

District director's report

By Bob Heller, hellerb@mindspring.com

Providence, RI — No preamble this time, we'll get right down to business from the pre-Thanksgiving meetings. This was the first NABC in New England other than Boston, and attendance of 9,574 tables was at the low end of expectations. It was the smallest fall tournament in North America since Birmingham in 2000.

The league gave up on Boston because of prohibitive hotel rates, but the area had made a strong pitch for another visit.

Next fall we go to Denver, but after that, NABC participants likely will enjoy warm weather over Thanksgiving through 2024 with only two exceptions: San Francisco in 2019 and Atlanta in 2023.

> The elephant in the room

We'll begin with finances and ACBLscore+. This is as large and bitter a pill as anyone would want to swallow, but the tentatively approved 2015 budget includes a \$4.1 million write-off. More than \$1.9 million is because of the ACBLscore+ fiasco, with almost as substantial a chunk linked to an early end to the league's pension plan.

A perfectly logical and understandable question: How did this happen, who is accountable, and what can or should be done?

ACBLscore+ is a saga that has angered, frustrated, or at least worn out, many members. There is plenty of blame to go around. We can argue for a long time what percentages of that responsibility to assign: Top management; specific technology personnel; the contractor; those on the BOD's strategic oversight committee; and the entire ACBL board — this member, obviously, included.

Readers know that technology is not my trump suit. I rely on those whom I trust and who have the background — as it so happens, colleagues on different sides of the major issue.

CEO Robert Hartman, who has taken considerable heat over this matter, addressed the board with a specific plan: A committee to oversee the ongoing ACBLscore project. There will be three board members, three management members and three outside experts who have volunteered their opinions and expertise. Some submitted a lengthy letter to board members just before we met.

The CEO's plan was overwhelmingly accepted, particularly after Jay Whipple of Florida (District 9), a strong critic of decisions that led to this point, spoke in favor of it. He will be one of the committee's board members.

The \$1.16 million write-off for additional pension funding was planned and approved by all of the appropriate people; \$596,000 was not. It was the result of market deviation and off-the-mark advice from consultants. We have to have faith in our trustees and presume they did their best.

A third write-off component, about \$260,000, was a labor issue affecting part-time employees. It involved travel time and the government, and it was more complex. That has been corrected, retroactively.

We'll end this segment with good news. Despite this unprecedented write-off — and an additional \$600,000 budgeted for ACBLscore enhancements — the league's CEO, CFO, and the board's treasurer and Finance Committee chair all say the league is in fine financial health, with about \$12 million in assets. The only fee increases in the annual budget are: tournament sponsors will pay 2% more for each sectional and regional table; 5% more for ACBL directors fees; and clubs

will pay 52 cents a table, up from 46 cents, for “short games” (12-17 boards), all effective April 1. (The board voted unanimously to accept the budget, although it is not finalized until March.)

> November means elections.

The priority given our one-year presidential term sucks a ridiculous amount of time and energy from the board. It's one of several governance issues that do not serve us — the big “us,” as in all membership — very well.

Suzi Subeck of Chicago was elected 2015 president, defeating Ken Monzingo of San Diego 13-11-1. She is the third president from the past five contested races who won with the bare minimum. Another got 14 votes.

An excellent man lost, a former ACBL Volunteer of the Year and a real “players’ board member” who is not reluctant to speak up for the masses even if it might be against the elite or those in power too long. That probably cost him the election.

Healthy news: Suzi is a very hard worker who devotes countless hours every week to bridge. She has shared some fine ideas about committee structure, and we should expect a lot to get done.

Sick news: The BOD buzz just hours after the vote was about two candidates already running for the 2016 presidency and others who might be jockeying for position in 2017 or 2018.

There were several other elections, and one broke with tradition. Two spots were open to serve on the World Bridge Federation board. Incumbent Georgia Heth was a first-ballot winner among the 10 candidates, and Howie Weinstein, president of the U.S. Bridge Federation, was elected on the next.

This is significant, because ACBL board members had filled all five international Zone 2 positions. Two of the 10 who submitted their names were incumbent Bruce Blakely, who resigned his ACBL position a year ago, and Stu Goodgold, his board replacement who wound up serving only this past year.

One other tidbit for District 7 members. Jane Champion of Naples, NC, was elected to a position on the Educational Foundation. Five non-board members vied for two spots, and Jane's work with youth in the North Carolina mountains impressed several BOD members. She is to serve a three-year term.

Providing all ACBL members with more information about the WBF is a big step forward in communication — and at least some peek under (what appears to be) a cloak of secrecy. I will continue to push for a limit of three sitting board members among the five that our zone is allocated, ensuring that a wider range of voices is heard and limiting potential conflicts of interest on the ACBL board.

Speaking of which ... it is disappointing that, for the first time since 2006 and only the second time this millennium, the board will not have a rookie. The lack of a new voice with a fresh perspective is not good. With a board so large, there always will be plenty of experience and history — and former district directors don't necessarily disappear.

Had a motion outlining term limits in 2013 passed, four present BOD members would have replacements by now. An additional three would not be eligible after their fourth (or more) three-year term concludes this year. (Full disclosure: I'll readily admit that some of these colleagues contribute greatly to the board.)

> Masterpoints: The official blessing

This was one of the least suspenseful votes in quite some time. As promised, a package of sweeping changes in masterpoint awards in sectional and regional events received overwhelming support from the board and was effective with any tournaments that included New Year's Day.

Interested players no doubt have read extensively of this in the previous two issues of the D7 News and/or the ACBL Bulletin.

One blanket caveat: There will be a few glitches along the way that necessitate tweaking. But enough data was collected and tests made that we anticipate these to be minimal.

At the same time, all regionals will be able to begin two-session gold point competition on Monday afternoon — in our district, that means knockouts as well as the new three-strat open and Gold Rush pairs.

A lot of credit goes to Robert Hartman for chairing this committee, which had unprecedented involvement from management. All things masterpoints had been exclusively a BOD responsibility, but many felt a lot of things were broken. Robert no longer will be on the committee, but momentum exists for an ongoing broad look and changes to make masterpoint awards more fair and equitable.

> A robot walked into a bar ...

And asked if masterpoints were on tap. No chance of running dry in this place; they're available 24/7, and you can buy another round in a half hour.

Well, the free flow of ACBL's currency isn't quite that extreme; however, when one ventures onto the Internet, we have a case of separate but unequal.

Let me make this perfectly clear. Online bridge is great. It is essential. It is a godsend. Learn from it. Brush up on partnership agreements. We hope it helps sustain the health of our game, rekindles interest and promotes its growth.

There is one thing it most assuredly is not, and that is face-to-face, live, in-the-flesh duplicate bridge. This is not an argument of whether it is inferior; it is a statement of fact that it is different.

What brick-and-mortar club schedules games every 10 minutes? What face-to-face club never closes and allows players to begin a new game every 30 minutes? Where can you holler across a room to ask your partner if a bid is forcing?

Because the ACBL measures accomplishments and sets goals by defining masterpoint mileposts, the awarding of these points is important. If one has the time and skill, and is in love with his computer and keyboard, he can win an avalanche of points because his "club" makes house calls, is always open and offers games with a dizzying frequency.

We allow all points to count, but is it the real world?

This brings us to the amendment of a Board of Governors motion brought to the Board of Directors: On all printed lifetime masterpoint lists beginning Jan. 1, 2015, online MPs will be included next to the total.

Surprise! I was strongly in favor — philosophically and because it presents a 100 percent accurate picture. Any member may judge how much weight to give electronic points; they will continue to be included in lifetime totals, but we'll know how many came online. The league derived about \$450,000 last year in sanction fees from online sources, so some board members cover their ears when this issue surfaces, believing any move possibly perceived as "anti-online bridge" could prove costly. The motion passed 14-11.

> Grand National Teams fail

Our group of firm believers in Grass Roots events and participation barely got through a motion last meeting to add a fourth district qualifier to Flight B and C North American Pairs finals. We knew it would be difficult to make some traditionalists see the merit in allowing a district's second Grand National Teams entry in Flight B and C GNT finals.

The cost to the league would have been negligible, and the likelihood that any participants would remain at an NABC they might have ignored, could have more than covered that.

We heard some pretty strange arguments, one recurrent theme being that smaller or less enthusiastic districts “couldn’t afford” to subsidize a second entry — so none should be allowed. The motion failed 9-16. We’ll try again soon with another angle.

> Pip of hypocrisy ends.

This isn’t a secret, because it’s in the Daily Bulletin regularly during an NABC. It’s just that a lot of players don’t pay much attention to it.

One reason why a two-session entry to an unrestricted-by-MPs championship event costs \$40 is because \$3 goes directly to the International Fund to help pay for U.S. and Canadian open, senior and women’s teams in world competition. The league’s actual entry fee is \$37, or \$18.50/session.

The ACBL board voted for this 8.1% special-purpose tax many years ago, and no one has a choice: If you play in an NABC+ event, you pay the entry fee *and* the tax.

One loophole. Those who benefit from free-play coupons at NABCs — including board members and league staff — pay nothing, and the International Fund gets nothing. If the board says this tax is worthwhile, why shouldn’t *everyone* pay it?

Principle must matter sometimes, and four of us co-sponsored this motion: Those with ACBL free plays who enter NABC+ events must pay the \$3 earmarked for the International Fund. It could net \$1,500 to \$2,000 a year for the fund. The motion passed 20-1-4.

> Pip of politics ends.

It’s sheer coincidence, but in a move to clean up a bit of old politics, your district director also spearheaded a motion to do away with a USBF regional. We won’t dredge up some unfortunate history, but people no longer involved, and circumstances no longer allowed, led to great abuse of a regional sanction.

Once that travesty ended, what remained was a political plum hardly worth having. The bottom line: Very, very few folks benefitted, and the USBF’s interest and revenue were so minimal that even the organization’s board said the event was not necessary.

The motion to eliminate the annual USBF regional, effective immediately, passed 24-1. That leaves the Canadian Bridge Federation regional, operated by volunteers as a true fundraiser, as the only one operating without a district sanction.

> Globetrotting kids

Junior Fund month now is January instead of February, which should net an increase in revenue (District 7, pretty much since Day One, has been the perennial leader in club and tournament contributions). A good chunk of this money goes not to schoolchildren or to education or high school or college kids, but rather to the 30 youngsters, their coaches and chaperones who train for and travel to world championships.

The board has gone around and around on how to fund the globetrotters, and it seems we’ve come full cycle. This meeting’s motion gives our organizations not as much money as last year, when teams went to Istanbul, but significantly more than three years ago when changes were made requiring accountability in order to receive the considerable funds.

The motion: The USBF shall receive \$50,000 per year and the CBF \$25,000 per year to support international junior and youth participation. The USBF and CBF must provide for the fall board meeting a report on Junior/Youth activities from that year. Passed unanimously. (I reluctantly went with these numbers — because the training and coaching aspects of the program have greatly improved.)

