



**EUROPEAN
BRIDGE
LEAGUE**

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A plan for a new EBL

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by Panos Gerontopoulos

While the world moves ahead and new challenges appear almost every day, bridge remains stagnant. Especially in Europe, membership remains where it stood 20 years ago, i.e. below the 400,000 mark, and there are no signs that this is going to change in the near future. On the contrary, the steady rise of the players' average age, points in the wrong direction.

A number of European NBOs show the way with their development methods and work in the field, but in most of our 48 member countries the situation leaves a lot to be desired.

The EBL is supposed to stimulate development efforts wherever needed, and coordinate a joint development effort across Europe to the benefit of NBOs, individual players and bridge as a whole. Unfortunately, the League today is confined to organizing a couple of championships and seminars a year. Every-day details occupy the EBL almost exclusively. There are no plans for tomorrow, and the lack of vision for the future is more than obvious. This has got to stop! It has got to stop now. European bridge needs to turn the page and start an entirely new chapter before it is too late.

What may be written in this new chapter? Many ideas, some of which are immediately applicable while other need more time to bear fruit. But we will never succeed if we do not start moving. The empty pages of our EBL future must not remain blank for any longer...

1. Development

a. Promotion

Once upon a time, bridge, together with chess, were the indisputable mind games worldwide, only locally and harmlessly challenged by other games. Not so today. With the proliferation of computer games of superior complexity, realism and challenge, the setting has changed – and this calls for our promotion plans to be re-drawn.

It is the task of the League to study the new situation and come up with specific proposals to the NBOs, as to how and where the promotion effort should be directed. Existing experience and methods will be used and even enhanced, under the coordination of experts in the field. This is a matter of priority.

b. Teaching

It is not easy to learn bridge, and it takes qualified methods and personnel to successfully welcome newcomers and ensure that they will enjoy our sport from the very beginning – or else, they are likely to leave soon.

A few countries in Europe have elaborated into didactically sound bridge education methods and have trained personnel (teachers) to implement them. The rest need help.

The EBL should ensure that the wheel does not need to be re-invented each time borders are crossed. As a continent, we are the world leaders in bridge teaching. It is the duty of the League to gather all this knowledge and make it available in the form of a unified standard system to those who need it. The task will be entrusted to a Committee consisting of Europe's top bridge educators under the supervision of a knowledgeable EBL Executive Committee member. Again, this is an issue of very high priority.

c. Youth

Everybody understands that without young players bridge will not survive. To this end, the EBL Executive Committee created, in 2009, a youth fund to help in the promotion of this sensitive section. Yet, to this day, the fund has not been handled effectively, and no youth development project has even been drafted!

2. Championships & Events

a. Existing competitions

Clearly, one of the main tasks of the League is to organize European competitions. Throughout the years, Europe has played a leading role in tournament organization, and therefore the quality of our events should be second to none. Indeed, we have the technological know-how as well as capable personnel to run any tournament successfully. This is expected by the players, and will be guaranteed by the League adjusting its structure in order to achieve this important goal.

b. New but different events

There are already plenty of European tournaments covering almost every possible category, and the annual competition calendar is quite crowded. Nevertheless, we are open to innovation and one may not rule out the possibility that a new idea be proposed and accepted, especially if it is supported by a sponsor and is not along the lines of existing competitions.

3. Administration

a. Decentralization & Inclusion

When it comes to structure, the EBL is an organization still in adolescence. A central office was established only recently, with just a couple of part time employees. The EBL is governed by the President and the Executive Committee, who are also expected to realize their decisions, aided by amateur Committees and part time consultants. In comparison, the EBL does not even reach a small NBO in structure and staff.

With such scarcity of manpower, it is clear that no forces should be spared as any available contribution may well make a difference to the League. The members of the Executive Committee need to undertake the various sections of activity and carry out their tasks all the way, from (organizational and financial) planning to realization. The President must oversee and coordinate the entire operation, instead of trying to maintain suffocating control over the activities. **Decentralization** and **inclusion** are our key words here.

To this end, the new EBL will work like a government cabinet. The various departments will be assigned to members of the Executive Committee,

taking into account personal interest and individual talent. Department Committees will draw an action plan and detailed budget, leading to concrete results over a specified time period. Once approved, each department will be expected to work on realizing the plan and will be responsible for the results.

b. Technology & Electronic governance

Electronic means have brought an entirely new era in organization, adding new possibilities to previously unattainable goals. This is especially valuable to an international organization like the EBL where increased communication both internally and with the NBOs is most essential.

Until a few years ago, the EBL had no archives about anything; fortunately, a wealth of information is now available publicly through the EBL website, which covers, mainly, competition results and tournament information. The EBL information network will be expanded to include everything there is, and electronic means will be used in the everyday running of the League making it unnecessary to re-discover what already exists, and eliminating errors and contradictions.

In addition to developing electronic services with its own means, the League will support wholeheartedly and to the extent possible third-party initiatives in the technical field, aiming at facilitating bridge learning and improving bridge appreciation in tournaments. Just imagine what bridge would have been today without bidding boxes, board duplication, computer scoring across the field, bridgemates and, more recently, automatic card reading – all European inventions which have changed our bridge lives more than a little.

Internet plays a very important role in our lives, and bridge is an Internet sport – unlike physical sports which are suitable for television. Internet is already used in bridge competition, but not to the extent possible. A most important point is using Internet possibilities for broadcasting bridge and benefitting from this. In most sports, broadcasting covers a substantial part of the running costs; in bridge we are still paying, instead!

c. Public Relations

Today, it is not easy to attract sponsors, especially in Europe. However, the field of public relations should not be neglected, as even a small success here could make a big difference for our sport.

In recent years, the elite of world bridge convenes regularly in North America thanks to individual sponsorship, while North American participation in European events is far from reciprocal. Private individual or corporate sponsorship could also lead to innovative events and activities.

Furthermore, in Europe we have the possibility of government sponsorship. While NBOs seek support from national and local authorities, the EBL should explore the ground around European authorities and find out if and to what extent bridge may be backed either by means of support or through beneficial social programmes.

d. Working with the NBOs

i. Coordination

The members of the League are the NBOs of 48 European countries, among which there are still tremendous differences in development. Incredible as it may sound, 2 out of the 48 member NBOs provide half of the total membership of the League, while the 26 smaller NBOs account for just 2% of the League's population! This constitutes a serious problem of imbalance. It is our duty to work in order to minimize these differences. This calls for a close working relationship with the member NBOs – and of the NBOs between them.

In the nearly 70 years of EBL history, the League has always led by Presidents from 5 big countries, and only once has there been a President from a smaller country. After 34 years, it would benefit the EBL to seek solutions to its problems, through the more representative prospective of a new but experienced leader from one of the smaller countries.

So far, the EBL has been organizing, biennially, a seminar for NBO officials aiming at discussing common problems and solutions, and bringing bridge administrators closer together. This needs to be enhanced, extending the discussion and cooperation throughout the year, by means of organized communication, feedback and direction spearheaded by top EBL personnel. It is not acceptable that bridge development drops considerably within a few kilometers, just because a border happened to be crossed. When differences between European countries get smaller and smaller every day in the political and economic field, bridge has to follow suit – a task which should be particularly familiar to us!

ii. Annual dues

Traditionally, the EBL seeks the number of individual members (players) from the various NBOs and charges annual dues in accordance with the numbers declared. However, NBOs have different concepts as to the definition of a 'member' – could be just the top players, or those who choose to register with the NBO, etc. And it has been noted that declaring fewer players may reduce NBO dues; this is against the interest of bridge and its promotion potential!

This system needs to be replaced by a fairer one, taking into account a number of objective parameters. Work in this direction has already started, and we need to see that it is concluded in a reasonable time.

e. Working with other sports authorities

Europe is the first and most important zone of the *World Bridge Federation*, constituting today more than 55% of the 8-zone organization. We do recognize the leading role of the WBF, and wish to maintain our enviable position with it through merit and achievement in the important fields of bridge development, technology, organization and, of course, evolution of bridge theory and technique. Our representatives on the WBF Executive Council and Committees are there to star in the joint effort and achieve the goals of the world organization rather than support short-sighted local interests.

Through the WBF we support an extrovert role for bridge towards other international sports organizations to which we may belong, from IMSA, SportAccord and ARISF to the IOC, and advocate the integration of bridge in the world family of mind sports.

f. History and Recognition

An activity without its history is like a tree without its trunk.

(Organized) European (contract) bridge already counts three quarters of a century on its shoulders, but so far European bridge history has been served mainly by hobbyist individuals. Now that the EBL has a central office it is time to ensure that information about our past and the evolution of our identity will no longer depend just on good will.

Concentrating various sources of bridge history documentation goes hand in hand with acknowledging the contributions of people who have realized – virtually, wrote – our history.

4. The Social Element

Unlike many other sports, bridge fans are the bridge players, i.e. those who know how and like to practice our sport personally. These are not champion players, of course, but individuals who enjoy bridge. They are a great mass of ordinary people who are attracted to bridge, mainly because bridge is a great social sport. It does bring people together. It does lay down the foundation stones of great relationships. It does serve mutual understanding. Ultimately, it does serve peace!

We need to remember that bridge is not just those great visible people at the top. It is also the ordinary bridge players which fill clubs across Europe every night, or keep Internet lines busy around the clock. Not all these people enjoy the full benefits of our bridge family. We should not overlook that we need to take care of them too!

Conclusion

In the aftermath of stagnation, European bridge needs to make a fresh start. In this new period, emphasis must be given on development, especially among the youth, and on combatting imbalance between our NBOs. Our administration will be totally decentralized to achieve maximum performance. All available forces will be mobilized, without exclusions, and each administrator will be free to handle the assigned department provided he delivers results. Working together with the NBOs will be more than a slogan. Electronic governance will be the rule in these modern times.

European bridge has a great past and tremendous potential. Therefore, it deserves a great future. With a good plan and a good team we can succeed in this noble goal. So we will.

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