

# 2022 OCTOBER ACBL REPORT

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## Farewell

This will be my last newsletter to you, and this time as the former “District Director” and member of the ACBL Board of Directors. A week ago yesterday, I resigned my position, and I’m posting my full explanation I posted on Bridgewinners.com below. I’ll have a few personal notes I’ll add at the end.

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It is with great sadness and a heavy heart that I have resigned from the ACBL Board of Directors, effective today. I wanted to provide all of you with at least a partial explanation for my actions, for several reasons:

- I abhor the generic “personal and family reasons” explanation, especially when it’s clear the truth lies elsewhere;
- I wanted to at least try to squash shotgun speculation about my personal motivations, particularly when the resignation occurs before my new 4-year term has even begun;
- Most of all, the ACBL membership deserves better – our organization exists for you, to preserve your enjoyment of bridge, and to act as the steward of our great game in North America to ensure it survives to live another day. You are owed an explanation.

It’s always more challenging to work to create positive change from the inside; however, the alternative creates the risk of unnecessary disruption and undesirable revolutionary dynamics. I have chosen to volunteer my time over the past 13 years from within the ACBL organizational structures in place – first at the Unit and club level, then at the District level, and over the past 6 years, from within the ACBL Board of Directors.

Working from this position has many advantages – I’ve forged many relationships that I consider among the most meaningful in my life, and I’m gratified in what I feel are positive contributions to the way the ACBL works.

The restrictions, however, can feel confining and exhausting at times – the learning curve for operating within an organization as complex and timeworn as the ACBL is steep. You agree to comply with certain rules and norms, personal relationships must be maintained to remain effective, and trust and respect must be earned slowly and incrementally.

Over the last few years, I began to lose confidence in ACBL management, one of the two groups that is primarily responsible for its continued existence and operation. Unfortunately, I now believe it is far past the point of repair – it’s no longer a reclamation project, it’s a “tear-it-down and start over” one. I want to emphasize that I have considerable respect and admiration for much of the staff in Horn Lake that I have worked with personally over the years. Unfortunately, without competent leadership and support, even the best employees find themselves exhausted and drained.

My evolution has roughly coincided with the advent of the COVID era, though many of the dynamics pre-date that time and other reasons have been raised in its wake. The governing body for the ACBL, the Board of Directors, has a responsibility to act in the best interests of the organization. Like many of the members of that body, I began to ask questions about how to respond to these challenges, what actions we might take, and how to think about our future as

## District 11 ACBL Membership Update

	Unit Name	Members	Year-Over-Year Trend
Unit 130	Central Indiana	852	-1.6 %
Unit 124	Cincinnati	751	-5.2 %
Unit 122	Central Ohio	522	-6.5 %
Unit 117	Louisville	399	-9.5 %
Unit 136	Miami Valley	284	-3.4 %
Unit 193	Cardinal States	306	-12.3 %
Unit 164	Bluegrass	293	-6.1 %
Unit 227	West Virginia	80	-16.7 %

an organization responsible for a game in trouble. I salute the diligence and dedication of many of my colleagues – we’re all volunteers serving a game we love, like many of you, and we work hard to preserve it.

As my confidence eroded, I held out hope that our Board would respond quickly and responsibly. I increased my efforts and sought to convince our leadership that the situation was growing more dire than we had previously seen:

- Our membership, which has been falling for decades, has dropped precipitously in the last several years;
- New member growth is less than half of what it was 2 years ago, and almost a third of what it was 5 years ago;
- Tournaments are running anywhere between 35-55% of table counts compared to 2019;
- Clubs, particularly larger permanent-location bridge centers that are the engine of new player growth and volunteer development, are struggling to keep their doors open as their costs continue to rise while revenues dramatically decrease;
- Our Virtual Club program lacks any semblance of a coherent structure, allowing large pools to cannibalize the original reason that the program was created in the first place (providing a broad cross-section of FTF club owners with a life raft through the early stages of the COVID shutdown);
- There’s not a hint of anything resembling an online bridge strategy or even the suggestion of how we might leverage the online experience to cross-pollinate our FTF game that forms the cornerstone of our tournaments and NABCs;
- Our internal Information Technology capacity, which was already taxed prior to the advent of COVID, has struggled mightily to handle the challenges of the last several years while engaging in expensive new projects that have borne little fruit or generate increases in productivity;
- Morale in Horn Lake among direct service staff is reported to be very low, perhaps even lower than when we terminated the prior CEO in April 2018;
- Our Recorder’s Office has failed to adjust to the challenges and the scale of online cheating (though the potential of new technologies and procedural developments has begun to be realized over the last year);
- We have strayed from our core competencies as a membership organization (protecting the Masterpoint brand, well-run and cost-effective tournaments for our Districts and Units, serving the daily needs and interests of our members) in search of developing “shiny new objects” (new programs and projects) that growing organizations might have the luxury of exploring but we simply cannot afford (not to mention the absence of organizational competence to pull off successfully);
- Administrative overhead in our national HQ based in Horn Lake continues to increase in the face of declining revenue, and total executive level compensation has ballooned over the last 3 years;
- Most alarmingly, we have utterly failed to respond to the threat of the average age of our membership, which has been increasing for longer than the overall number has been declining, *and has risen at a faster rate in the 2 post-COVID years than it did before* (this year, the rate has appeared to stabilize, though it continues to rise).

Our Board of Directors has long straddled the lines separating strategic direction, responsible oversight and micromanagement in addressing these challenges, and many of us are wary of the appearance of impropriety in this

regard. But that does not eliminate our obligation to take action for when the organization is adrift without either the structure to address these challenges or the proper management team to operate within that structure.

Our Board has engaged in a continuous thread of dialogue throughout the year about how to address to these challenges. To date, we have not responded in a manner that I believe reflects either the urgency with which we need to act or the recognition of the scope of these challenges.

I have reached the exhaustion point where I feel it's no longer worthwhile to keep trying. I wish I had more left in the tank, but recent experiences have left me with little hope that we will ever find a way out of this situation. I have served this organization for 6 years faithfully, and I hope most people who have worked with me believe I have served with integrity and some degree of competence. In the end, I have failed to achieve what we all hope for when we embark on this kind of volunteer service – to leave the organization in better shape than when we begin.

It's easy to look back at everything I should have done differently – times when I should have spoken up, and those when I should have kept my mouth shut – but I will leave knowing that I have done all I can to act for the ACBL's best interests without causing further unnecessary disruption.

I have greatly enjoyed serving all of you, and with my colleagues, and I hope to be more successful in my future endeavors (bridge-related and otherwise) than I've been in this one.

## Personal Notes

I've been honored to represent all of you in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky, and West Virginia for the past 6 years, just as my predecessor Beth Reid did before me. I've loved meeting you at Regionals, NAP and GNT competitions, Sectionals, club games, and through your Life Master stories and numerous phone calls, texts, and email. I've been proud of District 11's attendance at NABCs, even in far away locations, and our success in National-level competitions. I'm honored to have concluded my journey as a member of the ACBL Board as a District 11 bridge player.

I have not lost hope for our great game, and I know it will survive one way or another. I'm not going anywhere, and I'm exploring my options to determine how best to be a champion for the game in the future.

I'm always available by phone (513-313-0488) or e-mail ([AJStephani@gmail.com](mailto:AJStephani@gmail.com)) with your suggestions. Take care of yourselves, your partners, and your neighbors out there. I'll be at Louisville Regional on November 9, 12, and 13, so stop by and say hi.

All My Best,

A.J.