

Unit 249 Bridge Club Survey Report

Introduction:

The American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) is a governing body for contract bridge in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda. It's stated mission is "to promote, grow and sustain the game of bridge and serve the bridge-related interests of our Members." Its major activities are:

- sanctioning games at local bridge clubs and regional events
- certifying bridge teachers and club directors
- conducting the North American Bridge Championships (NABC)
- providing education materials and services
- administering the ACBL masterpoints system for tracking player performance
- providing oversight for ethical behavior and play
- representing the interests of its members with the World Bridge Federation

The ACBL consists of 13 Regions. Each Region elects a Regional Director who serves a three-year term on the ACBL Board of Directors. Each District is further subdivided into units and all "sanctioned" ACBL bridge clubs are assigned geographically to a Unit. Each Unit elects a Unit board of Directors whose major responsibility is to support the ACBL Mission.

Unit 249's board of directors has undertaken an information gathering activity to assess the health and vitality of its clubs; to assess activities that support the ACBL Mission; and to identify opportunities to support clubs in achieving the ACBL Mission.

This report has been prepared by Unit 249 Board of Directors for unit 249 Club Managers and Members.

Unit 249 Clubs:

ACBL sanctioned duplicate bridge games are hosted in Southwest Ontario either through "face to face" club games, or "virtual club" games. Unit 249 currently has 18 ACBL sanction clubs providing 66 weekly sanctioned games:

1. St. Thomas DBC (St. Thomas) - 2 open & 1 restricted game per week
2. Grand River Bridge Club (Kitchener) - 4 open & 9 restricted & 2.5 virtual game per week
3. Brew's Bridge Clubs (Sarnia) - 3 open game per week
4. Goderich Bridge Club (Goderich) - 1 open & 4 virtual game per week
5. Owen Sound DBC (Owen Sound) - 3 open game per week
6. Maple City Bridge Club (Chatham) - 2 open game per week
7. Tillsonburg DBC (Tillsonburg) - 2 open game per week
8. Simcoe Duplicate Bridge Club (Simcoe) - 1 open game per week
9. Dunes Duplicate (Port Franks) - 1 open game per week
10. Windsor Social Duplicate BC (Tecumseh) - 2 open game per week

11. Saugeen Shores DBC (Port Elgin) - 3 open game per week
12. Lakeshore Bridge Club (Tecumseh) - 1 open game per week
13. Guelph Bridge Club Inc (Guelph) - 6 open & 2 restricted game per week
14. Meaford Duplicate Bridge Club (Meaford) - 2 open game per week
15. Beach Grove BC (Windsor) - 1 restricted game per week
16. Kincardine Charity Duplicate (Kincardine) - 2 open game per week
17. London Bridge Centre Inc. - 5 open & 6 restricted and 2 virtual games per week
18. Parkhill Bridge Club LC (Park Hill) - 1 open game per week

Club Managers

A bridge club may be run as "for-profit" or "non-profit". It is the sole discretion of the club and its administration; this choice has no bearing on the club's relationship with ACBL. Every club has an internal administration to direct the club activities; the composition of the club's administrative body is again the sole discretion of the club. The bridge "Club Manager" is an individual who bears the responsibility of representing the ACBL to the club members and representing the club to the ACBL. The Club Manager may be the sole person responsible for the club administration, or maybe the representative for a club board.

Unit 249 spans the gambit of club administrations. Some clubs have a club owner who is also the club manager. Some clubs have the club manager as an appointment or elected role within the club. Most clubs have the club manager role as static; that is, the club manager remains in that role indefinitely.

Regardless of the relationship, the Club Manager shares in the mission of the ACBL "To promote, grow and sustain the game of bridge and serve the bridge-related interests of our members." However, the Club Managers focus their efforts within their own clubs.

The Unit's Board Club Survey has identified some weaknesses in its relationship with Club managers. Looking forward, the Unit Board of Directors sees an opportunity to strengthen these relationships.

The Unit Board of Directors recognizes that it is often the Club Managers who manage the growth and sustainability of the local bridge club. The Unit Board would like to support Club Managers in meeting the stated mission of the ACBL and would like to offer some assistance to Club Managers:-

The board of Directors are a resource for clubs and each club has a Unit 249 representative as follows:

1. St. Thomas DBC (St. Thomas) – Tom Jolliffe: Tom.Jolliffe@rogers.com
2. Grand River Bridge Club (Kitchener) – Ted Boyd: boydst1945@gmail.com
3. Brew's Bridge Clubs (Sarnia) – Gary Robertson: garroberr@gmail.com
4. Goderich Bridge Club (Goderich) – Jennifer Verdam: jennverdam@gmail.com
5. Owen Sound DBC (Owen Sound) – Lee Gallacher: lee.gallacher@gmail.com
6. Maple City Bridge Club (Chatham) - Gary Robertson; garroberr@gmail.com
7. Tillsonburg DBC (Tillsonburg) – Brian Clark: brian.clark@sympatico.ca
8. Simcoe Duplicate Bridge Club (Simcoe) – Brian Clark: brian.clark@sympatico.ca

9. Dunes Duplicate (Port Franks) – Lindal Tindale: tindalin1@gmail.com
10. Windsor Social Duplicate BC (Tecumseh) – Ewoud Van Goch: henkflora@outlook.com
11. Saugeen Shores DBC (Port Elgin) – Lee Gallacher: lee.gallacher@gmail.com
12. Lakeshore Bridge Club (Tecumseh) - Ewoud Van Goch: henkflora@outlook.com
13. Guelph Bridge Club Inc (Guelph) – Ted Boyd: boydst1945@gmail.com
14. Meaford Duplicate Bridge Club (Meaford) – Lee Gallacher: lee.gallacher@gmail.com
15. Beach Grove BC (Windsor) - Ewoud Van Goch: henkflora@outlook.com
16. Kincardine Charity Duplicate (Kincardine) – Jennifer Verdam: jennverdam@gmail.com
17. London Bridge Centre Inc. - Tom Jolliffe; tom.jolliffe@rogers.com
18. Parkhill Bridge Club LC (Park Hill) – Linda Tindale: tindalin1@gmail.com

Covid Recovery

In early 2020, Ontario and Canada governments-imposed restrictions on freedom of movement to curb the spread of the disease. These restrictions resulted in face-to-face bridge being discontinued for most of 2020 through 2022. This has had a significant impact on bridge clubs which are now attempting to recover their table counts. Four clubs, Cambridge DBC, Pat's Bridge Club, Sarnia Stepping Stones BC, and Sun Parlour BC did not reopen after the government-imposed restrictions being lifted. The remaining 18 clubs have reopened and made changes in response to the long absence; changes in club administration, venues, game fees, and games were required. The clubs are reporting a slow to moderate recovery with some returning to pre-COVID attendance, others struggling to gain attendance, and still others reporting an uptick in attendance. At the close of 2023, unit 249 had 1192 members, slightly down from 2022 and significantly down from pre-covid number of 1,353 as of December 31, 2019. Most clubs are reporting approximately a 20% decrease from pre-COVID.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the urgency of the ACBL mission "To promote, grow and sustain the game of bridge and serve the bridge-related interests of our members." It is ultimately a Club's responsibility to sustain its own existence, but this is exactly the mission of the ACBL and the Unit Board of Directors. It was the intent of the Unit Club Survey to gather "best practices" for COVID-19 return that clubs employed. However, the survey did not yield reportable observations along these lines; rather, more general themes surfaced.

Theme 1: Advertising

Growing/maintaining a club's attendance is essential to maintaining its sustainability. Generally, attendance has been decreasing due to attrition. Anecdotal reports of new membership are of new retirees from the workforce. There is no appreciable increase in players within the non-retired sector, contrarily, the working sector has aged and graduated to retired sector of players. It is noted that the working sector does not have many opportunities to play club duplicate games during non-business hours. Of the 41 weekly "open" games offered within Unit 249 boundary, as listed by the ACBL club directory, only 6 are offered during non-business hours/days. However, new players do have many opportunities to play in virtual games hosted by clubs within and beyond unit 249.

The clubs within unit 249 do not report much engagement in advertising actively. Advertising is done predominantly through "word of mouth" and posting at the game venue and other sites. Targeted advertising is not being conducted by any club.

Advertising is an opportunity for the Unit Board to support local bridge clubs. Advertising platforms and advertising materials should be exploited by sharing information and resources. Considerable time and effort are expended in developing materials specific to the advertising platform and duplication of effort and expertise can be avoided through increased relationship management.

Advertising strategies and materials should be shared among bridge clubs, the Unit Board can be a conduit, however, the ACBL is integral partner in this effort. Conservation of effort with a realistic view of catering to those who can attend club games should remain the focus of the club. The Board of Directors envisions a specific role within the Unit Board of "Advertisement Coordinator" mandated to support advertising effort within the Unit.

Theme 2: Teaching

The Unit Club Survey gathered information on which clubs offer bridge training/teaching, what is the frequency of these events, what materials do they use, what was the focus, and what is their success. Club Managers reported various levels of training engagement; many reporting no such activity within their club but consolidation with other clubs. This concentration of effort presents significant efficiencies and is predominantly done "at-hoc". The Unit Board of Director sees opportunity in a teaching/training curriculum in three sections: Rules; Bidding; Play of the Hand. Most of the materials are thought to exist already, but the connection between existence and delivery isn't transparent or exploited.

It is noted that a standard or certification is not required by a teacher/trainer. Therefore, lessons may be developed by whomever is delivering the lesson. This hurdle may be self-imposed and unnecessary; the materials may exist; the curriculum may be developed; a teacher may be provided. These are unknown to Club Managers thus providing training can prove to be an unsurmountable challenge. Should a club wish to exploit any of these resources, the Unit Board should act as the conduit for providing the materials and other resources needed by the club.

Theme 3: Virtual Games

Prior to COVID-19 Unit 249 the Board of Directors had engaged in visioning exercises. An outcome was the realization that virtual games would present a platform for games that should be encouraged. The pandemic ensured a quick roll-out of these games. However, the roll-out in unit 249 is sporadic at best. Virtual games were used as a revenue source by some clubs during the pandemic, but most clubs simply put their game schedule in abeyance; only to return after government-imposed mobility restrictions were lifted.

Virtual games are underexploited. Causes for this can be sought out but likely won't yield any benefit. Most bridge players are unaware of virtual games, what they offer, how to play, and what are the benefits. The knowledge of how virtual games can enhance a club, the Unit, and the ACBL appears missing. The shared mission of all three parties may be advanced through virtual games or virtual clubs.

As an "off-the-top-of-the-head" idea, every Unit in the ACBL could have a Virtual Club with some revenue sharing mechanism.

Virtual games are a format that the working sector can participate in. Virtual games can be used as a training platform. It seems that there are many possibilities of how a virtual game can support the mission and all bridge players. The Unit Board of Directors intends on hosting a workshop session with Bridge Club Managers to discuss the ins and outs of virtual games; opportunities in virtual clubs; limitations of virtual games and clubs; and anything else in support of the ACBL mission and their own club attendance.

Conclusion

After considering the results of the many contacts with the clubs of Unit 249 through this survey, the Unit envisions the following five objectives. Details for each objective will be developed and advanced to Unit 249 club managers to ensure that timely and effective activity will be carried out for the benefit of our clubs and members.

- 1. The Unit will improve communications with each club to assist with ACBL needs, marketing and educational activities.**
- 2. The Unit will facilitate educational activities within clubs.**
- 3. The Unit will determine the needs of clubs to advertise the games and lessons.**
- 4. The Unit will investigate the opportunities for online games for all clubs in the Unit.**
- 5. The Unit will sponsor Sectional and Regional tournaments available to all clubs in the Unit.**

Ted Boyd
President, Unit 249