

Chairperson's Address at the 2011 AGM

A. Welcome

Thank you for giving up your time to come to your county association's AGM. I extend a warm welcome to you all.

In this address I will be reviewing

- (a) Pay to Play and Universal Membership one year on,
- (b) our financial position,
- (c) the selection committee and
- (d) the work of the SCBA.

B. Pay to Play and Universal Membership One Year On

1. The New EBU System Interface with Affiliated Clubs and Counties

After historic poor computer experiences with the English Bridge Union (EBU) , many of us were concerned about what would happen when Pay to Play came in at the beginning of April last year. Our pessimism thankfully was not justified, as there does not appear to have been any significant hitches with the new electronic interface between the affiliated clubs and the EBU.

We have also had a similar positive experience for our county events, although Bob still has to produce masterpoint excel files for events which at present do not have a scoring programme which can create a properly formatted electronic masterpoints file. This should improve by the end of the coming season, ready for further changes in the masterpoints and licensing system which I will mention briefly later.

2. Consultation on the Future Governance of the EBU

County Associations like our own are an integral part of the English Bridge Union. Each of them has been granted shareholder votes which enable them to determine the EBU's policies, and who is appointed to the EBU's board and main committees. Over the last year, EBU affiliated clubs were consulted on whether there should be any change to this historic governance structure. Very few clubs responded and the few that did generally indicated no appetite for change.

3. Club Development

The survival of regulated duplicate bridge in England is dependent on the development of new affiliated clubs and the continuation and expansion of existing ones. Otherwise the funding for the EBU that comes from them will begin to dry up as the membership base contracts. Very slowly the EBU's resources and energy is beginning to be focused on how this might be achieved, and I will be finding out more about their thoughts at a county chairman's meeting next Wednesday.

At the heart of any affiliated club development programme is the need to teach more people to play duplicate bridge, and then to integrate them into a club. The EBU itself

provides excellent advice on setting up teaching programmes, teacher training courses and very good teaching support materials. Here in Somerset we can learn from excellent role model clubs, in particular the Wilton bridge club that has successfully been built from scratch based on the teaching from Anne Harris and the late Paul Wickham.

But the crucial and most difficult thing is to find the individuals who are prepared to make the commitment to teach in support of a club's member development policy. It seems more people have come forward, and I am delighted to see more teaching programmes are in place than last year, and 7 clubs recently had representatives at a teaching seminar organised by Tony Russ.

5. New Masterpoint and Licensing Regulations

The masterpoint and licensing regulations were initially updated on 1 April 2010. I mentioned last year that as things stood, from April 2011 the new regulations would restrict us from arranging county sponsored events, which involved non affiliated clubs, and as a result I was particularly concerned about the impact these new rules would have on some of our events for the 2011/12 season. I am delighted to say that after consultation with the county associations, the EBU has now postponed the licensing changes impacting on county events until April 2012, and furthermore from that date, there will be no need to change the structure of any of our events that involve non affiliated clubs and non affiliated members.

From April 2012 county events will be subject to a new county P2P fee, and this will slightly increase the cost of running our competitions. The upside though is that by the end of the coming season, more of our county events will have scoring programmes linked to the production of P2P files, which should help to reduce the Tournament Secretary's workload.

C. The SCBA's Financial Position

1. The SCBA's Financial Policy

We have adequate reserves for the foreseeable future and there is little point in building up additional reserves for the sake of it. Our financial policy is to budget for our income to exceed our expenditure to create a small surplus each year. This enables us to ensure the members benefit as much as possible from the surplus arising from the West of England Congress, whilst holding our reserves broadly at their current level.

2. Membership Fees and County Competition Charges

In line with our financial policy, at the last AGM we agreed not to charge any membership fee during the 2011/12 accounting year and to have a zero county component within an affiliated club's pay to play fee for that accounting year. We will be recommending later that this should also be the case for 2012/13.

3. Financial Risk

The biggest risk to our finances during the 2011/12 financial year will be that the surplus we enjoy from the West of England Congress is not maintained at the current level. So far this year's entries are in line with last year's at the same point in time, so we have no indication a similar Congress surplus cannot be achieved. However, as in previous years, once we are more certain of the financial outcome of the West of England Congress, the 2011/12 budget will be reviewed by the Treasurer. We will decide on any adjustment needed to our competition fee and cost structure at that time, should we be heading towards an unexpected deficit in 2011/12.

One of the reasons our costs for the West of England Congress are kept at a low level is that we have been able to agree in the past relatively low charges for the hire of the Winter Gardens. This may not of course continue in the current financial climate, and the surplus we currently earn from the Congress may not be so easy to achieve from 2012 onwards. If this should happen, the same amount of subsidy our members currently enjoy may not be available from April 2012 onwards, and the cost of being an SCBA member and playing in county competitions may have to increase from that date as a result.

C. The Selection Committee

During 2009, one of the most worrying things that was said to me by some SCBA members was that in their view selection was a closed shop, and by implication unfair. Although I am certain this was a perception and actually not true, I and other committee members felt we certainly needed to try to remove it.

Your Executive Committee has spent quite a lot of time reviewing the governance we had for the Selection Committee and agreeing the selection criteria under which we wanted it to operate. This has not been an easy process, but the results of our deliberations have now been published. In particular our new governance process requires the Selection Committee to be appointed for a two-year period only and enables members to nominate candidates for it. I am delighted to say we were able to appoint the first new Selection Committee using our new governance process this week.

Over the year I hope you have noticed we have more openly communicated on the website the selections made and the results of each of the county matches. This will continue to be so.

I am sure you will all be aware that Roger Sweet has decided to take a well deserved break from the Selection Committee after 8 years of sterling work. For most of this period Roger chaired the Selection Committee. During my short period of service on the Selection Committee prior to taking on the SCBA chairman's role, I saw at first hand Roger's commitment to improve the standard of our county teams, as well as the hard work he put in to provide excellent administrative support to them. During his period of service, Somerset won the Western League A division three times, having never won it prior to his appointment. On behalf of the members thank you very much Roger.

D. Your Executive Committee

A team of unpaid volunteers undertake the annual work of our Association, and we have a lot of people to thank for everything the SCBA does.

1. Thanks for the County Committee Work in 2010/11

Once again I have been fortunate to be the chairman of a hard working county committee, who freely give up a lot of their time to provide a comprehensive programme of events, and to ensure the affairs of the county are run efficiently. So on behalf of the Association's members, I would like to thank all Committee members for their work throughout 2010/11.

2. West of England Congress

I have already indicated how important the revenue generated from a successful West of England Congress is and how members of the SCBA benefit from it. Over the last few years the Congress has been built up to be arguably the most successful county run congress in the country. The Congress is a very large undertaking and once again last year we had a waiting list for the final day's Swiss Teams event, which had over 80 tables in play. I would like to thank Ann Bawdon for her excellent administration, and the hundreds of hours she spends preparing the pre dealt boards. I would also like to thank David Porter for his chairmanship of the event, and all other SCBA members who support David and Ann during the Congress weekend itself.

[I will just pause for a commercial break. Ann has reminded me that the 2011 Congress programmes are now available and if you don't have one already, please pick one up before leaving today.]

3. County Events Programme

Outside of the West of England Congress, we have a large programme of county sponsored events, 24 in total played over a ten month season. You can imagine that running such a programme takes a lot of organisation, administrative support and event management. I would like to thank all the Committee members involved with the county programme for a large amount of work behind the scenes. I would also like to thank all members outside of the Committee who are involved with directing and scoring, as well as those transporting the tables, the bidding boxes and the pre dealt hands to and from the events.

Due to the illness of Mrs. Poole the Yeovil tea ladies had to withdraw from supporting our events. I would like to thank Gina Coltman for stepping in to help us out. We have not yet decided how teas should be supplied next season. Very shortly I will be forwarding a simple questionnaire to the members seeking their views on a number of options, and we will make a decision sometime in August ready for the new season.

4. The Website

The county is fortunate to have a very good website. Tony Manickam provides an excellent service to keep the site up to date with news and results not only for the county itself, but also for the Western League and for some of our affiliated clubs.

Tony continues to improve the website so it is easier to navigate around, and the new online entry process introduced last year for most of our competitions has worked well. Tony's other role is as the county's photographer, as you will see when we get to our prize giving.

Thank you Tony for all of your work.

5. County Teams

We had a successful county team season winning the Western Counties A League. But qualifying from a Tollemache group remains as elusive as ever, although our team this season finished 4th in their group to equal our highest ever finishing position.

6. The County's Nominated Charity

I am delighted that over £1500 was raised for last year's county nominated charity, Somerset Cancer Care.

I would like to thank Ken and Ann Bawdon for administering the Michael Coda Cup event, and Dave Latchem for preparing the commentary.

This year's nominated charity will be the Secret World. This charity specialises in the rescue, rehabilitation and eventual release of orphaned, injured and sick wildlife and is the only 24/7 service in the South West. It is based in Highbridge.

The Chairmanship

My chairmanship really should have come to an end at this AGM. Unfortunately we have not been able to convince any member to take the job on for 2011/12. I have therefore agreed to be nominated again.

In effect I have now served as chairman for four years. It is an honour to do so, and most of the time an enjoyable experience. I really hope though a new person, with new ideas, can be found to take the SCBA forward from the 2012 AGM.

Finally I would like to thank everyone for the support I have received over the last 12 months, particularly during and after my wife's terminal illness.

Michael Whittaker
25 June 2011