

**Executive Summary**

Since 2016 the Advisory Council Teachers and Club Managers Committee brings the voice of teachers and club managers to ACBL leadership. Our priority is growth - members, teachers and classes, and tables. We offer guidance and change proposals that have positive material impact on the ACBL. We publicize our [work product](#). Here is our advice on the 4 biggest problems:

- ♣ **Sharp Decline in Members, Clubs, Teachers, and in-person bridge at all levels.** Growth in club table count has not compensated for lost dues and play revenue from lapsed members.

Mitigations: Focus all stakeholders on membership growth – grow members and frequency of play. “A rising sea floats all boats”. Make peer clubs & teachers apprenticeships to serve the 15-35 year-old demographic.

- ♦ Define the online path to ACBL membership serving interested prospects without cannibalizing in-person participation. What blended models work? Eliminate the zero-sum choices between in-person and online bridge – both and not either or. Grow best options. Create synergy between venues. Eliminate poaching.
- ♦ Prospects choose their teachers and clubs, not *vice versa*. Prospects go un(der)served, see options immediately. Prospects make their best choice with complete information in real time (online marketplaces with timely curated information, near term events, prospect/novice feedback, and ratings of clubs, teachers, and tournaments). Competition for prospects improves offerings. Discourage clubs and teachers who delay prospects from becoming members. Eliminate friction that hinders growth. BOOST is unscalable and has clubs/teachers choosing prospects, not the other way around. We need more, faster, now.

- ♣ **Stakeholders are disjoint, independent businesses unaccustomed to working together.** Change management is difficult and alignment to goals lacking. (Stakeholders – Teachers, Clubs, Units, Districts, Members).

Mitigations: Lead the stakeholders toward growth and **INTERDEPENDENCE** by 1) Actionable business analytics, and 2) Training, Best Practices, and Success stories. **Metaphor:** The ACBL is the Conductor of our stakeholder bridge symphony. The symphony attracts prospects and retains stakeholders for years to come. The ACBL is in the **Entertainment Information** and **Membership Growth** business.

- ♣ **Poor track record on project successes.**

Mitigations: **Require business cases and measured benefits** for return on investment. Pareto principle: Support the 20% that make the 80% of the results. Work with skilled stakeholders and members. Every member and stakeholder have value. Focus effort on the more valuable stakeholders. Customers first. Focus on what prospects, novices and members want. Help both in-person and online clubs build the peer novice communities that sustain I/N engagement over time.

- ♣ **The current single-provider online contract created a destructive monopoly and shifts market power to the service.** The ACBL owns bridge, not the service provider. Teachers, Clubs, Units and Districts have lost volunteers and income because of the current arrangement.

Mitigations: Future online contracts last 2-3 years and specify requirements on the provider. Contracts must not disadvantage any one stakeholder group. The ACBL must control its Brand. **Multiple online services compete for ACBL games** through public bidding and limited contracts. No more single service provider. Secret contracts are unacceptable. No online service or party with interest in that business shall own an ACBL game sanction (conflict of interest and improper acquisition of market power).

Submitted Respectfully,

Steve Moese K082411, Chair, for the

[Advisory Council Teachers and Club Managers Committee.](#)

## Current Situation

The current precipitous decline in membership, number of bridge clubs, and number of active bridge teachers portends great risk for the future of duplicate bridge. While the availability of online play makes consumption of bridge cheaper, more convenient, and more frequent than play at face-to-face clubs, the swift shift in club table share to majority (~80%) online has coincided with a 32,000 member decline from 164,000 to 132,000. Little of this decline can be attributed to deaths. Most of the lapsed members are Life Master or below, a bad sign for the near future. The approximate impact on revenue is a \$1.2-1.5MM loss. That does not include losses from table fees which for clubs alone approach \$0.4-0.6MM.

When the covid-19 shutdowns occurred in March 2020, Jay Whipple, Uday Ivatury (BBO Chief Technology Officer), and several large club owners created a crisis team that brought forward the Support Your Club (SYC) game. This revenue sharing approach gave clubs income from any player who had played in 2019 at their club. The share was based on the club's share of that player's 2019 total sessions. Shortly thereafter the VACB Virtual Club game became available but only to sanctioned holders with existing face-to-face sanctions. The SYC game disappointed as the ACBL took \$1 per table, BBO took 30% or \$1.80 per table, and the remaining \$3.20 was split often among 4 or more clubs for every player.

Club managers and teachers took to the task of getting club players up to speed with playing online. ACBL Appendix O came along months later essentially allowing certain differences between the laws of bridge, ACBL Regulations, and what the BBO Software could do. BBO was overwhelmed by May of 2020 with up to 50,000+ tables in any given daytime hour. This caused their service to crash unexpectedly. The solution was to double server capacity and split the informal free bridge services to one set of servers and the for-profit games to another. The BBO user experience has not changed noticeably since they went to an all-web application and eliminated the local downloaded app run on adobe flash player.

The ACBL launched successful Gold Point Regional Pairs online, and also offered Silver Points during silver Lining Week promotions. These events are popular with members who don't travel or have the funds to attend in-person tournaments, and also appeal to District 99 overseas members. Slowly the SYC game vanished because of poor returns for the Clubs and price competition from BBO. A member could earn clear points on BBO for \$0.99 to \$1.29 per game, and a game would last about two hours (Price today is \$3.99 for 18 boards).

VACB games grew and became dominated by a handful of very large actors who acquired players from all over the ACBL, not just in their user accept list (the list of players who played at their club in 2019). BAND from Dallas has all but abandoned their large in-person presence, but is a top table count club online.

In-person clubs restarted at various times some began in December 2020 others followed in early 2021. Midwest clubs tried reopening in May 2021, and adopted vaccination requirements similar to ACBL. Some clubs in Canada reopened much later. Clubs found their early table counts at or below 40% of 2019 attendance. Many of their past members were content playing in cheaper games on BBO, or larger VACB Alliance games for black points. These low-cost online options took players away from in-person clubs.

## Market Share

The move to online bridge caused by the pandemic of 2020 saw a 33% increase in club tables from 3MM to 4MM and the share of tables shifted dramatically. Ironically, drawn by the need to help players play in SYC and VACB games, teachers and clubs taught their members how to use the BBO interface. BBO enjoyed a 33% share prior to the pandemic. Now it's share approaches 80% - about 63% from BBO ACBL clear point games (62+ sessions per day in addition to robot events) and 17% from the VACB games that run on their platform. Pricing, availability and short games (starting at \$0.99 per 18 board game now \$3.99 per game) made competition by face-to-face clubs noncompetitive. During this period the number of sanctioned ACBL clubs dropped from 2666 to 1760 (some 1200 of which offer face-to-face games). Since clubs had been the portal to ACBL membership, the ACBL has lost 1/3 or more of its points of entry.

**The membership income loss is greater than the gain in table fees from the shift to online play.**

During the same period, the number of ACBL members playing monthly dropped substantially from about 120,000 to 60,000-80,000. Online play segments members behavior. In-person tournament attendance dropped to under 50% and has been improving slowly. This has led to a sharp decline in tournament revenue for Units and Districts. The 110 or so Units that own bridge centers are facing financial losses that can exceed their tournament income. Some Districts needed relief from financial commitments for regional Tournaments made prior to March 2020.

Teachers had to adopt new approaches to reach students. Teaching online has been attractive given new software like Shark Bridge which enables individualized instruction, great reach, and low cost. However, classes among highly dispersed students cannot create the local **sense of community** that is a major element for member retention. **Once prospects discover the fun of playing bridge, social interaction and belonging are key reasons that players keep playing.** Social benefits are complemented by the pursuit of achievement (Ranks, Masterpoints, Tournament Wins) as the player matures. For now, online play does not offer that group or community experience, nor does it facilitate finding and keeping partners.

Clubs have scrambled to make their business model work in the new conditions. While restructuring location and rent, they have also had to address how best to recruit new players. Some clubs have won the race to the head of large online alliances. This has afforded them the dominant position in VACB play and in negotiating rates that subordinate alliance members pay for the right to share in the profits. For the first time in history, a few large clubs are able to make money off other clubs and their members playing in alliance games. A 50/50 revenue split with the alliance owner is not uncommon. Poor enforcement of visitor policy and the introduction of an exception for members not served by VACB from their club created the opportunity for broadscale recruiting of existing members. Members from the Canadian Maritimes play in alliance games from Knoxville and Dallas for example.

On the positive side, several districts sought to engage 99ers in online play in large evening games. This has been popular as these players have not seen level-appropriate games in face-to-face play due largely to lack of attendance to date.

The original goals for VACB play have morphed into a competitive market with no apparent controls. BBO has benefitted greatly from their 10 years of exclusive ACBL use at the cost of in-person clubs.

The decline in membership has been followed with a decline in volunteers. The Advisory Council has had difficulty keeping 100% representation. Districts are running low on volunteers for tournaments, and Unit Board have trouble finding key activity leaders.

The rhetorical question remains – **What new members have online play (BBO or VACB) created since April 2020?**

We surmise that while online play has increased the income from consumption, it has:

- failed to increase the number of prospects expressing interest in learning bridge,
- failed to retain members, and
- failed to create popular learning venues that stimulate the sense of community underlying ACBL membership.

BBO has its own player ranking, membership subscription, and business focus. (They are wholly owned by 52 Entertainment, a private investment company headquartered in France). Only in the past 4 weeks has BBO consented or thought to ask lapsed ACBL members to reenlist. The ACBL has set up a patchwork of newbie offerings (including a simple robot contest for 0-5 MP players so they can earn masterpoints) but none of this addresses a reason why people who play on BBO should become and remain members of the ACBL, and why they should volunteer to make Local, Regional, and National Tournaments a success. Indeed, the single-minded focus on inexpensive consumption makes volunteering unnecessary for many.

### **What Growth Do We Want?**

The ACBL serves the bridge interests of its members. We can consider the following stakeholder groups: Members, Club Owners, Teachers, Units and Districts. Subdividing the Members into social players, professionals, international players,

volunteers, Unit officials, District officials while possible offers little additional insight. We know that social players do not convert to duplicate unless exposed early to that form of the game.

The common ground among all is:

- 1) **Grow Members**
- 2) **Grow Teachers and Classes** (# Teachers, Teacher Skill, # Students Playing)
- 3) **Grow Tables** (frequency each player plays)

We can debate whether the business type (For-profit, Non-profit; sole proprietor, member-owned) affects the quality of the game and the prices paid by players. We do not see that discussion leading to insights on growth. It is true that many clubs are happy to run games and expect volunteers to bring other bridge players to the club. Clubs with **successful teaching programs** and meticulous attention to the **quality of the player experience** are the powerhouse behind new member formation. These teaching programs might be led by independent teachers or teaching sanction holders. When clubs work with good teachers, good things happen.

Unfortunately, the ACBL, Districts, Units, Clubs, and Teachers are independent businesses. This stems from the legal judgment to minimize financial risk to the corporation. This independence has fostered a combative relationship among stakeholder groups at their worst, and mistrust and a lack of collaboration at their best.

We are in an **all-hands-on-deck** situation. Current membership is aging every year – We have failed to attract younger replacement members in the quantity we need. Paradoxically the US census suggests the 50-85 year old demographic will grow about 2-4% annually through 2060. The ACBL as a whole (Clubs, Teachers, ACBL) had kept membership at no growth prior to the pandemic and have lost over 32,000 members since the pandemic. When the largest target audience grows 2-4% and we cannot match membership growth to that we have a problem. This says that the ACBL ecosystem – how all stakeholders relate to one another – is **not designed for membership growth** as is. The system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets. We need **fundamental change**.

In November 2018 I talked with Joe Jones, then Executive Director of the ACBL. He asked me how many people headquarters had working on member growth. The answer? ONE – Him. Management took steps to change that. Those leaders have resigned/left employ. We cannot succeed in turning this around unless we have the right leadership, strategy, skills, and capability, and the decision processes to make right choices.

What we cannot do is pit online versus face-to-face. Nor can we allow online to ravage the market that face-to-face clubs depend on without being willing to accept the consequences. Afterall, the ACBL is not a for-profit corporation. The ACBL serves **ALL** its members.

So how do we approach Growth knowing that we need to change?

## FOCUS ON THE PATH

Let's look at the steps for creating and retaining new members:



While the exact sequence for any one individual could vary, this simple model organizes our choices. Let's look into each step in-turn:

### Identify Prospects

Broadcast advertising is too costly and too inefficient to be successful. The Education Foundation BOOST program has had early pilot success, but is costly when viewed on a per-prospect cost basis, and is not scalable because it is a highly manual work process. Indeed, the BOOST program identifies prospects in a way that they are locked into the participating teacher,

even though there are other teachers and clubs in their area who could provide equal or better first experiences. Participating teachers are screened for past recruiting success. Online teaching is not supported/allowed, even though online can speed transition from learner to player, and help reach a younger, more disperse audience.

Clubs or teachers have done their own online advertising (Sagamore Bridge Club – Sylvana Morici provided videos about using Facebook to recruit prospects to beginner lessons and club play more than 5 years ago). The difficulty is that having one club or one teacher advertise we have only one solution for the participating prospect when more are available (in high population density areas).

The ACBL is uniquely positioned to **catalyze recruitment**. Rather than have the ACBL pay for the local advertisements, **teach teachers and clubs** to do it. However, to earn Cooperative Advertising Program funds, require the teacher and club to post their offering in the ACBL Marketplace. The ACBL Marketplace makes all bridge offerings available on the worldwide web, gives a link to the teacher to use in their advertisements, and allows for financial engagement (for a modest fee <2%). To benefit the prospect, the market place helps them “see more options in your area” based on the postal code of the teacher/club offering the event.

The ability to **purchase the event, see alternatives, and rate their experience** for other prospects to see (curated) are fundamental to the success of this approach. A **map** of classes and beginner friendly games within 50 miles of the prospect should be readily available. Show if the class is face-to-face, online, or a combination. Make the teacher/Club owner’s Photo, background, and marketing statement available to **build trust in the decision**. Teachers and Clubs will manage pricing to **minimize trial risk** perceived by prospects.

Potential weaknesses –

- The deeply inculcated sense of independence and aversion to collaborating with ACBL Management could starve the ACBL Marketplace and render it useless. Membership growth would be much less than potential.
- Some teachers and clubs are happy with low growth and low effort.
- Some teachers maximize their income by warehousing students – keeping them away from club bridge and active play. They want to have students take more classes and are not concerned about getting prospects to play early, have FUN, and let alone join the ACBL.
- Some teachers want to teach social bridge players only and guide them away from sanctioned clubs and duplicate play. Promoting ACBL membership is not on their radar screen.

These are purposely counterproductive behaviors. We must not support these behaviors. We can mitigate their impacts.

**Hypothesis:** If we had a constant stream of prospects available to all nearby instruction and play offerings we would **maximize Engagement and Creating Players**.

**Hypothesis:** The number of teachers and clubs engaging in onboarding new members must grow substantially to reverse membership trends in both recruitment and retention. If clubs and teachers target the 50-85 year old population growing 2-4% (US Census), then it is fair to expect on average 2-4% growth in members assuming no retention issues. We need more teaching clubs. It doesn’t matter if they are in-person or online as long as both online and in-person play occur.

### **Engage Prospects**

The advent of Amazon.com has changed how people shop. People to want **immediate engagement**. Submitting an email of a phone number then waiting several days or weeks to have a first conversation is no longer acceptable. We must **enable immediate engagement** online.

Prospects faced with only one viable choice will wonder if learning is worth the effort. Options and the appearance of choice matters - the more, the better. **Trusting the vendor** matters – curated reviews and 5-star rating (a la Amazon) are important. So is a simple online introduction to the teacher/club owner.

Experience suggests that prospects who **learn at clubs and play early, learn fun and create a peer group community** that they stay in through their bridge journey. BOOST sees this as necessary for both recruitment and retention. Yet, the internet allows for greater reach (distance and time of day) and better learning experience (all one-on-one attention is feasible). We need is a flexible approach that fosters playing in local clubs as learning progresses while applying the strengths of both approaches. Simple collaboration by online teachers with clubs in the student's area can allow their students to engage face-to-face play as well as the online experience.

**Prospects cannot be the property of only one club or teacher**, but should be available for any offering in their area. If prospects cannot see the full set of available options engagement suffers and the reversal of membership decline slows.

Members, clubs, and teachers should be able to recommend prospects to the ACBL (name, email, phone, address). Prospects should be able to find the ACBL marketplace on their own, without much effort. Promotions with QR codes and the like suggest themselves. Prospects, guest members, and full members must have substantially similar user experiences online.

Prospects should be encouraged to give feedback and a rating for teacher and clubs. Management should decide how to curate poorly written feedback. This applies to online or in-person experiences.

**Hypothesis** – The ACBL Corporation is uniquely positioned to lead the **system-wide prospect data base and marketplace**. Teachers and clubs should be able to access the nearby prospects and to post offerings to attract them. These offerings can be classes, games, and social events. The ACBL can consider a fee-for-service arrangement.

**Hypothesis** – The community of teachers and club managers will require confidence that the central approach to finding prospects is worth their effort. By engaging Teachers and Club Managers and responding to feedback that improves the systems, these stakeholders will engage.

### **Create Players**

**Teach beginners to FUN as fast as possible. FUN comes from play. FUN also comes from the social group created by the class or club.** After all, a prospect who wants play and socialize, not be stuck in class after class. Forming a prospect peer group creates a community that is self-reinforcing and comfortable. Some players are more ready than others to leave that nest. Others want the support that this new social group provides. It is unclear how best to manage online bridge to create these groups. Person-to-person contact is important to many.

**Clubs need to cooperate by working with and not against area teachers.** If a club cannot support a 0-5/10/20 game on their own, they can partner with the teacher and provide space and possibly equipment for a weekly teaching game. They can also set up frequent supervised play – unsanctioned coached play that engaged rank beginners with other I/N players usually U100MPs.

**Clubs will be more interested in participating in the ACBL Marketplace if they are able to post all I/N events not just beginners' classes.** Demonstrating to clubs how many prospects were provided and how many were engaged allows for performance metrics that the clubs would find useful.

Rating clubs and teachers based on prospects' experiences should be actively solicited by the ACBL while prospects are engaged in classes and games. Provide alternatives for prospects with less than satisfactory experiences.

**Hypothesis** – The ACBL can collect prospect and engagement data and provide reports to clubs and teachers so clubs and teachers can make appropriate improvements.

### **Play Duplicate Bridge**

Some learn bridge and begin playing at home or socially. The best approach will have teachers working at clubs or exposing prospects to club play in a very supportive environment. **Teaching games** and **supervised play** offer friendly contexts for



learning how to deal with the tools and proprieties of duplicate bridge. Once exposed, players will be offered the chance to earn masterpoints.

Playing duplicate bridge brings up the choice of partners. Face-to-face play enables people to make decisions based on compatibility and other factors not evident online. Encouraging social peer groups is a critical element for successful recruitment and for retention. One's set of acceptable partners determines one's desire to continue playing. While people can work to grow that set, doing so online is not facilitated. As one ages, one's peer group becomes smaller and social contexts foster new pairings.

Encouraging face-to-face play and online play is appropriate as people will have different needs. We have to stop making this an "Either Or" proposition and make it a **"BOTH AND" opportunity**. Synergy means we don't sum to zero any more.

Units have a role here – **recognizing brand new players** who earn their first masterpoints creates goodwill. **Recognizing rank promotions** publicly will breed a full sense of accomplishment. **Celebrating Major Ranks** creates goals new players might aspire to.

Some very large face-to-face clubs teach beginners by offering a class followed immediately by duplicate play. They give the text for free, but charge for the game and the lesson. Something to think about.

If a prospect's first duplicate experience is online, they need experience with the tools of in-person play. If their first experience is in-person, then they need experience with the online interface.

### **Earn Masterpoints**

**Teaching games, 0-5/10/20 MP limited games, and supervised play** are critical here. Getting people to their first ACBL masterpoints will whet their appetite for membership. If the prospect instead earns points from an unaffiliated game by an online provider, they will have less incentive to join the ACBL. It is unclear if the 0-5 MP online play will foster a sense of community for a prospect beginning duplicate play.

Reminding players how many and what pigment masterpoints they need for their next rank is useful to help them focus on their bridge journey.

### **Join the ACBL**

Joining the ACBL is easier once a prospect has first hand knowledge of the FUN in bridge and has played duplicate. These first-hand experiences form the basis for creating a member relationship. The ACBL can facilitate membership through the Guest Member program. While there should be time limits on the benefits from guest membership status, there should be no limit on the time when a guest member can become a full member.

**Guest membership** was developed in part as a way to satisfy the privacy requirement for owning and managing contact information about prospects by the ACBL. There are better ways.

Guest members must be able to experience everything that a full member can experience. If a guest member has engaged a class or a game from the ACBL Marketplace they should receive some number of printed ACBL Bulletins. Make the online experience identical.

Membership should be a natural decision unfettered with perceived financial risk. Many subscription services in the entertainment industry reframe their costs to a low self-renewing monthly rate. For example, allowing a new member to join for \$6.99 per month (less than the average cost of face-to-face club play) and having that agreement roll into a yearly constantly renewing membership at \$49 per year is an example of reframing perceived risk and perhaps eliminating a barrier to trial. It's unclear that multiyear membership dues offer any real advantage. They bring in less revenue and don't necessarily offer more loyalty than automatic renewals.

Given the need for memberships, **the ACBL should encourage teacher and clubs to enroll guest members as part of their classes and play**. This positive approach is blocked today because software requires prospects to agree to membership

conditions and privacy protections. That is an artificial barrier and one easily overcome (A third person guest member registration creates an email welcoming the guest member and asking for them to click to agree to terms of membership. Done). Additionally, youth and Junior members should not have to suffer from a guest member software that doesn't provide access to Youth and Junior membership rates. Optimally, guest member and regular member online user experiences must be indistinguishable. They are not today.

Grant teachers and club managers the ability to sign up guest members. Then provide them with the new guest member contact information. The ACBL can use a confirmation email to the prospect to 1) Confirm acceptance of membership policies, and 2) communicate to their Teacher/Club their contact information once policies have been accepted.

Units and Districts have a role in celebrating new members. Units should have their Membership Committees throw out the red carpet and offer engagement opportunities for the new members. These opportunities are more than just limited games – make them a social event for everyone to enjoy.

Districts have the opportunity to sponsor limited games at regionals and to publicly recognize new members in attendance. Both Units and Districts can offer teachers or clubs cost-free tournament space for teacher or club games. Teachers or clubs earn income and students get a taste of the big time and an opportunity to earn Red Points. Let's up our game to promote membership growth and retention.

Imagine a future where the ACBL bulletin features the monthly bulletin on the stories of our prospects, novices, and NLMs (60% of our membership) and their clubs in ways that promote more frequent play. Contrast that with the current emphasis on NABC Champions from a pool of about 4000 members who attend NABC tournaments. Focusing on growth means shining light on the growing population. The Bulletin can serve Clubs who invest in growth too. What per cent of feature articles offers growth stories and advice?

### **Play Tournaments**

How many years does a prospect take to become ready and interested in playing in tournaments? The data is available in the ACBL archives, but not available to the rest of us. Newcomers do not become instant tournament players. They build proficiency to when they assess they are capable. Clubs can do much to promote tournament play, and tournaments can cooperate with clubs to loosen any barriers caused by poor communication. Any disincentive caused by perceived lost income to the club can be managed creatively. Allowing clubs to run I/N games are regionals for income is one way. Perhaps those games could be on the Regional Sanction. The same applies to Units and Sectionals. Profit sharing is better than no profit.

### **Retention**

As long as players enjoy their play experience at clubs and tournaments, they will continue being members. Yes, health and cost can influence the decision to renew. We don't know specific reasons for the drastic decline in membership since the onset of the pandemic. We do know that the trend might now be beginning to reverse itself. Maybe.

Clubs, Units, and Districts each have different opportunities to delight members. Clubs have more frequent contact and represent the ACBL for many members. Poor experiences at clubs, whether from unacceptable player behavior or neglect of the game by the owner, drives members away. Success stories are a great way to make change possible for teachers and club owners who see their businesses struggling. Of course, they need support in mining prospects and engaging them.

The ACBL offers services to members that impact retention:

- Game results
- Masterpoint earnings
- Rank Management and Recognition
- Where to find club games and tournaments
- Planning NABC attendance
- ACBL Bulletin



- Masterpoint Competitions (several)
- Promotional e-mails
- Additional member benefits

The ACBL should provide clubs a report on their player's bridge activity every month (VACB, IN-Person, BBO ACBL, Tournaments) with number of sessions played.

Clubs are expected to manage their own communication limited to the database of members who played recently in their games. Clubs should be allowed to reach out to any member in the Unit to advertise their offerings.

Marketing Solutions by Pianola is a tool many Units Districts and Clubs use to reach members. Pianola offers current membership contacts and manage privacy for subscribers, reducing the effort required. Costs are lower than other mass mailing options.

### Steps Forward

1. **The ACBL as Conductor of the Stakeholder Symphony** - The ACBL is uniquely positioned to offer **important business information, online business services and training** to all stakeholders:
  - a. Create the prospect database as a part of the membership database. Make prospect an additional step before guest and full member.
  - b. Create the Calendar of Events or ACBL Marketplace (CoE/MP) where teacher and club offerings can be posted online and subsequently used in online advertising by clubs and teachers. Direct search inquiries to this application. Sponsor links on key sites (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch, Kroger Media). Promote short ads in game apps on smart devices.
  - c. Scale BOOST and release it to every teacher and clubs. If BOOST cannot be scaled then provide teachers and clubs the ability and tools to advertise online using the CoE/MP. Use the guest membership to record contact information from all prospects. Share options for less than satisfied prospects so they continue engaging bridge.
  - d. Encourage Clubs and Teachers to post their offerings on the CoE/MP. Make CAP assistance contingent on it's use.
  - e. Support all members who are teaching beginners. Many members are good teachers who don't want various accreditations. All they need to do is teach to fun. Recruitment will demonstrate their success. Encourage all teachers, certified or not, to use the CoE/MP. We are in an emergency and cannot stand having limits on the number of people teaching bridge to beginners.
  - f. Encourage teachers and clubs to work together. Publicize those who do. When a prospect searches the CoE/MP, have proven club-teacher pairs show up as preferred in the prospect's area.
  - g. Encourage clubs to provide/allow: teaching games, 0-5/10/20 MPs limited games, and supervised play.
  - h. Provide Units and Districts with actionable data.
    - i. The Current I/O Report views the future through the rearview mirror and does not offer guidance necessary to impact the future.
    - ii. Players have value to clubs and the ACBL. That value depends on their activity and volunteer efforts.
    - iii. Not all members are equally valuable.
    - iv. Focus on the more valuable members when working to recruit lapsed members.
    - v. Provide Clubs and Unite the data necessary to do the same (e.g.: Lapsed member name, player number, clubs entries to date, tournament entries to date, volunteer roles, recruiting, teacher, cub manager, director).
  - i. Retrain **Unit Membership Committees** to focus on welcome, social engagement, and retention. They can help bridge the gap between clubs and teachers, and ensure limited games are available for beginners.
  - j. Provide clubs reports about players, especially beginners, who live near the club zip code and earn masterpoints online (e.g.: Name, Player Number, Rank, MPs, MP F2f Past Mo., Internet MPs Past Mo., Non VACB Internet MPs Online).

2. Create a relationship among stakeholders that promotes **INTERDEPENDENCE** instead of independence and zero-sum competition. Communication is the key, recognition the reward.

Bridge is entertainment, and the ACBL is in the **Entertainment Information** business and the **Growing Membership** business. Running Masterpoint and rank records along with tournaments are but two tools to make these businesses successful.

## **ADDITIONAL NEXT STEPS**

### **Work with young adults**

Growth from retirees is where clubs find great return on investment. Empty Nesters and retirees have the time, money, and motivation to learn to play. However, someone who joins at say 18 and plays for a lifetime is much more valuable than someone who joins at 65 ½ and plays for 6-8 years. **Youth want to socialize with their peers.** Let's identify how to create peer teachers and game owners who can invest the time and energy to develop the right blend of in-person and online bridge for their peer group. Leaders between 18 and 25 abound. They are more in tune with their peers' social wants. They are better placed to engage this demographic who has less free time but a desire for excitement, fun and challenge. Bridge for the 15-35 year old set should be managed from their age group. Apprenticeships anyone?

### **Governance**

Finally, if we can agree that:

- clubs are indeed the lifeblood of the ACBL,
- that Clubs and Teachers are the Salesforce for member recruiting,
- that many members see clubs as a proxy for the ACBL, and
- that the demise of clubs is correlated with the decline in membership from poor retention and recruiting,

then it's time Clubs and Teachers have a voice in governance.

We propose that **the ACBL establish a Teachers & Club Managers Committee of the Corporation** with:

- three (3) Board of Directors Members with marketing expertise,
- three (3) teachers who teach beginners, and
- three (3) club owners who recruit new members.

Recruit a group of U100 players and 15-35 year old members as sounding boards to consult on member growth and retention ideas.

This committee would make proposals to the full board regarding issues and opportunities having material impact on clubs and teachers. The committee must provide financial justification for major budget impacts from their proposals bound by fiduciary responsibility to the corporation. Growth initiatives are measured by appropriate business metrics. Investment by the corporation will be based on business success. The Board of Directors will consult with the Committee on all decisions that materially affect clubs. Decisions owned by other Committees of the Corporation are not part of the Teachers and Club Manager's Committee portfolio (e.g. Masterpoints, or Bridge).

Sound fiscal leadership and engaging stakeholders for common benefit will engender the collaboration necessary to maximize recruiting new members. Providing excellent experiences for players will secure high levels of retention.

### **Parting Thoughts**

Let's eliminate unnecessary barriers and friction points that make collaboration toward growth among stakeholders unattractive.

Let's equip our teachers and clubs with the business tools they need based on the information already available so that they can grow members, tables, classes, and teachers more effectively than ever before.

Let's also invest in practical automation that allows the ACBL to conduct the stakeholder symphony in a mutually beneficial and more productive direction.

Let's foster joint growth and block destructive competition between online bridge and in-person bridge.

Let's create sustainable micro communities for prospects and I/N members.

Finally, we must recognize that repeating the past with the past way of doing things can never lead to better results. Growth costs money. We must spend it wisely on positive results.

Submitted respectfully,

Steve Moese K082411

On behalf of the Advisory Council Teacher and Club Manager Committee

[Teachers & Club Managers Committee Work Product](#) ← This link to our webpage documents.

Our Members:

Jeff Bayonne, Rich Carle, Judy Elbogen, Ellis Feigenbaum, Steve Gaynor, Kathie Macnab, Henry Meguid, Sam Marks, Sylvana Morici, Betty Starzec, and Steve Moese – Chair.

## Appendix – Gives and Gets

	We Give	We Get
Teachers	Curriculum fosters early play focused on fun. Collaboration with local clubs. Full timely information about beginning bridge classes, teaching games, supervised play, and social gatherings to the ACBL.	More students with less effort. Useful feedback to improve student experience. Shared recruiting bonus CAP funds Publicity on the worldwide web. How to run online ads effectively.
Clubs	Space/support for teachers. Partnering with teachers. Full and accurate information about Beginner games – teaching games, 0-5/10/20 MPs limited games, supervised play. Online offerings Social events to engage existing members	More players playing more often Less effort recruiting Shared recruiting bonus CAP funds Publicity on the worldwide web. How to run online ads effectively.
Prospects	Contact information Payment for classes Willing to engage bridge	Offerings nearby and online Comments and ratings about teachers and clubs from other beginners Introduction to duplicate bridge and the ACBL Tools to plan next steps
Members	Recommendations – friends and family Help meeting teachers and clubs in the area Attending social events and engaging newbies Sharing stories about fun at the bridge club Positive word of mouth	Larger games More fun New partners Sustainability Social interaction
Units	Growing new teachers Teacher and Club support for recruiting Social events for retention Space at sectionals for teachers and teaching clubs who grow membership 0-5/10/20 MP games at sectionals and STaCs	More teachers with great skills Clubs supporting tournaments New members exposed to tournament fun in their ability group Healthier clubs and more members
Districts	Sponsor ACBL Teacher Accreditation Recognize teachers and clubs recruiting success Games by teachers and clubs at regionals.	Larger membership Steady sustainable stream of tournament players Sufficient teachers to continue growing members
ACBL	Actionable stakeholder business data Capturing prospects Promoting Teacher and Club offerings Train Clubs and Teachers in online advertising Recognition for top recruiters CAP and recruiting bonuses. Eliminate points of friction between stakeholders. Lead stakeholders to interdependence and collaboration	Stable sustainable growth Fresh pool of necessary volunteers and future employees. Sufficient income to serve stakeholders Super quality experiences for members Tighter knit community with a bright future.

## Appendix – Examples of Actionable Business Data

Teachers	<p>Monthly:</p> <p>Prospects living within 50 miles by duration on list.</p> <p>Clubs with beginner games nearby</p> <p>Clubs seeking teachers who teach beginners</p> <p>Data: P12 Mo # New Members, # Prospects, Membership years purchased.</p> <p>Teacher metrics dashboard</p>
Clubs	<p>Monthly:</p> <p>Prospects living within 50 miles by duration on list.</p> <p>For members and guest members living within 50 miles of each club each month:</p> <p>Player name, player number, player rank, # sessions by club type (BBO, VACB, F2F).</p> <p>Players who have not played bridge at any Unit Club.</p> <p>Players nearby looking for partners.</p> <p>Lapsed members and the number of club sessions they represent</p> <p>Club game attendance: Number of people and number of sessions played by F2F, Online, VACB and any combination (Venn Diagram).</p> <p>Data: Newbie attendance at limited games</p> <p>Club metrics dashboard</p>
Units	<p>Quarterly:</p> <p>Teachers and Clubs recruiting performance within the Unit</p> <p>Attendance by 0-50 MP Players to club games, online games and sectional tournaments compared to 1 yr ago</p> <p>Club game attendance: Number of people and number of sessions played by F2F, Online, VACB and any combination (Venn Diagram).</p> <p>Lapsed members and the number of club sessions they represent.</p> <p>Club game attendance: Number of people and number of sessions played by F2F, Online, VACB and any combination (Venn Diagram).</p> <p>Tournament Attendance by Unit members by rank ranges</p> <p>Unit metrics dashboard</p>
Districts	<p>Quarterly (by month where useful):</p> <p>Teaching and Clubs recruiting performance within the District</p> <p>Attendance by 0-50 MP Players to club games, online games, sectional tournaments, and regional tournaments compared to 1 year ago.</p> <p>Club game attendance: Number of people and number of sessions played by F2F, Online, VACB and any combination (Venn Diagram).</p> <p>Tournament attendance by District members by rank ranges.</p> <p>District Metrics dashboard</p>

The ACBL should stop delegating re-enlistment to Units. Instead, the ACBL should do that work directly. Units can help recruit lapsed members if the ACBL can focus their effort on valuable lapsed members – not on every one who lapses. The ACBL should develop Unit Membership Committee Guidelines to focus on Recruitment and Retention best practices.

QUIP Reports should identify the value of the lost members, and the contribution of the new members. Key data covers number of sessions played by club type, sectionals, regionals, and NABCs. Not all lapsed members are worth pursuing. Ideally, lapsed member reports will include reasons why. Losing 30 members who played no sessions of bridge in 6 months is less of an issue than losing one player who played 30-50 sessions per month. Invest effort in getting NLMs to play at least once a week.

### Growth and Online Play

1. Online bridge service providers compete every two or three years for the contract to offer ACBL masterpoint games and tournaments online. A minimum of 3 providers shall compete for a share of the market.

2. ACBL shall assert control over the ACBL Brand in every aspect of online ACBL play. ACBL shall work to have an ACBL instance of the application from the service provider that delivers on ACBL marketing image and experience requirements. Online bridge is ACBL bridge, not BBO Bridge, Swan Bridge, etc.
3. Service providers shall assist in recruiting new ACBL members and improving retention/re-acquisition of lapsed ACBL Members playing on their venue.
4. Service providers shall collaborate with teachers to provide beginner friendly games.
5. Support should be granted to online games targeting underserved segments of the membership (evening games, weekend games, limited games especially for newbies and I.N players).
6. Online bridge service providers will create/foster online ways for bridge players to engage socially, including Facebook, twitch, Instagram etc. This goes beyond Bridgewinners and BBO Forums to enable new friendships and successful partner searches.

**In Addition -**

7. No exclusive contract with only one service provider shall ever be approved by the ACBL regardless of the short-term financial benefit. Service providers are distributors of bridge not partners of the ACBL. Distributors should not dominate the bridge market at the expense of the ACBL.
8. The ACBL will negotiate a fixed cost per table payable with the bridge service provider for all ACBL masterpoint games including tournaments. The ACBL and club owners retain the right to set entry fees. Service provider cost to sanctioned clubs shall not exceed 20% of the entry fee or \$1.50 whichever is lesser.
9. Bridge service providers for ACBL sanctioned games shall not assess separate membership fees on ACBL members in order to play on their service.
10. Share of members (accept lists) for ACBL Tournaments shall be decided by the relative amount of the bids. No provider shall serve more than 40% of membership. Failure to deliver can allow the ACBL to allocate market to the remaining providers.
11. Clubs choose their service provider unless that provider has reached their contract market limit based on prior year tables. A random lottery assigns remaining service providers to clubs up to the market limit based on last year's table count. The ACBL can price online sanctions to reflect the right to choose a club's service or the need to enter a random draw.
12. Service providers are encouraged/directed to improve user experience and conformity with Bridge Laws and ACBL Regulations. Failure to do so voids the contract.
13. The three contracted services shall collaborate on one system to manage ACBL wide online tournaments in a way that assigns players randomly to each service, sharing the attendance fairly across the platforms.
14. Online Bridge Service Providers must not own online ACBL sanctions. This bars principals, employees and anyone with a material interest in the online service platform, excluding club managers who direct their own club games online, from owning an online ACBL club. The ACBL must retain control of the ACBL Sanctioned Bridge Market and not cede it to any one or more bridge service providers.
15. Online club sanctions shall be available from the ACBL for a price to qualified members in good standing. The ACBL may set a minimum entry fee requirement across all platforms to mitigate predatory pricing.
16. Online games shall be limited to a fair number of sessions per day (<10), and a limited geography. By-District or by-region acceptance lists would be natural limits. These limits are necessary to avoid destructive competition, and provide a broader base of ownership with greater certainty for business success. Existing alliances would be given 3-6 months to conform to the new acceptance list boundaries.
17. The ACBL should reward sanction owners who create games and onboarding events that deliver mutual growth for online and in-person play. Every effort should be made to thwart the "zero-sum" destructive competition between online and in-person play. All clubs whether online or in-person should have access to player data in their area that would help them support attendance at their games.



18. The ACBL can refuse to grant online sanctions to applicants who don't own an in-person club. However, these applicants might serve online games for underserved members.
19. Equitable masterpoint awards shall be offered with an eye toward eliminating masterpoints as a differentiation between online and in-person play.
20. Units and Districts may choose to conduct online tournaments for their members, including neighboring clubs limited to an appropriate number based on population and club density (#/area).
21. Clear points will disappear since all club games online will be run by club managers not affiliated with the bridge service provider.
22. A separate rank system for online accomplishments will celebrate the achievements of online players. Members may hold different ranks in each venue.
23. ACBL will encourage cross-over events where people play face to face then meet for an online final and vice versa. Give support to ways that join both venues.
24. ACBL will encourage teaching both online and in-person and encourage ways for engaged prospects to experience both online and in-person play as early as often as possible as they begin their bridge journey.
25. ACBL will train 15-25 year-olds as game directors, teachers and club managers so that they can recruit and retain peer group prospects. This includes guidelines for managing online play among highschoolers, college students, and young professionals, as well as creating compelling presence on social media appealing to these age groups (twitch, Instagram, etc.).
26. The ACBL will continue to explore creative ways to expose potential prospects to invitations to engage the game. These might include existing online advertising channels, new channels like Amazon or Kroger cooperative marketing, and short ads on smartphone game apps.
27. Platinum Masterpoints will never be awarded online. Consider eliminating gold point events online except for D99.

Note: Achieving these objectives is impossible if all stakeholders are kept at arm's length as independent businesses. Bridge stakeholders are interdependent businesses. The ACBL depends on Clubs and Teachers for member recruiting, social engagement, and retention; on Units for social engagement, retention and beginning the tournament experience; Districts for discipline and Life Master creating tournaments including grass roots events. Clubs and teachers depend on the ACBL for a steady stream of prospects, for the masterpoint program that motivates accomplishment, and for regulations and ethical guidelines and enforcement among members. Units and districts depend on the ACBL for masterpoint management, tournament operation excellence, and planning and execution of tournaments. Members depend on the collaboration among all stakeholders for the best possible bridge experience. **We are indeed all in this together. Let's maximize mutual benefit and discard the zero-sum mentality.**

For once we can all win together.

