

2021 SEPTEMBER ACBL DISTRICT DIRECTOR REPORT

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Mea Culpa

First, my deep apologies for the LONG delay in these newsletters. It seemed like just yesterday that we were announcing the cancellation of the 2020 Spring Columbus NABC, and in that brief moment between then and now our bridge world has been turned upside down. I've timed my newsletters to our NABCs in the past, and though the ACBL has run some online events as a kind of pseudo-NABC, it just isn't the same. I know many of you have had an awful time of it the last 18 months, and we've lost some of our dear friends along the way. That's all the more reason why I should have checked in with you more often than I have – my sincere apologies.

DISTRICT 11 ACBL MEMBERS BY UNIT

| | | |
|----------|-----------------|-----|
| Unit 130 | Central Indiana | 878 |
| Unit 124 | Cincinnati | 797 |
| Unit 122 | Central Ohio | 565 |
| Unit 117 | Louisville | 448 |
| Unit 136 | Miami Valley | 303 |
| Unit 193 | Cardinal States | 346 |
| Unit 164 | Bluegrass | 316 |
| Unit 227 | West Virginia | 95 |

This newsletter is longer than usual – there's a lot going on in our bridge lives and the ACBL, and we're facing major challenges in our clubs and tournaments. I'll also provide news from the ACBL Board of Directors and weigh in on how we're trying to imagine solutions to these challenges. I'll focus on decisions that matter most to our players, but if you're not interested in a particular item, feel free to skip to the next one. I also want to maintain an approach that balances the informational content (what did the Board decide?) with opinion (why did I vote a certain way?).

Cincinnati Flying Pig Un-Regional

Now for some good news! Of a sort. . . we're playing bridge in Cincinnati the first week of October! Most of you know that all ACBL Regionals have been canceled so far, which is certainly a frustrating state of affairs. ACBL Management has insisted on a rigid checklist that tournaments need to be in compliance with (most of which are beyond our control) before the ACBL will allow it to go forward. Many of us believe that these big decisions affecting our tournaments should remain local and within the discretion of the tournament organizer, but the ACBL can determine how they will deploy their Tournament Directors. Without them, we can't run a "Regional." Even worse, we're not even sure when we'd get a final decision, and our members deserve more than 2 weeks notice.

So instead of waiting for the ACBL to cancel the Flying Pig, the Cincinnati Bridge Association has decided to take the lead. We're going to run it anyway – the Flying Pig Un-Regional!

We're moving forward with our bridge tournament – it won't be a "Regional," and so we can't award gold points, but I think there's enough interest out there to make it happen. I can't promise anything resembling a normal tournament, like a sizable turnout (not that I could have promised one anyway), lots of hospitality, or t-shirts (our best hope is to break even financially) but the skinny is that we'll be playing bridge at the Marriott Delta in Cincinnati – our tournament site – from October 3-7, and we'd love to see you there! It would be a breath of fresh air to see some old friends again.



We'll try to stick to our tournament schedule as best we can – Pairs on Sunday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; Swiss on Monday and Thursday. But I hope everyone understands that we'll have to improvise on the fly – we're really not sure what to expect. I can't say for sure whether we'll award black points, silver points, purple points, cryptopoints, or Pigpoints (though you'd be the first players ever to get them!), but we'll do our best to cobble together the best games we're allowed to run with club directors.

We'll be securing some kind of limited MP sectional sanction for the 0-750 players – you will be able to play with your partner if both players are under 750 MP. We will probably run Upgraded Club Championship sanctions for the Open games, but we're exploring other options so we can pay silver trinket points for the Open games. We'll figure it out.

If I'm right, I don't think it's the masterpoints that makes bridge great – I think it's the game and the people that make bridge great. I've heard from players in Florida, Illinois, and Pennsylvania that want to support us and plan to attend. Some of us just want to play to play bridge, and we'll be in Cincinnati at the Marriott-Delta the first week of October doing that. We'd love for you to join us.

Will you help us out? If you're planning to attend, just send the short message "I'm coming!" to FlyingPig.Chair@cincybridge.com. This will help us figure out how many local directors we need, how many tables to set up, how many sets of boards to duplicate, etc. This won't obligate you for anything, of course, but we'd love to have a rough count.

The Cincinnati Bridge Association has established the following health and safety policies for the tournament:

- Proof of full vaccination required – no exceptions of any kind.
- Masks are encouraged, but not required. We welcome you to take whatever precautions you feel are in your best interest.



That's about it. The hotel is beautiful after a \$10 million makeover, and \$89 room rates are terrific for a Marriott. They've got a brand new restaurant inside, a Starbucks, and a great new microbrewery with a wonderful lunch menu right next door.

We'd be honored to be your first post-COVID road trip to a bridge tournament – I hope to see you there!

Remember: If you're planning to attend, just send the short message "I'm coming!" to FlyingPig.Chair@cincybridge.com.

Online and Sit-Down Bridge

Some thoughts on our competing bridge platforms Playing on BBO has been a life raft for many of us over the last 18 months, as it's kept us connected with the game we love. But online bridge can't replace the human connection, and that's what keeps the game more than just a series of digital puzzles. Clubs throughout our District have tried to re-open to provide that much-needed opportunity for social interaction as quickly as they felt it safe to do so. For some of us, sit-down bridge with real people faded from our memory with the ongoing news of infections, vaccines, breakthrough COVID, shutdowns, and the new day-to-day routines we fell into.

But we need sit-down bridge, and we need each other. I forgot how much I love it! I played my first in-person game a few weeks ago, and the tactile aspect of the cards, bidding boxes, tables and scoresheets came flooding back. And, of course, the chance to commune with familiar faces I used to see weekly ("What was her name again?") was a pure delight. Have you ever laughed while playing online? You can do it again, at your local bridge club.

Your club managers and Unit-run bridge centers need your support. If you haven't returned yet, please consider it. I understand the hesitancy to return to public spaces, and I'm sure your local club manager will be happy to answer questions you might have. Proof of vaccination is required at the vast majority, if not all, clubs in our District, and masks are surely encouraged, if not required as well.

ACBL Board of Directors Happenings

The ACBL Board of Directors has been meeting via Zoom (hasn't everyone?) regularly, and the last few months have seen an increase in the frequency of those meetings. We reached a kind of online stasis, with growing anticipation, during the late winter months of 2021, as we looked forward to a re-opening of in-person bridge. It hasn't worked out quite as some of us would have liked.

I'll be honest with you – a large majority of the ACBL Board and Management are not seeing eye-to-eye on this. The ACBL is a decent-sized organization with a \$13 million (\$19 million pre-COVID) budget and over 100 full-time employees. Management has the responsibility for implementing the strategic direction established by the Board of Directors, and we sometimes disagree over that direction or how to get there. That's normal for any non-profit organization, and we find a way to smooth out those differences. It's easy to criticize the Board or ACBL Management for any number of decisions made over the years, but I have been impressed by the overall level of competence and reasonableness in my 4 ½ years of service on the ACBL Board.

But right now, I'm concerned. COVID has permanently changed the bridge landscape, and right now we're sifting through the rubble of our in-person clubs to see what's survived. Online bridge has thrived, to an extent, but we've seen a huge percentage of regular players not migrate to BBO (for many different reasons). BBO has given many of us the opportunity to continue playing some version of the game we know, but BBO has its own share of problems. Competing bridge playing and teaching platforms like RealBridge, Sharkbridge, and Trickster Bridge (there are others) have surfaced that offered a different, and some would say better, playing experience. The ACBL is tied to BBO for many years, and that has limited our options.

The future of bridge is not clear, and it seems that many of us have very different visions of the game than the course being pursued. In some ways, it feels we're still trying to figure out what we're talking about, but in my opinion, these are the critical questions:

- What does "playing bridge" look like in 10 years?
- Is it necessary, or even important, that bridge be played in person?
- If so, how does the ACBL support the in-person bridge clubs that have formed the backbone of our game for 90 years?

I will continue to advocate my perspective on the best way to answer these questions and how we can ensure the survival of our game.

Here's the nuts and bolts of what the ACBL Board and Management have been busy with:

The ACBL Board of Directors held 3 days of meetings on July 14-16, 2021. We've had numerous special meetings since then, and of course, our committees and work groups continue to meet regularly. Here's a breakdown by Board Committee and department:

FINANCE

Operating gain for the first five months of the year is just over \$900K; non-operating gain is \$150K. ACBL presently has \$19M in assets. With the resumption of face-to-face tournament bridge, revised projections for year-end 2021, show a gain from operations of about \$130K. This is highly dependent on the success of NABC Austin in November, the first national tournament held by the ACBL in two years.

The reduction in projected operational gain is because face-to-face regional tournaments do not provide the ACBL with the same level of income as online regional tournaments, and the ACBL is currently planning only one more online regional tournament (held in August). Net income from face-to-face regional tournaments goes to the district or unit sponsor while net income from online tournaments goes directly to the ACBL.

OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL RECORDER

The Office of the National Recorder, headed by Robb Gordon, continues to see a substantial number of player memos generated from online play. Most of the memos involve unethical behavior. As of July 2021, over 630 player memos have been received.

The volume of player memos is expected to decrease as the ACBL transitions to face-to-face tournament play. Player memos generated during face-to-face play are more commonly conduct related.

Whether playing online or face-to-face, the message from Robb Gordon remains clear: "If you 'see' something, 'say' something. Do not state it in public or accuse someone. Fill out a player memo. I guarantee we will investigate."

More than 15 volunteers currently support the investigative process. District Disciplinary Committees will become more active as face-to-face play resumes.

Compliance Coordinator Sabrina Goley has been promoted to the roles of Administrative Coordinator and Assistant Corporate Secretary. Her duties as they relate to the Office of the National Recorder will be limited to disciplinary matters.

APPEALS AND CHARGES COMMITTEE

The Appeals and Charges Committee (A&C) presented its report on (a) hearings and (b) revisions to the Code of Disciplinary Regulations.

During "Special" board meetings, A&C previously reported on hearings it had held since the March 2021 Board meeting. At the July meetings, A&C reported on its two most recent hearings: A Negotiated Resolution and an automatic review of an Online Ethical Oversight Committee hearing.

A&C presented a revision of our Code of Disciplinary Regulations (CDR) that was then approved by the Board during the meeting. This revision includes substantial clarifications and simplifications, and a reorganization that includes deletion of Article IX and Appendix A and moves their provisions elsewhere within the CDR. A new section was added to provide guidance to all disciplinary bodies on how to determine appropriate disciplines. Disciplinary options were greatly simplified, improving the process for application of discipline.

An online tour of the ACBL website demonstrated means to access disciplinary case disposition charts, hearing reports and helpful documents. All of the decisions of our Disciplinary Committees (set out in "Hearing Reports") and summaries of the results can be found here: <https://www.acbl.org/ethics/>

Speaking of which, the ACBL has rolled out a new website design. There are bound to be numerous hiccups when a website as extensive as ours is re-designed, and you'll have to get used to the new layout. It might take me a while.

BYLAWS COMMITTEE

The Bylaws Committee brought forward a motion for its first reading making certain technical amendments to the ACBL Bylaws, Article IX, Board of Governors, correcting omissions made effective April 2021.

MEMBERSHIP

ACBL membership continues to decrease sharply each month, down approximately 9.0% since last year. Currently, the ACBL has approximately 146,300 members.

CLUBS

The table counts for Virtual Club games are decreasing as table counts for face-to-face play continue to climb. Table counts below were sourced from an ACBL email sent to club managers on August 4.

| Table Counts by Platform | Face-to-Face Tables | Virtual Club Tables | Total Tables |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| May 2021 | 17,981 | 110,169 | 128,150 |
| June 2021 | 38,066 | 86,822 | 124,888 |
| July 2021 | 53,230 | 77,072 | 130,302 |

STRATEGIC COMMITTEE

Strategies for a robust return to face-to-face bridge continue to be refined as club openings are monitored and the Delta variant continues to surge. While the majority of the Board favors an invitational/restricted model, discussions regarding an open (unrestricted) market model continue. We thought ACBL Management had agreed to implement some needed changes, affecting things like eliminating the masterpoint multiplier for Virtual Club games, adding limited MP Support Your Club (SYC) games, strictly enforcing the Visitor Policy for Virtual Clubs, eliminating almost multi-district pools, and adding rules for obtaining Virtual Club sanctions going forward, but here's the latest guidance:

- The ACBL has begun enforcing the visitor policy as written at 15%
- No major changes in the current regulations affecting Virtual Clubs
- Possible elimination or reduction of the MP multiplier later this year

Management Membership Proposals

Strategic presented two proposals from Management.

The first proposal would require players in club games to either have a lapsed, retrievable ACBL member number or to acquire a number by obtaining a Guest Membership. These actions would support ACBL marketing efforts to encourage individuals to join or re-join the ACBL. The proposal was rejected by the Board.

The second proposal recommends that tournament participants have an active membership. This requirement is already in place for NABC-level events. It would streamline the tournament fee structure and make membership universal for sanctioned tournaments. This proposal was accepted by the Board.

Both actions by the Board were consistent with feedback from the Board of Governors.

GOVERNANCE BOARD OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

Most of the actions were undertaken by the Governance Committee in advance of the July meeting, and were administrative/housekeeping in nature. All were approved by the Board during the meeting.

The work to update and simplify the Codification, the regulatory document of the Board, continued with motions being put forward to address how and when Board motions are made, Board meeting process and Board minutes. In addition, the Board clarified outdated language in the Codification regarding Board expenses. It also voted to eliminate reimbursement for hotel and per diem expenses for district directors (soon-to-be-regional directors as well), with the exception of the ACBL President and the Board of Governors Chair, between the conclusion of the Board of Directors meeting and the convening of the Board of Governors meeting.

Board Reorganization

Many Districts are starting to review their respective bylaws, amending where necessary those portions governing the role of their representative member of the ACBL Board from their districts. This is in anticipation of the elections early this fall for the position of Regional Director that will begin the reorganization and downsizing of the board of directors. Eight elections for Regional Directors are taking place now for ACBL Board positions beginning January 1, 2022. Our District has been combined with the Districts to the West and South, so our new Region includes the territory from Charleston, WV to Central Missouri, and from northern Ohio down to Louisiana. Our Region includes all or part of the following states: West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Our election will occur in the summer of 2022.

The Governance Committee began an in-depth review of both Part 1: Governance and Policy and Part 2: Bridge Operations, of the Codification where there are many references to the roles and responsibilities of the district directors. Per that review and as approved by the Board at this meeting, a number of these current responsibilities will not be assumed by the regional directors replacing them, but instead will become the responsibility of district presidents (or their appointed surrogates). Examples include annual appointments of members from their districts to the National Goodwill and Charity Committees, and approval of sanctions for new club games in their districts.

Codification review will continue through the end of this year, with improvements expected to the communications policy; clarification of the procedures for unit governance, formation and dissolution and the composition of the Board Executive Committee, to name just a few. As the transition to a smaller board gets underway, there are many areas of the Codification that will require changing, as Management, staff and members-at-large through appointment by Management or the Board of Governors take on more of the roles currently being filled by Board members. Key functions include: NABC Site Selection, bridge decisions beyond what are fulfilled by the joint Management/Board/member/Masterpoint Committee, and approval of players to compete in grass roots events when they have residences in multiple districts.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REVIEW

During the spring national board meeting, Joe Jones, executive director, ACBL, presented operational goals for 2021. A status update of these goals was presented by Jones during the July board meeting. A newly implemented dashboard which helps track the progress and status of projects was demonstrated to the Board.

MARKETING

Guest Membership Program

ACBL Marketing continues to promote and grow the Guest Membership program.

In February, Marketing launched the \$29 first-year annual membership promotion and has successfully converted over 716 guest members to full ACBL members. Currently, there are 781 guest members.

Communications

ACBL continues to use multiple social media platforms, primarily Facebook.

- ACBL Facebook page has over 10,200 followers.
- As of June, ACBL Twitter account has over 3,000 followers.
- ACBL Instagram account has over 1,600 followers.

The Longest Day

Bridge players and clubs rallied around The Longest Day despite the coronavirus pandemic. As of July, over \$843,478 has been raised to support the Alzheimer's Association in its quest to end this devastating disease. Funds raised in Canada will be donated to the Alzheimer Society of Canada.

The ACBL will donate all sanction fees from Virtual Club games held the weekend of June 19 and 20 and from face-to-face club games held the week of June 20-27, increasing the fundraising total.

NABC SERVICES

The ACBL has reduced by over \$5.4 million 2020-21 financial impacts from hotel contracts related to canceled 2020-21 NABCs.

Hotel and convention center contracts for future NABCs have been renegotiated, resulting in approximately \$1.7 million in financial risk reduction.

Strategies were used to adjust contracted room blocks to match historical pick up and to renegotiate concessions to match the needs of the ACBL.

EDUCATION

Club Director Refresher Course

A free club director refresher course led by Melody Euler, tournament director, was held Saturday, June 12. Five-hundred directors attended. An additional 250 received the link to the video.

The ACBL will train approximately 100 new club directors June through August.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Pre-registration Platform

The ACBL is developing a pre-registration platform for future tournaments. This platform will be delivered in four phases with a tentative completion date of spring 2022. Phase one will enable attendees to view, select and register for tournaments. Payment options will be added in phase two. The ability to register for specific tournament events such as open pairs or KOs and to identify and select partners/teammates will be added during phase three.

Further refinements to data analytics and reporting will be delivered during the final phase of the project.

Reporting capabilities will provide tournament organizers with valuable information to select venues, fine tune hospitality costs, adjust staffing levels and modify event offerings. Pre-registration in general will reduce the time spent standing in line and enable directing staff to stay on schedule.

Analytics and Visualizations

IT, in conjunction with Marketing and Field Operations, has developed Tableau workbooks depicting ACBL membership retention trends, pipeline goals for new members, player activity and masterpoint earnings by members and guest members. This is in addition to a daily dashboard depicting the activity of North American Pairs (NAP) club games. Presenting raw data through graphical representations improves the user experience and better enables users to interpret data to meet organizational goals.

Data Warehouse

Advancing its Data Warehouse project, IT has completed analysis of a platform upgrade and has successfully migrated to the new platform. This will provide advanced functionality and increased stability to ACBL data processing and analytics.

BRIDGE COMMITTEE

The committee brought forward a motion to amend Chapter XI -- Special Events, North American Pairs (NAP). It clarified subsidy provisions and provided Management the authority to establish the dates for finals to be held online.

Also, the committee presented a motion on behalf of Management which seeks to simplify grandfathered ranking standards, with ample notification to ACBL membership, so that the process and requirements are more straightforward. Implementation: January 1, 2023. The Board concurred with Management.

Whew! If you've gotten through all that, you have my admiration.

I am always available by phone (513-313-0488) or e-mail (AJStephani@gmail.com) with questions or concerns. Take care of yourselves, your partners, and your neighbors out there.

Hope to see you in Cincinnati!

A.J.