



President's address: -87th Annual General meeting of the SBU

Good evening. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the 87th Annual General meeting of the Scottish Bridge Union.

Introduction

It is certainly the case that, during these extraordinary and unprecedented times, the SBU has been supported throughout the organisation by extraordinary people. In turn, I hope that Council is demonstrating that it understands that it is its job to support, promote and sustain bridge and the wider bridge community. It is also its job to look to the future.

The level of commitment of so many to ensure that at all levels, the teaching and playing of bridge in Scotland has not only survived, but has flourished in safe environments, has been inspirational.

Of course, we have all missed the balance of face-to-face meetings, the ability to meet together to discuss and debate issues. In this new world, where on many occasions there is often no clear right and wrong, reaching sound consensus driven decisions, has been a particular challenge and we in the SBU have not perhaps, if my inbox is anything to go by, always got it right the first time.

There are numerous examples of innovative collaboration. The SBU, itself an Organisation of Volunteers has always been fortunate that so many come forward to help. This year, I feel has been exceptional.

The challenges of dependence on the on-line game have been, and to an extent remain, substantial. It is universally recognised that, unfortunately, there has been and remains a sharp rise in the number of players who are cheating. The SBU, like all of the NBOs within the World Bridge Federation, condemns such behaviour and will do everything in its power to expose it and act punitively.

Our increasing dependence on Contractual arrangements with outside Organisations has, in particular, focused our minds to consider whether or not being an Unincorporated Association best serves the SBU.

The Elephant in the room, remains "When and how will we all be able to return to playing bridge face to face? How can we help ensure that all members can once again meet and socialise as they play if and when they wish to?"

Past Members

Before I report on more detail on our activities and plans, let us pause to remember all our fellow players who have died over the past year.

Three deaths were recorded by the SBU:-

Dr Stuart MaCreadie in November 2020, Ayrshire's popular first Grandmaster and founder of Ayrshire Bridge Centre.

Dr Dave Perry in January 21, gentleman member of Stirling Union Bridge Club, one time editor of the SBU News and SBU President in 1998/89.

Donald Shamash, another unassuming gentleman, who stood down as President of South District and thus came off Council at last year's AGM. Donald was described as a major inspiration for the game in South West Scotland.

Education

In a previous address, I said that the SBU wished to encourage and support the teaching of bridge by all wherever the setting and whatever the system.

I was delighted that Sam Punch agreed to become Education Convenor, after being reassured that an amazing team of leads had been recruited. They have certainly delivered. Two new sets of SBU branded Courses, based on the same system files but with different lengths and presentation styles, were produced by the Perth Bridge Club and New Melville teams respectively, with a lot of help from their friends. They were developed with the possibility of on-line teaching in mind, with on line bridge platform compatible deal files.

For the first year the nominated custodians hold the access keys. Almost on a daily basis I am notified by a ping, as Gill and George Roberts and Nigel Booth constantly update the files. There have been well over 150 requests from tutors for these courses. At the end of the year the new courses will become truly ours and we plan to offer open access to all worldwide.

Meanwhile other centres continue to offer other systems including the English Bridge, Education & Development, [EBED] course. We are building up a potentially interactive data base of all teaching available across Scotland.

There is on line teaching being offered throughout Scotland, including Inverness, Granton on Spey, Nairn, Elgin, Glasgow Bridge Centre, the Buchanan, Kilmacoll, Dundee, Edinburgh at New Melville and Carlton, Montrose, Milngavie, and individuals, Grace Whyte, Maureen Rennie, Anne Symons, with Danny Hamilton, as far as I know, the only current F2F tutor at Glasgow High School – more of Danny later. Enterprising Tutors have videoed courses, and access is now expanding to South District and the Islands.

All in all, well over 300 students have been taught bridge across Scotland by dedicated tutors. These tutors have all had to learn new skills and we are indebted to their drive and energy.

The SBU launched a Summer Academy this spring, offering weekly play & learn lounges on RealBridge and monthly tournaments April- September. Applicable to all "Pre - Bronze" Levels and completely funded by the SBU. The last figures I received were 114 students enrolled. 18 tables were in play with 6 mentors and a helper in the first P&L session on the 4th May. This initiative came entirely from members who put together a fully worked up, costed proposal that would put many large organisations to shame. Well done, Sarah Gunn, Gill Roberts, and Fiona Scully.

A new SBU Education Club now exists within Mempo, bridging the pathway of learning to Club membership.

Meanwhile the indefatigable Anne Wickens has started video linked minibridge teaching in schools in the Highlands, and Marina Evans and Marty Stephens are pitching for teaching bridge in one or two Secondary schools in Edinburgh.

Council agreed that Sam's appointment would involve partnership working with BAMSA[Bridge a MindSport for all]- her sociology of bridge project at the University of Stirling.

There is considerable further scope for joint working in bridge development and promotion.

And what of continuing Education? Many of our various international squads benefit from mentoring. Liz McGowan, and Paul Gipson, are often referenced and of course, the NPCs of our international squads, Alex Adamson, Finlay Marshall, Bill Whyte, Anne Symons, Alisdair McLeod, Loraine Finlay and Danny Hamilton. Wouldn't it be marvellous for Club players to be offered mentoring, or perhaps also for there to be a forum with expert commentators, where we could post hands and queries?

Junior Co-ordinator

Alisdair McLeod took over as the junior co-ordinator in September. Thanks to his offices, and those of Danny Hamilton, Loraine Finlay, and Paul Gipson, together with Anne Perkins who organised RealBridge training sessions, with TDs Julia Palmer and Liz McGowan mentoring, as the Home Nation we managed to finish 2nd in both the Junior Camrose and Peggy Bayer.

Tournaments/Congresses/International

Appendix 5 lists the trophy winners. Add to these the Individual Trophy winners, Cornelius Meehan, Fairlie, Andy Wilson, Harrison, Yuen Man Rowbottom, Shenkin.

Last year Eddie paid tribute to the hard work already undertaken by the Tournament Committee, repositioned as the Online Tournament Committee, which had resulted in the launch of the first SBU on line Tuesday night paid competition which began on Tuesday 2nd June.

As you will know, the SBU on line experience has grown exponentially from then.

There are 54 SBU Virtual Clubs, from that first game on June 2nd thru to the end of March 21, 47 Clubs have earned £146,436, Districts £8,453 and the SBU £25,402.

These figures represent a lot of bridge and a huge amount of dedicated work. Anne Brodie Allan [ANBA] spearheaded the training of the first cohort of on-line TDs, no virtual Club was granted their "ticket" until they had a ANBA endorsed TD lined up. But then, so many of these TDs voluntarily trained others. It is thanks to them and ANBA that the SBU saw new Clubs seeking affiliation. Over 100 TDs are now trained. ANBA continues to "finish them off". Eddie paid tribute last year to ANBA, our debt to her continues. Meanwhile the network of trained on line TDs are continually learning and sharing knowledge and expertise with each other.

As you see from the list of Trophy winners, thanks to the perseverance of Anne Coles, the Convenor, most of our National competitions were run on line this year.

Thanks to the District Chairs and their teams many of their Congresses and some of their red pointed events have also been held this year on line. Strathpeffer Congress even held "meet the President" break away zoom room meetings during their WE. A very interesting and salutary experience.

Anne spearheaded the introduction of the new Scottish Online League-SOL, now into its 4th iteration. Anne herself and Anne Perkins, continue to do considerable backroom work with this event, and Gus Macdonald oversees all games as TD.

Meanwhile Howard Greenwell continues with the hugely successful Bronze League, now at iteration 6.

Harry Smith and Paul Gipson relinquished their Saturday and Tuesday evening slots to the SBU, but continue to run their ever-popular Scottish Lockdown Thursday Swiss Teams, now in its 7th iteration.

Mike Ash and Anne Perkins, together with Christine Walker and Gus Macdonald, Alan Officer, who helped with Google docs with links, Ibex, and Chris Chambers movement advisor, ran the SBU Winter 4s and Winter Teams via RealBridge. Their hard work which included overseeing practice games, paid off spectacularly. Feedback has been excellent and well deserved.

Anne Perkins, as Convenor of the International Committee has quickly adapted to the changing circumstance. She has ensured that players are ready to play on a new platform, appointing savvy NPCs and excellent TDs.

Together with Angus Macdonald, Anne ran the trials. BGB oversaw the Home Nations' competitions again on RealBridge. Early teething problems with disconnections were mitigated by agreement that a 4th reserve pair could be "got ready", just in case. Different experiences for players and NPCs alike.

Scotland hosted the Junior Camrose, Christine, Julia Palmer, Angus, Damien Byron, providing skilled TD services, with Anne P co-ordinating and Alan Officer again providing website services.

The twice postponed EBL National Team Championships are rescheduled to June 2022.

Recently, the WBF cancelled the 2021 World Youth Teams Championship and World Teams Championship, [WTC], with the aim of holding the WTCs (Bermuda Bowl, Venice Cup, d'Orsi Senior Trophy and Wuhan Trophy) in 2022 between the end of February and beginning of March, whilst rescheduling the Youth Teams Championships to 2023.

The EBL subsequently announced that between August 23-28, 2021, on line qualifying events for European representation at the WTC will be run. Strict rules of combat are being announced, which involve playing in local centres on tablets/laptops under scrutiny.

Some of you will know, but many might not, that downloading results from on line platforms such as BBO and RealBridge is not straightforward. Indeed, I shall not expose myself unnecessarily by trying to explain the various steps. Although this task is part of TD training and "job description", a considerable amount of highly technical work continues to be undertaken by others. Step forward Eddie McGeogh, past President and IT guru, the enabling Alan Officer, Web Master and Gordon Milne. I would like in particular at this point to pay tribute to Gordon who like the other two so willingly quietly and unobtrusively sets his mind to continually resolve difficulties with a positive, results- based mindset. Cheerfully achieving the seemingly impossible time and time again.

Some interesting statistics- the first xml post Pandemic was loaded in on 9th June 2021. In the 344 days since then Gordon has downloaded 3,408 files- approx 10 a day.

Alan agreed to trial a Bridgeweb site embedded into the SBU Web. This is now adopted and thanks to Alan, Gordon, Eddie and Alison Carmichael for various aspects of its operation.

Alison Carmichael also should be singled out along with the whole Master point policy team led by Peter Hodgson for their work. There has had to be a considerable rethink on the criteria and allocation of MPs for the restricted on- line game. Another difficult area where reaching a consensus has not always been easy and thanks are due to the team for some enlightened decisions. Alison has updated the Master Point Policy Handbook more than once during this period, and handles all the Congress Licences and MP calculations and allocations.

Meanwhile we welcomed Robert Clow and Frances McKeon as the new Congress Convenors. Julie and Hasan Choudhury had held the fort after Alison Bruce did not seek reappointment. Alison was

extremely unlucky in not having a chance to “test” her wings. Bill Whyte “stepped up” to run the successful Dec Congress on line. There is an online July SBU Congress imminent, and an Overseas Congress in Crete in Oct., with Majorca again rolled over to May 2022.

Our thanks to GEBOS and Simon Kelly, who, in the end, successfully oversaw satisfactory compensation arrangements from the originally arranged Majorca 2020 Congress.

Gus Macdonald has agreed to become the Home Congress TD lead with Russell Frame that for Overseas Congresses. I expect them to work closely and collaboratively with Christine, Chief TD Convenor.

We are very excited to have booked Peebles Hydro for a Spring congress in March 22, instead of the traditional Christmas one. We hope to build on the hugely successful Peebles Dec 2019 Congress. Grateful thanks to Julie who almost single handily brokered an excellent deal. I am already looking forward to the Gala dinner and the fun, and, of course, the bridge and I hope you are too.

These reports of considerable achievement, perhaps correctly, do little to reflect the considerable blood sweat and tears expended to “get there” at all levels- the SBU, Districts and Clubs. So many unsung heroes are working so hard to keep the bridge experience alive for us all.

There has been, and remains, considerable disquiet about any possibility that our National and District Trophies could be inscribed by players whose route to success in online competitions has not been an honest one. We have done our best to prevent the possibility of benefiting from self-kibitzing. Now we are concentrating our minds, through the auspices of the considerable minds of Brian Short and his team to further developing systems to detect collusive cheating. I am sorry to report that there a number of open cases. As you may have noticed, the WBF decided some time ago, that it, and subsequently, constituent NBOs, should have jurisdiction to prosecute players found to be cheating anywhere on any platform. All NBOs have to report all suspension notices which are disseminated worldwide.

Meanwhile we have decided to calendar all National events on line for 21/22. We are lobbying BGB for a decision about Home Internationals.

Law and Ethics

As reported, on line bridge has greatly increased the opportunities to cheat.

From late last year, L&E spawned two new distinct entities, an Investigation Panel and a Disciplinary Panel, headed up by Brian Short and Mike Ash.

Brian instigated and led a review of all our processes and Procedures, with considerable input from Mike and Liz McGowan. The Disciplinary Code was revised, new Disciplinary Panel procedures were drawn up with a statement on Sanctions with Guidelines for a Disciplinary panel. Underpinning all this was training for new teams of Investigators and Disciplinary Panel members.

The amount of work that Brian Short has undertaken as he constantly researches and networks to help ensure that bridge events held in Scotland are honest and fair is almost immeasurable. On top of this, his teams are themselves putting in many hours examining hands and play patterns to detect the unusual. Mike too has been training his team and further developing processes. I was privileged to partake in two of his Zoom training sessions.

Again, we are indebted to these individuals and all those who are supporting them. The number of dedicated Volunteers who have come forward this season in all areas is quite remarkable.

Membership, Data Bases and Communications

Bill Whyte continues to serve as Membership Secretary. SBU insist that anyone playing on any of their BBO paid Clubs are members of the SBU. This has resulted in an increase in Direct Membership to 204.

The fact that our membership numbers have held up remarkably well owes much to Bill's proactive style, the SBU Contract with BBO, and the success of the OTC's drive to train on line TDs.

Comparative figures are: -

2018-2019: Adults 5686 + 21 Juniors = 5707

2019-2020: Adults 5352 + 21 Juniors = 5373

2020-2021: Adults 4922 + 28 Juniors = 4950

At the same time Bill is proposing changes which will limit the categories of Membership to better allow that all members have a recorded postal address as well as, where available, an E mail address. Continued Membership of the SBU does of course presume members' knowledge of and adherence to all current SBU policies.

Such measures, and reiteration of members' obligations to the SBU, will, I am sure, be welcomed by the membership.

Bill has perfected the elegant message, as more and more notifications to members come from his pen. Or should I say, on occasion, come adapted by his pen. Bill is another Convenor who has met an increased workload without complaint. He gives freely of both his opinion and his services, both which are generally received positively!

Carolyn Dempsie has served as Secretary with diligence. She is ever ready to take advice and is becoming more confident in offering it. She accepted the Role of Secretary to the Disciplinary Panel, and has quickly adapted to this role.

Liz McGowan continues to Edit the excellent SBU news, at present a subscriber- only printed magazine. It was made available to all digitally once this season when the printers were closed.

Alan Officer, our Web Master, has been hard at work undertaking a root and branch redesign of the SBU Web. I have had a glimpse of the future and it looks good!

In this digital age we should be considering the most effective and efficient manner in which to convey information to members and districts, and how best to market and promote bridge and our organisation.

Finance and Treasurer

August saw the departure of George Plant as Treasurer and Loraine Finlay as Finance Convenor. Fears that they might be irreplaceable were soon replaced by relief as Scott Macdonald and Fiona Greenwood "got their feet under the table". Both George and Loraine continue to be available for advice, and there was a lengthy handover period for the Treasurer position in particular.

Scott sought further advice on any VAT aspects from our BBO income, an action which has been beneficial financially but which has involved Scott in considerable additional work.

Our excellent relationship with BBO owes much to Scott's diligence and quiet perseverance.

Fiona, as Finance Convenor, has built on what she inherited, working now in a very different climate. Working closely with Anne Coles and Bill she oversaw a template for charging and award for all SBU pay Club events. Trying to marry conflicting financial interests and opinions thereof from Clubs, Districts and indeed individuals is never an easy task. Organised, methodical and ever willing to question our direction at any point in time, her input is both stimulating and essential.

Farewell

Eddie, you now can retire from Council in the knowledge that you have served the SBU well.

I used to sit and admire your wise quiet authority at meetings wondering how on earth I could follow such a display of understated leadership.

You did everything you could to help me learn during our year of overlap, giving me silent access to your e mail account, and handing over one or two challenging briefs!

You have continued to act as a wise adviser particular to the OTC, where your IT knowledge and skills, particularly around the various BBO file convertor programmes have been invaluable.

Single handedly you downloaded result files for months in order that they could be presented, latterly on our Bridgeweb site, and also to enable MPs to be awarded.

You have been a much- valued mentor to me and Anne Coles over the year and for this, and everything you did over the preceding two years we thank you.

Looking ahead

What of the future? What will the “New Normal” look like? A Working Group led by Tim Wickens has been set up with the remit to

- Agree content, timings and manner of SBU communications to Clubs/members about safe return to F2F bridge
- Consider the likely practical and cost implications to clubs as they consider their reopening options
- Consider the role of the SBU in aiding a return to F2F bridge in Clubs and Districts

We await their feedback. Meanwhile, I have recontacted the Scottish Government regarding their previously stated application of household mixing rules to bridge playing irrespective of the setting as we see differences of application arising across the UK.

As mentioned, we have diarised all National events apart from SBU Congresses, so far, for May21-April 30th 22 to be on line. Further consideration will be given to the balance of on line and F2F bridge for the foreseeable future aided by the feedback from Tim’s Group.

We have renegotiated favourable terms with BBO. However, we are aware that signatories are personally responsible for any liability incurred under contract in an Unincorporated Association.

Together with the challenge of obtaining Officer indemnity and finding financial institutions willing to offer us reasonable saving rates for our funds, has led us to start exploring the best way to ensure Incorporation for the SBU, and start building for the future. The next year will witness a roll out of meetings from Council to Districts to best decide together a preferred route with an aim to seek membership approval for a new Organisational Structure of the SBU before the end of 2021.

JF 19/05/21