



BRIDGE

Bulletin

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Bridge in the Desert

Results from the Phoenix NABC

Continuity

Joann Glasson reelected
ACBL President

Heavy Medal

Barbara Ferm wins gold in the World Mixed Teams

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On the Front Lines

Are F2F clubs at war with the ACBL?

By Amy Casanova

Rob Lail of Beckett Ridge OH directs one game per week, on Thursdays. It's a big game, 18–20 tables on average. He starts to prepare several days beforehand.

"I start on Sunday individually texting, emailing and calling over 100 people to get them to my game on Thursday. I'm trying to keep people relevant, with something to do that makes them happy and brings them together. We serve huge amounts of food. It takes a lot of work.

"To be honest, the ACBL is the enemy of the clubs. One-third of my calls say, 'Your game is \$8, we can play online for \$2.25.' That's no support from the ACBL. It's too bad because, when you get old, you really want to stay personally relevant."

John Altman of Cincinnati OH runs a night game. He grew up at the bridge center in Cincinnati, learning with his dad when he was 11 at the behest of his grandmother. He directed all through high school and college and still runs a weekly game. "I do one of the one-and-a-half night games we have. I run a 'four is enough' game every week, and we have one other night game every other week." They average 7–10 tables.

"I don't want to say I'm the opposite of Rob, but I spend significantly less time on my game simply because I don't have the time. Half the reason I direct the game is because it's the only game I can play in. Normally I wouldn't do that as a director if I was making a sitout or something, but this is the deal if we are going to have a night pairs game, because otherwise I wouldn't get to play any bridge."

Everything about the in-person experience is harder and takes longer, for everyone involved. Yet these are the people dedicated to providing the opportunity. Both Altman and Lail believe masterpoints and winning are secondary. "It's not the reason they're coming out," said Lail. "They just want some interaction. They want a break from being old, or from having spouses that have problems, or whatever." Lail often plays in Altman's game. "I love John because John is a young person acknowledging older people. He makes my evening fun."

As local bridge continues to shrink, clubs and units might be more inclined to operate together. An interesting feature of the Cincinnati Bridge Center is its arrangement with local Unit 124. All games are individually run and sanctioned; directors "lease" the space from the unit, paying \$16 per table for their club games. They can use the duplicating machine, boards, print hand records and use the facility. The unit also hosts sectional tournaments at the facility.

Altman serves on the unit board. "The unit is losing money every month. This space might go away. We've been in this facility for 25 years; it's a great space and we don't want to lose it. We have a bit of a cushion; we can be here for another year or two, but we have to figure something out. Otherwise, we have to relocate and that's only going to cause

more players to leave."

Sharks in the pool

When the pandemic shut down in-person bridge, the virtual clubs program was created almost instantly by a team that included former Board of Directors member Jay Whipple and Greg Coles, until recently director of operations of the ACBL (Bridge Bulletin, March 2021). "We had Support Your Club games up and running in about 36 hours," said Coles. "The first games were limited to 400 pairs, and they sold out, so we added new ones. It was huge that first month. We thought it would tide us over until we got the virtual clubs going. It still brings in revenue, so it still exists." Almost immediately, the virtual clubs (VACB) began to outpace the SYC games. The online games are generating less revenue this year than the two years prior. Still, to date, almost \$45 million of revenue has been generated and disbursed directly to clubs via online games.

It didn't take long for online clubs to merge, creating "pools" or mega-clubs that run multiple games per day with multiple sections. By far the biggest virtual club in North America is the Southeast Bridge Club Consortium, also known as Gryphon II DBC, which is operated by Kevin Wilson and Jim Ricker, both of Knoxville TN. Wilson is a national champion



Rob Lail



Almost a full house at the Cincinnati Bridge Center on a Thursday

and ABTA-certified master teacher. Ricker was the ABTA's 2019 Teacher of the Year. Their club's YTD table count as of the end of November was a staggering 63,174 tables, more than double that of the Duncan Bridge Center, which operates out of Palm Desert CA.

"There are two types of players now," said Wilson, who noted they are serving the people who cannot leave their homes. "I get people thanking me for welcoming them into our club. They might have Stage 4 cancer and can't leave the house, and this is the only opportunity for them to play."

Joe Jones, until recently ACBL's executive director, looks at it from a business angle. "If someone's willing to work really hard and take care of their customers, they deserve to be successful. Are they serving our members? Is this serving our members' needs? I would have to say yes. Is it in the best interest of the long-term health of the bridge community in North America? I don't know."

The BBO "club" – which has been sanctioned since 2003 – got into the action, too, expanding their hourly games that award unpigmented ACBL masterpoints which count toward a player's ranking. Their table count through October was over 2 million tables.

acbl	ACBL 299el Daylong - 2022-11-28	Individual	Running	301	1.33 BBS
acbl	ACBL Daylong (MP) 2 - 2022-11-28	Individual	Running	167	1.40 BBS
acbl	ACEL Daylong 16 Boards (MP) 1 - 2022-11-28	Individual	Running	130	2.09 BBS
acbl	ACBL C-20 Daylong (MP) - 2022-11-28	Individual	Running	54	1.35 BBS
acbl	ACBL Daylong (MP) 1 - 2022-11-28	Individual	Running	537	1.45 BBS
acbl	ACBL Daylong (MP) 2 - 2022-11-28	Individual	Running	308	1.45 BBS
ACBL.SYC	ACBL.SYC Back Post Daylong (MP) - 2022-11-28	Individual	Running	51	6.095

Labeling these games in "ACBL World" and as hosted by the ACBL only adds to the confusion and misconception. The host of these games is BBO.

Why is the perception that the ACBL is killing F2F clubs? Perhaps there are misconceptions about where the money goes. The ACBL does not keep any table fees. For every club game, the sanction fee to the ACBL remains 25 cents per

player, or \$1 per table. In fact, for the games that are only 12 boards (by far the majority), the sanction fee is 14.5 cents. That is the entirety of the money that goes to the ACBL. Besides the sanction fee, the funds from the hourly "ACBL" games run by BBO go to BBO, even though they are confusingly "hosted" by ACBL. The league can't tell a club – online or in person – when it can and cannot operate. "There's a lot of frustration around clubs. We are careful to not be controlling," said Jones.

The top 10 clubs – whether online, F2F or hybrid – are certainly posting big numbers, but it doesn't take long for the clubs' table counts to drop off significantly and moderate. "The vast majority of our clubs are very small," said Coles. "If they were struggling pre-pandemic to stay alive with five to seven tables and having to pay rent and directors and our fees, I know coming out of the pandemic if that has dropped to three to five, they just can't afford it anymore. If those clubs say, 'We are just going to operate online,' what do we want? Do we want them to go away? Because that's the only other option."

Some believe any kind of bridge is good for bridge. Perhaps the online community is just that – another type of community that creates bridge

players who might transition from the computer into a F2F player. "I started playing bridge around the same time online sanctioned bridge started, in 2004," said Coles. "I won my first masterpoints online." Online bridge didn't prevent Coles from getting involved. "I don't think there are many who have worn more hats than me. I've been a club manager, a teacher, a

unit and district board officer.

"I used to be heavily engaged in BBO forums; I heard the same things back then when it was a buck a game, people thought club bridge would die. That didn't happen. It's not going to happen this time either. The people that want to go back, they are going back."

Altman doesn't think they're coming back. "We need to focus on building a new player base, because even if we can get everyone to come back, it's still gonna die out.

"For my generation, I would like to see the ACBL do some actual marketing to people. We have a big, nationwide organization, but if I mention bridge to anyone my age, nobody has any clue that there is a competitive side to bridge. No one has any idea that it's a competitive mindsport."

So far, there has been no consensus between the board and management in terms of strategy going forward. There have been discussions regarding pricing structures, annual sanction fees and differentiating between online play and F2F play.

"The in-person game is special; it should be elevated in terms of achievement," said Jones. "There is a real sense of community; it's an outlet for sociability, and we don't want that to die.

"But people don't want to be told what to do. We would like everyone to get together and play in person, but we can't make them."

F2F club owners and directors are desperate for some form of action from the league. In the meantime, they will continue to work twice as hard and long.

"For me, it's about personalizing everyone at the club," said Lail. "I send texts out to people who did well, to say, 'Congratulations, I hope you had a good time.' I get responses like, 'What do you need me to bring to eat next week?'"

"They say, 'You made my day, you made my week, I look forward to every Thursday.'" 🍷