

THE FUTURE OF TOURNAMENT BRIDGE IN WALES

This paper is written with the knowledge and approval of Neville Richards, but it is my own initiative and of course has no official standing. It is merely the contribution of one keen tournament player who is concerned at the state of competitive bridge in Wales.

It is my opinion that Welsh bridge has stagnated for at least the past decade – the entire period I have been involved! There are many reasons for this, some of them beyond the control of the WBU and its officials. I do not propose to address all the ills of the WBU in this paper. I shall restrict myself to the topic of tournament bridge. But it is worth acknowledging, more or less in passing, that there can be no future for tournament bridge in Wales unless we discover the will, and the means, to develop a new generation of competitive players to replace the current ageing population. I could say more about this, but I won't do it here.

A second topic that I shall likewise only allude to in passing is the organisational structure of Welsh bridge. I have conveyed my views on this on previous occasions, both orally and in writing. As I see it, the management structure of Welsh bridge requires surgery of the most fundamental, radical kind. We need a different organisational model altogether – one that reflects the core tasks of the WBU and which does not simply ape some business model. But that too is a topic for another time. Not that it isn't urgent; the present structure partly explains the paralysis and downward drift that we can all observe. The way that the WBU is structured in Wales is one reason for the failure to take effective steps to address this decline. There is a chronic failure to delegate, so that no-one has decision-making power within any given sphere of activity. It is no criticism of individuals to observe that the Council/Chief Executive model is a failure and, incidentally, is almost bound to scupper the proposals for reform that are contained in this paper. This is because it conducive to paralysis, rather than action.

But one thing at a time. In this paper I shall simply consider what is wrong with our present tournament structure (that is to say, why it does not fit the needs of the membership), and what might be done about it.

Tournaments

The tournament structure in Wales reflects the stagnation that has afflicted the organisation for at least ten years (probably longer, but I wasn't around to see it). We need to begin afresh. Competitions that have outlived their usefulness, and their appeal, need to be culled. You don't start by dreaming up new events. Nor is it effective to downgrade events, limiting the investment of time and money required to play in them. That just perpetuates decline. You start by getting rid of those components that no longer work. Bear in my mind that at this point I am considering only NATIONAL events. I am assuming that the four regions would continue to sponsor the Congresses with which they are associated at present. I also assume that the regions would maintain their own programme of events geared to their own members. (I could say something about how these events are organised, at least in East Wales, but I don't want to overcrowd this paper.)

My observation is that anything on the present model of club/regional qualification to a national final is no longer viable. These competitions have lacked integrity for as long as I have observed them. They also lack support. So they need to be culled. Also, anything catering just for an elite should be culled. Such events bring the WBU into disrepute amongst its own members. We also need to discover a way of interesting the (primarily) club player in events with a national dimension.

WHAT SHOULD GO?

(And I do mean go completely)

This would be my list.

Ladies Welsh Cup (in fact, ladies' anything)

Men's Teams (in fact, men's anything)

Webber Cup

National Open Pairs

National Mixed Pairs

Graded Masters

Invitation Pairs

Clear those out that and we may be able to construct a competitive programme that actually appeals to the membership.

WHAT SHOULD BE RETAINED?

a) Welsh Cup (as now, but with new seeding arrangements that protect teams from being overmatched in early rounds; we should also consider free entry for less experienced teams)

b) Cambria Cup (likewise)

c) Inter-Club Teams of Eight (BUT this should be a direct entry completion, with no local qualifying round and no limit on the number of teams that can be put forward by any one club)

d) Perry Shield/Spickett Bowl (to continue as at present).

Of the present programme of national events, it is only the above four, in my judgement, that should be preserved, and even in respect of those four there is much that might be done to improve their appeal.

NEW EVENTS

1. The Welsh League

We need a Welsh league for serious tournament players (aspiring as well as established), the aim being to have a programme of fixtures that matches the needs of this stratum of

players (or I should say, these strata, since there is no limit to the range of ability that can be catered for within a national league.)

My proposal is that each division of the league should comprise six teams. The initial allocation of teams would be determined by a seeding committee. Teams in League One would be limited to a maximum of six players. Teams in lower divisions would be permitted up to eight players. The league would be 'fixed date', on three weekends through the winter months. All matches would be played at one central venue. In the course of a weekend, each team would play a 16 board match against every other team in their division. The winners of League Two (and of lower divisions) would be guaranteed promotion to the above division in the following season provided they retained at least four of their members. Disputes would be resolved by a seeding committee.

If the Welsh selectors agreed, the League could become the principal yardstick determining the composition of Welsh teams for the following season. Apart for other benefits, that would ensure the participation of top players. It might be that the top two teams in League One would be required to engage in a play-off.

How many teams would enter? I don't know. Much would depend on how enthusiastically the event was promoted. I think we should aim for three divisions (eighteen teams).

2. Club Champions Pairs

We need an event that pulls in players from all the clubs in Wales and makes them feel part of the national scene. I propose that the WBU initiate a single weekend Pairs event for the Pairs Champions of all the affiliated clubs in Wales. Clubs with fewer than 50 members would be permitted just one pair. Clubs with 50-99 members could send two pairs. Clubs with at least 100 members could send three pairs.

Brutal as it sounds, I believe that those two new events, plus the four that I suggest be retained (with modifications) from the present programme are all that we can support given our present membership, and given the present level of interest in tournament play.

As I said at the outset, I do not believe that this is the answer to our present malaise. No revision to our tournament structure, however well founded, can achieve that on its own. But there is absolutely no point in continuing with the present programme. Many events have long since run out of steam. This is my idea of what we need to do, on the tournament side, to improve the situation.

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