtual Clubs and quite likely occasional online gold and silver point games. The BoD is still considering what conditions and restrictions should be placed on Virtual Games, if any.

During the pandemic BBO and other online games have had double the number of tables of Virtual Club games. Regionally rated online tournaments run by the ACBL have been very successful, bringing in substantial revenue. Featured events for Virtual Clubs, such as Silver Lining games (silver points), Stardust games (part gold points), and Club Appreciation games (higher black points) have also proved a big success.

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What the BoD has to decide now is how and when to pivot from online games to face-to-face game and also how to encourage and support clubs returning to face-to-face play.

A poll of ACBL members was taken in October 2020 regarding the relation between face-to-face and online clubs. It found 65% thought that online play should help supplement the income of brick-and-mortar clubs. 18% thought the ACBL should encourage members to play in more Virtual Clubs rather than in BBO games. 14% thought we should encourage those without face-to-face sanctioned clubs to compete online with existing face-to-face clubs.

When asked what was most important, the top choice was to protect face-to-face clubs from being taken over by online Virtual Clubs. Secondly, to provide opportunities for players in a given area (such as a unit or district) to play in a Virtual Club, presumably since not everyone can find a physical club that is close or easy to get to. The third important item was to provide opportunities for club owners who decide not to return to face-to-face games.

The Strategy Committee of the BoD is considering the results of this poll and all the options that may be taken to support the return of face-to-face clubs. Among the primary considerations are a rebalancing of masterpoint awards, such as returning online play to the old standard awards, and possibly creating a bonus for returning face-to-face club games. Also under consideration is the continuation of occasional online tournaments. There are players that are not physically capable of getting around as well as those who live in less populated areas of the ACBL that are not near major tournaments; both groups would welcome the opportunity to play in major tournaments online.

Before the pandemic, face-to-face clubs had twice as many tables than online play. During the pandemic BBO and other online games have twice the Virtual Club tables. That means there are lots of players who are playing in the low cost BBO games instead of, or in addition, to online Virtual Club games. This is another area for possible changes to encourage more club support, either face-to-face clubs or online Virtual clubs.

### **Finances:**

Despite the elimination of all tournaments for most of last year, the ACBL managed to increase its assets by \$2.7 million compared to 2019. A good portion was due to quick management decisions in reducing expenses, along with running gold point 4-day "regionals" every other month. These events had attendance of roughly 10,000 tables and netted about \$400,000 for each event. Even total club sanction fees were up \$900,000 (a 30% increase over 2019) due to the large number of Virtual Club games run on BBO.

Another key factor was renegotiating contracts with hotels scheduled to host NABCs that perforce needed to be cancelled. Normally, the contractual obligations would impose a heavy penalty for not making the room quota, but under the pandemic conditions the hotels had to, or agreed to, waive that stipulation. While all the NABCs for 2020 and the Spring and Summer NABCs in 2021 were cancelled, there were no significant penalties imposed. Some of the host hotels were satisfied with rebooking the NABC for future dates.

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### Membership:

It is of little surprise that ACBL membership has been dropping. In past few years the decrease was about 1% per year. Last year started off that way but from June 2020 to March 2021 it declined at just under 9% per year. The most recent numbers show 147,000 members. No doubt this is due to players who decided they don't want to play online at all. It happens that 70% of all members who received Masterpoints in 2019 are playing in online ACBL games. The other 30% are not and are likely the source of those who have not renewed their membership. ACBL management is actively considering incentives to get lapsed members back to bridge once the pandemic is over.

Guest membership is relatively new. Prospective players can become a free guest member for a few months to try out the benefits of the ACBL. There is a new incentive now in place for guest members - they can become a full member for \$29 for the first one-year regular membership. That's a 25% savings over the regular yearly cost. If you know any guest members, please encourage them to become a regular member.

### Governance:

Another significant proposed change is a reduction in the size of the Board of Governors (BoG). My previous article, published in the Diamond in the Ruff, reported that this change required a bylaw amendment and that the motion passed the first reading. All bylaw changes require a second reading following the publication of the amendment in the Bulletin at least 30 days in advance. The text of the motion can be found in the March 2021 Bulletin. The BoD will vote following the second reading at a special meeting in April. If this amendment passes the second reading and is ratified by the BoG, it will affect the D21 election later this year for our BoG representatives.

The Appeals and Charges Committee (A&C) is the final arbitrator of ethical violations. Most of those violation these days are online cheating. A larger number than usual are being found in violation of that offense, including most recently another well-known pro. There is an Online Ethical Oversight Committee that hears these cases and decides on what should be done in accordance with the Code of Disciplinary Regulations (CDR). The A&C committee has the final word on whether the hearing met all the procedural requirements. Additionally, a number of cases have been resolved by a Negotiated Resolution, where the charged party admits wrong doing and receives an agreed penalty. Lately the CDR has been going through numerous changes to better define different degrees of cheating, especially with respect to online play.

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## **Looking Forward:**

As more and more of us are vaccinated, there is cause for optimism. It will have been 1 ½ years by the time we are able to play in face-to-face tournaments once again and enjoy bridge with our friends and colleagues. We can be grateful that online bridge filled a void during the pandemic, and we can be sure that online bridge will still be around after the pandemic is over. But face-to-face bridge is the activity that binds us together and has for many years. I look forward to when we will see each other once more at the table. Until then, if you have any comments or suggestions, feel free to contact me at [D21D@acbl.org](mailto:D21D@acbl.org).