

# WINTER 2019 ACBL Board NEWS

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## ACBL Board Member Notes

### Honolulu NABC

Many people have asked about my trip to Hawaii for our Fall meetings; I often respond that a conference room in Honolulu looks much the same as a conference room in Omaha. We spend the better part of 4 days sitting in these conference rooms taking part in committee meetings, appeals of disciplinary hearings (there are 7 of us that serve on last year's Appeals & Charges Committee, which is a little like the ACBL's Supreme Court), and getting through the Board agenda. I voted against having our meetings in Honolulu, as we could have done the same thing in Horn Lake (ACBL HQ is located there), MS as we did in Honolulu for a lot less money.



And it IS convenient to have our meetings at the NABCs – many of us attend ACBL committee and ACBL-affiliated organizational meetings while we're there. We also try to touch base with our teachers, club managers, patron members, directors, professional players, and other stakeholders within the ACBL. It's just unfortunate that this particular opportunity, at a time when we can bear few unnecessary costs, was so expensive.

As usual, I want to continue focusing 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?).

### "Of-the-Year" Honorees

The ACBL Board recognizes certain ACBL members for their exceptional contributions during its Fall meetings. Mark Sorenson of San Bruno, CA was appointed the 2019 Aileen Osofsky ACBL Goodwill Member of the Year. Shawn Stringer of Silver Spring, MD, was named the 2018 Nadine Wood Volunteer of the Year. And Michael & Debbie Rosenberg, who have been instrumental in

bringing much-needed energy to the US Junior Bridge Program, were named the 2018 ACBL Honorary Members of the Year.

### ACBL Executive Director

I'm pleased to tell you that our Interim Executive Director, Joe Jones, has been made permanent. Joe was the former ACBL Chief Financial Officer, so he has as good a handle on the finances of the ACBL as anyone. As 2019 dawns, this is a biggie (see below). The formal ACBL announcement noted that he's a self-described "finance guy" who puts ACBL's fiscal health high on his priority list. On a personal note, I'll say that Joe has the complete trust of the Board of Directors and has already demonstrated that he doesn't shy away from the tough decisions. He's absolutely the right guy for where we are today.

A lifelong resident of Memphis, Joe has worked for the ACBL for 8 years. He and wife Julie have a son and 2 daughters. If you happen to see Joe at an NABC or elsewhere, stop him and say hi. He's about as approachable as they come.



### New ACBL President

Many of us have gotten the roles of ACBL CEO (now with the title of "Executive Director") and President confused at one time or another. The Executive Director is the full-time chief officer of the ACBL who works in Horn Lake – that's Joe. The President of the Board, on the other hand, is a 1-year volunteer elected position that serves as something of an ambassadorial role to the ACBL

### DISTRICT 11 ACBL MEMBERS BY UNIT

Unit 130	Central Indiana	984
Unit 124	Cincinnati	911
Unit 122	Central Ohio	633
Unit 117	Louisville	510
Unit 136	Miami Valley	393
Unit 193	Cardinal States	385
Unit 164	Bluegrass	341
Unit 227	West Virginia	130

Membership. The President is not just a figurehead position, however, as the President sets the Board's agenda, acts as the liaison with the Executive Director and ACBL management, and helps to frame the tactical approach of the organization.



I'm happy to announce that Russ Jones (Jonesboro, Arkansas) is our 2019 ACBL President. Russ has an intriguing bridge resume: he's a former ACBL Director, current club manager, and tournament organizer of one of the largest NLM Regionals in the ACBL. He's also our masterpoint guru – the Guardian of the Masterpoint Book – and our go-to guy on all things masterpoints. (If you've never leafed through it before, you're in for a treat: Google "ACBL Masterpoint Book" sometime to get a glimpse of how Russ's mind works.)

Russ is a very low-key, no drama-kind of guy, and I predict that there will be more than 1 call from the BOD for a second year of Russ as ACBL President. By day, he's a Professor of Computer Science at Arkansas State University. Lest you think that the President's job is a part-time gig, Russ is taking a full year sabbatical from his job this year. At a time when the average age of the ACBL member is 72 ½, it's refreshing that Russ became a new father just over a year ago.

## The Financial State of the ACBL in 2019

I'm not going to mince words here, folks – our situation stinks right now. We just received year-end financial statements from our Finance Committee Chair, and here's a sampling of some of the takeaways:

- an operating loss of \$1,078,675
- a \$756K loss on the Hawaii NABC
- revenue for the NABC \$138K below budget. . . . staffing costs \$8K over budget and lodging \$33K over budget
- tournament tables down 4.7% from 2017 and Tournament Director expenses up \$392K (11.3%) from 2017
- membership down 1.5% for the year and club tables down 4% in 2018

It's obviously critical that we address these imbalances. Our average age continues to climb (currently 72.45), our tournament and club table count continue to decrease, and we never seem to run out of huge one-off expenses. In my judgment, responsible stewardship requires us to acknowledge these realities and plan accordingly. We simply must envision a smaller ACBL going forward. This will mean jobs lost, fees raised, programs curtailed, and fewer of the bells and whistles that we have grown accustomed to in our bridge lives. Bridge will survive, but we need to plan for a graceful decline or we may face an ugly demise.

I wish I could tell you that someone has the magic wand to rejuvenate the game among our youth, or grow tournaments, or return to the halcyon days when *Championship Bridge with Charles Goren* was broadcast on Sunday afternoon television. I don't see it happening, at least on our current course.

I became a member of the ACBL Board of Directors 2 years ago with the promise that I would try to change that course, but it's a slow grind. I believe that more like-minded members of the Board are being elected each year, and I have reasons to be cautiously optimistic about a few developments that will play out in 2019. But I don't want to lead anyone into thinking that things are just hunky-dory and all we need to do is plow forward. Big changes are needed.

In the meantime, conditions of contest have to be altered, masterpoint formulas tweaked, contracts reviewed, tournaments approved, meetings scheduled, NABC events evaluated, fragrance and NT announcement policies reviewed, committee appointments made, new convention charts introduced, disciplinary hearings conducted, and future NABCs planned. We'll get there.

## NAP and GNT News

It doesn't affect us much in District 11, but Unit and District qualifying events for the Grand National Teams may now be scheduled opposite open, women and senior team trials run by the United States Bridge Federation or Canadian Bridge Federation. In larger Districts, scheduling conflicts prevented some Districts from running their GNT events during the most convenient weekends. The motion passed easily, 23-2-0. \*

\* Where votes of the Board are noted, the tally will be given with the Ayes first, then the Nays, then the Abstentions (e.g., 15-9-1 would be 15 in favor, 9 opposed, with 1 person abstaining).

It's a good example of a small, but tangible recognition that we need to plan for a future where we don't get everything we want. At one time, perhaps it was good policy to force Districts into suboptimal contracts with venues in the interest of allowing everyone to compete in both their District GNT Finals and the USBF Team Trials. But occasionally forcing someone to choose between these events shouldn't be the end of the world, and large Districts were having problems finding time on their tournament calendars. I voted in favor of the motion.

In other GNT news, Districts that can turn out at least 8 teams in the B or C flights of the GNT District finals will be able to send a second team in that flight to the GNT National Final.

“Like some ghoul in a late night horror movie that repeatedly sits up in its grave and shuffles abroad, after being repeatedly killed and buried,”\* this motion has been around an eon or



two. There are good reasons to like this policy, as it certainly promises to introduce new players to NABCs and may increase participation in GNTs at the District level. It

failed in our last meeting by the narrowest of votes, 12-13, but passed this time, 14-10-1. I voted against the measure both times (so at least I'm consistent), noting in my last newsletter that I thought the GNT's tradition of "1 team per District" meant that we smaller Districts have a fighting chance to win. Now, the larger Districts will inevitably send more than one team, which means we have our work cut out for us even more.

No matter, we got this. **GET OUT THERE, FORM A TEAM, AND COME TO THE GNT FINALS ON APRIL**

**13-14 IN CINCINNATI!** Sorry for yelling, but District 11 has an outstanding history of success in this event, it's my favorite District event of the year, and I'd love to see a huge crowd in April.

## No Trump Range Announcement

One of the more interesting motions was a request to do away with the NT range announcement *unless* the opening range was outside the usual 15-17 HCP. Sounds reasonable, right? Sure, but start to consider the problems: players who scramble to grab their opponents' convention cards when they open 1NT with no announcement (see if you can figure out the reason why); pairs with variable no trump ranges in KOs or Swiss matches; the cost of transitioning to a "no announcement" environment, etc. The motion ultimately failed, 5-20 (I voted no).

Note that clubs may, and sometimes do, eliminate the NT announcement requirement in the interest of making certain club games friendlier and less formal and legalistic. However, the regulation still applies in all ACBL tournaments, and it's probably good practice to keep most of the rules consistent across all ACBL-sanctioned events.

The Fall NABC in Honolulu had terrific weather and was held in a beautiful location, as you might expect. Sadly, table count was only 6000 tables, down considerably from most Fall NABCs as well as the 8600 table count the last time the NABC was held in Hawaii in 2006.



The Hilton Hawaiian Village was a unique venue for Thanksgiving, though it's tough to complain about its location right on Waikiki Beach. I got away from the hotel for a few short tourist-y windows, including the Diamond Head hike inside a dormant crater featuring great views of the city.



This was largely a nonplaying trip for me, as I played just one two-session pairs event with former Cincinnati player (and now New York bridge pro) Randall Rubenstein. The camaraderie was better than the bridge, as I had forgotten how much I enjoy spending time with Randall. Anyway, I had to scoot back to Cincinnati to administer final exams in my classes.

The Spring 2019 NABC in **Memphis** is set for March 20-31. It's certainly a shorter trip than it was for **Honolulu** – I look forward to seeing you there.

\* Prizes to whomever recognizes this quote without the benefit of Google.



## NABC Developments

Do you realize the Columbus 2020 Spring NABC is only 14 months away????!! Unit leaders, start the buzz now, because we want to really represent District 11 well next spring in Columbus. . . .

Our 3 NABCs each year are expected to generate about \$500K per year of income. This is not a huge percentage of the ACBL's nearly \$18M budget, but we fell significantly short of our target for 2018. In general, our contracts with NABC venues provide us, at no cost, with the playing space, conference space, and public space needed to run the tournament. In return, we must guarantee significant room blocks at the host hotel as well as a food and beverage commitment (in most cases). With the growing popularity of online hotel purchasing, Airbnb and the like, more and more of our NABC players are seeking more economical housing alternatives. Essentially, the players that spend more to stay at NABC host hotels are subsidizing the rest of us. The

economic model that has worked for years is now broken, and our NABC contracts, which are often signed 7-10 years in advance, have become millstones around our neck. Our clubs and non-NABC players should not be expected to pay these costs – we must somehow figure out how to make our NABCs profitable again.

In Honolulu, our Finance Chair made a persuasive case for raising NABC fees. Regional fees at NABCs had not been raised *in 10 years*. The Board allowed itself to be bullied into dropping screen fees several years ago, even though it is painfully evident that the cost of running NABC events is MUCH higher than running Regionally-rated events. Tables are farther apart in NABC events, which means we need more space. When screens are used, the space needs nearly quadruple. Regional events use far fewer directors per player. NABC events have more appeals, higher security costs, etc.

Two motions addressed these problems. In the first, we raised (14-9-1-1 absent) entry fees at NABCs to \$30 for NABC+ events, \$22 for other NABC events, \$20 for regional events and \$20 for unlimited single session events. We held the line on Intermediate/Newcomer events to \$15 in recognition that these events are vital for future growth.

The second motion added (18-7-0) a screen fee of \$10.00 per session/per pair and \$20.00 per session/per team in all NABC events at the point during each event when screens are introduced. I voted in favor of both these motions – not because I love to raise fees, but because I recognized they more accurately reflected the true cost of running these events.

I'll note that, even with the increased fees, our NABC events are still cheaper than most WBF events and other world-class bridge competitions. Management recognizes that players will expect better playing conditions in NABC events going forward, and they have also been urged to find cost reductions.

## More Board of Directors Cost-Cutting

The ACBL Board of Directors has an unfortunate reputation as squanderer of ACBL funds. It's unfortunate, but perhaps not undeserved, as the ACBL Board of decades past spent money on items I do not approve. Over the past 10 years, however, the BOD has worked hard to curb these habits, and every year we try to do more. In Atlanta we passed a motion that eliminated the practice of taking newly-elected members of the BOD to its Fall NABC meeting before their terms begin. We will have 5 new faces on our Board in 2019, so the financial savings will be substantial. Our new President, Russ Jones, has decided to hold new board member orientation electronically, instead of the traditional face-to-face orientation. This will also save a little bit. The 5 new Board members will be able to meet the Horn Lake staff and tour HQ in the few days before our Memphis meetings. Speaking of which, our Memphis meetings will be reduced to 2.5 days from the typical 3.5-4 days, which will save even more. In all, the percentage of the ACBL budget allocated to the Board of Directors is approximately 2%.



## Cheating and What to Do About It

For most of us, bridge cheating scandals seem remote and inconsequential. We may be aware that some pairs at the highest levels of the game have been accused of cheating over the past few years, but we may not have followed the variety of worldwide disciplinary and legal proceedings that came after. And it's not just the ACBL we're talking about; the European Bridge League, World Bridge Federation, various other so-called "zonal authorities" that represent different regions of the world, and several dozen national bridge organizations (like, for example, the French Bridge Federation) are all wrestling with these problems as well.

However, the last 3-year period has been the most significant chapter in the history of bridge ethics and fair play. On August 22, 2015, Norwegian pro Boye Brogeland went public with cheating accusations against some of the most successful bridge players over the prior 20 years. During this saga, Boye has stood out as a hero whose actions we should all strive to emulate. In the last few years, at least 4 world-class pairs were either convicted or confessed to cheating. This has re-ignited a public discussion on the ethics of the game, and bridge organizations of various stripes and squares have struggled to address the aftermath.

The ACBL Board has not been immune to these developments. The interplay between the ACBL and other national bridge organizations across the world is complex, and for reasons I won't detail here, we are able to exercise more discretion in these matters than other bridge organizations (including the World Bridge Federation). This gives the ACBL a somewhat unique opportunity to become a global leader.

The ACBL Board will be reviewing several motions in 2019 that address bridge cheating in one way or another. It's tempting to stand on the mountain top and clamor for the heads for the cheaters, but that approach might backfire and yield undesirable results. The devil is in the details, as is often the case, and it will be critical to craft rules and regulations that allow us to treat the "bad guys" with sufficient discipline while maintaining the capacity for redemption. We don't want to become like *Hang 'em High's* Judge Adam Fenton, acting from a reservoir of passion, rather than from one of reason. But we need to send a message to the world that the ACBL is willing to do what is right, and not necessarily what is easy.



## Looking Ahead

I predict that a proposal to significantly change the ACBL governing structure will see the light of day in 2019. Various proposals have been bouncing around for several years now, and a favorable sail may catch the winds of change this year. A motion was passed in Honolulu (22-2-1) that establishes a Masterpoint Committee composed of board members and outside experts. I voted in favor of this motion reluctantly, as significant unanswered questions remain about how it would work. However, it's some kind of move in the right direction, and it could portend something much bigger and more significant. This Committee may move this business off the BOD and into the hands of those who can devote the necessary time to understanding the complexities of making masterpoint changes.

## Around the District

Next up for our District Regionals is Cincinnati's Flying Pig Regional on June 3-9. You'll see some changes at our host venue this year, and we ask that you excuse our dust as the Ramada is in the middle of a \$10M upgrade as it converts to a Marriott-branded hotel. The playing area and conference space will be complete, and we're anxious to see the results!

The NAP District Finals for Flights A & B are in the books, and congrats to all the winners! I'm always privileged to have the opportunity to play with my son, Isaac, and we played just well enough to hold off the field in Flight A. Alas, for naught, as I am ineligible to play in the NAP National Finals because it interferes with our Board meetings (yes, I knew about this beforehand). So, a stocked field will be representing our District: Doug Simson (Columbus) and Shan Au (Columbus), Eugene Siutsau (Cincinnati) and Bill Higgins (Cincinnati), and Pete Whipple (Cincinnati) and Ryan Schultz (Dayton). Steve Moese (Cincinnati) and Mike Ma (Cincinnati) will be available as replacements in case one of our 3 top pairs can't make it.

In Flight B, we're represented by Denny Schultz (Cincinnati) and Larry Newman (Cincinnati), Charlie Seelbach (Lexington) and Blaine Mullins (Lexington), Terry Brausch (Cincinnati) and John Williams (Cincinnati), and Max Arora (Indianapolis) and Rahul Kapur (Indianapolis).

The GNT Finals are coming up in Cincinnati on April 13-14, and remember that we can send 2 teams in Flights B & C with a good turnout! See you there!

Until then, I am always available by phone (513-313-0488) or e-mail ([AJStephani@gmail.com](mailto:AJStephani@gmail.com)) with questions or concerns.

May At Least Half Your Finesses Work,

A.J.