

# **Board of Governors Town Halls**

**Takeaways from outreach meetings  
held August 17–19, 2021**

Prepared by BoG Chair Doug Couchman

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# What did we do?

On August 17–19, 2021, the Board of Governors conducted five two-hour outreach meetings with unit presidents, club owners, and others. The immediate purpose of the meetings was to gather thoughts and impressions regarding the issues that are on the agenda for the August 20, 2021 meeting of the Board of Directors.

The broader purpose of these meetings was to establish rapport between the BoG and these constituents and to ensure that these constituents understand that their concerns are heard and included in the decision-making process.

A compilation of results and ideas from the meetings was presented to management and the Board of Directors on August 20.

# Who was invited?

Invitees to the meetings were:

- Every unit president for whom ACBL has a valid email address (total = 284)
- Every Board of Governors member
- Every member of the Board of Directors and the executive team

Additionally and importantly, each of these invitees was asked to forward the invitation to other unit and district officers as well as owners and managers of clubs in that person's area.

# Who was present?

Total attendance across the meetings was more than 400, but this includes duplicates. 313 different people participated in at least one poll.

Club owners and managers seemed to be particularly well represented, which affected the discussions. Many unit and district officers were also present. Quite a few BoD members attended (I did not count), several more than once. I believe about 30 BoG members attended.

Most of the discussion at the meetings was by unit officers and club owners/managers. Most BoD members were primarily observers, as were many but not all BoG members.

# What happened?

After introductions each meeting proceeded in four phases:

1. Two polls were presented, one about online club play and the other about face to face tournaments. The first was intended in part to frame the major issues for discussion; the second turned out not to be relevant to most discussions but may be useful for future decisions about tournaments.
2. I (BoG Chair Doug Couchman) made a presentation regarding the major agenda items for the August 20 BoD meeting, paying particular attention to two items: conditioning of online club sanctions on running face-to-face games; and possible changes in the VACB world including elimination of most cross-district pools, expansion or contraction of allowed player lists, and elimination of pooling and guest restrictions. I also summarized the principal arguments for and against each proposal.

# What happened (cont.)

3. Each attendee then went to one of several breakout sessions (six in some of the meetings, five in others). These sessions were denominated geographically but attendees were free to choose which to join. Each breakout group then spent 30 to 40 minutes discussing the major topics that had been introduced in part 2, plus any other issues that the group thought relevant.
4. All attendees then returned to the main meeting whereupon one person from each breakout group gave a brief presentation of the results — including consensus or lack thereof — of the group's discussion, along with any other ideas the group wished to share.

# Overall character of discussion

In most cases discussion was free flowing and open; groupthink clearly affected some breakout rooms but I saw no instances of any voice being stifled.

What resulted shouldn't be surprising: There was little unanimity, certainly not on the hard questions. Broad messages and themes emerged and I report these on the following pages, but in every case there were voices on the other side.

Moreover, most attendees were — understandably and not wrongly — focused primarily on their own situations. Those with small clubs argued for protection from large ones; those with large clubs argued against. Players in areas in which face to face play is reopening argued for the necessity of face to face to retain sanctions... except for those whose clubs couldn't open, who argued against. Players without clubs tended to argue for more opportunities to play, but also tended to want actions that support their local clubs.

# Overall message from discussion

With more than 300 people expressing their opinions it is no wonder that those opinions varied. In this report I relate ideas and opinions that were expressed consistently or by substantial fractions of attendees.

I attempted to keep discussions focused on the agenda items but certain other issues consistently attracted attention and generated discussion; these are noted.

In this document I divide ideas roughly by topic, but I do not attempt to present a rigorously calculated representation of how many attendees favored or opposed what. However, where clear consensus arose I highlight that.

# Removal of online-only sanctions not strongly favored (yet)

In a group including so many owners of traditional face-to-face clubs, one might expect strong support for a plan to condition retention of sanctions of online games on running face-to-face games.

There were large numbers of attendees in both the *for* and *against* camp, but across the five meetings a majority of those who spoke on this issue opposed removing any online sanctions soon (which I had defined as being around the first of the year). A much larger number favored doing so eventually, with the most commonly cited timeframe being the end of 2022.

Several club owners in the meetings said they had lost their own spaces for holding games and quite a few others had experienced such a loss of players that they were unsure when or even whether they would be able to run face to face games successfully again.

# This was not a unanimous position

While a majority wanted to wait (in some case forever — several people spoke actively in favor of online-only clubs as the future of bridge) before eliminating online-only sanctions, a substantial contingent favored it quite soon. Interestingly, this seemed to vary on a group-by-group basis, with many breakout groups reaching consensus one way or the other.

When asked what should happen to players who lost their games as a result of removal of sanctions many of those in favor had no clear answers. One answer that did arise several times was allowing all players to play in all games within their unit or their district. During the final meeting I polled this question; see later in this writeup for discussion.

# The elephant: BBO games

Notwithstanding that I did not suggest discussion of the matter and that I often tried to remind people that there was not a lot that we could do about them, attendees consistently returned to the subject of the \$1.75 BBO games (those that pay colorless masterpoints). This was described as “the elephant in the room”, “the thing that will kill the ACBL”, “the only thing worth talking about”, and so on.

Unsurprisingly, almost everyone who expressed an opinion about these games hates them. Many club owners believe that it is competition from BBO, not from other clubs or other activities, that is hurting their games most. According to a majority of this group, the number one priority right now should be competing better against BBO.

# But how?

Without getting deeply into specifics I reminded attendees that contractual obligations limited ACBL's options with respect to the BBO games, but many suggestions were nevertheless offered.

Most of these suggestions focused on masterpoints. Some suggested eliminating masterpoint awards for these games entirely, or cutting them by as much as 90%. Many others suggested altering pigmentation requirements for various awards or otherwise changing the value of colorless points; I curtailed discussion of specifics lest it dominate the meetings but various specific ideas were offered. I think it is fair to say that we could have held a roundtable on this topic alone.

# The elephant's cousin

There was also a fair amount of discussion about SYC games. I had explained that expanded SYC options were just over the horizon, but that didn't seem to excite many people. Rather, SYC games were routinely disparaged. "Useless" and synonyms thereof were frequently offered.

The specific problem cited, when one was, was the idea that players had "no reason" to play in SYC games when the BBO games offer the same (according to this group) experience for far less money.

# Open competition? Not so fast.

I had explained that one possibility being considered was an open model in which players could play wherever they want — no include lists, no guest policy, no restrictions on play save what clubs themselves chose to employ.

A few attendees favored this model, most of those suggesting in one way or another that the future of bridge was online and that tying players to geographical locations would drive them from the game (or just from the ACBL).

These few notwithstanding, however, overall the attendees were not in favor of open competition; a sizable majority of the group (which, recall, includes many traditional club owners) thought that such an open model would destroy their businesses or otherwise be unacceptable.

# Focus on local

It was clear that most of those who opposed an open market were worried about lost players, for their own club or those in their area. Several said they would not be able to compete with big clubs (this dovetailed with the discussion about cross-district pooling, which I detail later) and would lose many players, some explicitly saying they would not stay in business.

I did not hear anyone mention the possibility that they might *gain* players. Some explicitly stated they would not because big pools would “grab” them.

Several of those who were strongly opposed to an open model today or soon also opined that someday — some specified after the pandemic was over, others simply some variation of “eventually” — open competition would be appropriate, but I heard “not now” and “not yet” a great deal.

# The opposition

As I said, those who were in favor of an open market were in the minority, but that minority was vocal.

Arguments in favor of open competition tended to focus on the future; for example, one breakout group told me they felt like we were reacting to the past rather than planning for the future.

A more specific variation that was advanced by two different attendees was that in the long run local clubs wouldn't exist at all except as "storefronts" or "skins" for games that were actually run centrally or at least broadly, and that we should begin moving toward that future now.

Another main line of argument was along the lines of "this is America" (explicitly in one case) and related expressions of freedom; people argued that players should have the right to choose where they played.

# The great white sharks

On the subject of cross-district pooling, again there was support for both sides but the majority clearly favored elimination of cross-district pools.

Opposition to large pools was vehement and visceral. Even the vocabulary reflected this: In addition to “mega-pools” and “superpools” I heard them called “predators”, “Amazon” pools (analogies to Google were also made), “sharks” and “tigers”, and a variety of other somewhat to overtly pejorative terms. Competition from large pools was routinely called “unfair”, in part because they “steal” players.

Representatives of at least three of the largest pools participated but their views were not a large part of the conversation.

# Blood in the water?

When it was articulated further, the case against the large pools was that it was “impossible” to compete against them. Sometimes price was explicitly cited, other times game offerings.

Many attendees said that they (their clubs) had done considerable work to develop players and then seen those players take their business to the big pools.

Further, there was broad agreement that for now and the foreseeable future, a healthy club environment including numerous small and medium sized clubs is necessary for the continued health of the game; this sentiment was expressed many times.

# Shark cages

When pressed on what should be done for players who lose their games as a result of elimination of the pools they play in, some groups had no answer but some possible solutions were presented.

Very few attendees thought SYC games, even in an expanded form, were a big part of the answer. SYC games seem generally not to be well-regarded and in particular many believe that players will tend to choose cheaper ACBL games over similar SYC games. (See page 13 for details.)

One suggestion was expanding “include” lists to include everyone in some geographic area. (Units and districts were suggested.) I discuss this issue further on pages 23–24.

# Shark bait

As with almost everything else, the positions expressed about cross-district pools were not unanimous. Some players spoke about how pools give them a place to play that they wouldn't otherwise have. The manager of a "slave" club spoke about the value of the pool to his club and its members. References were made to competition and the open market being good for the game.

Some said that domination by some big operations was inevitable and if it weren't our clubs it would be someone else. (BBO was sometimes explicitly named.)

A few cited low-priced games as a good thing but this sentiment was not common; price was cited in discussions of BBO games far more often, in a negative way.

# Speaking of money...

Revenue sharing arose numerous times in the discussions, in various ways. It seemed clear that many stakeholders favor models with substantial revenue sharing, though the specifics varied.

Examples included increased sanction fees for large clubs and pools that were then distributed to smaller clubs; very large district-wide fees per person (for example, 25 cents per year for every member within a district) which would then be distributed to clubs, and several ideas regarding sharing of ACBL revenue.

I believe many attendees would have been happy to discuss this further but for pragmatic reasons I steered discussion to other matters.

# Come out at night

One important issue that arose many times was evening games. Most evening games are dying or have died (though a few attendees cited their own games as exceptions), and many attendees noted the value of such games to attract working people.

There seemed to be consensus that either pooling limits should not be applied to evening games, the guest policy should be liberalized (possibly completely) with respect to them, or both. I did not hear opposition to this general position.

# Moving the fences?

In the last of the five meetings I conducted an extra poll that was stimulated by a suggestion I had heard several times, namely that open competition within units or districts would be appropriate.

The first question: Assuming cross-district pools are eliminated and some limitations on who can play where are retained, would you favor shared “include” lists within each unit?

The vote on this question was 27–1 in favor.

(Note that this poll was taken toward the end of the last meeting, which had begun as the smallest and had shrunk by then. Unfortunately I had not thought to poll this question earlier so the sample is smaller than I would like.)

# Further back?

The second question: Assuming cross-district pools are eliminated and some limitations on who can play where are retained, would you favor shared “include lists” within each *district*?

The vote on this question was 19-13 in favor.

This poll was taken during a meeting that had both a very strongly protection-oriented contingent and also a strong open competition faction; my impression was that the overall mix was typical of the five meetings taken as a whole.

# Final thoughts on the discussions

One theme, unrelated to the specific questions under review, was that attendees were grateful for the opportunity to be heard. Many of them feel that decisions have been made without their input and they appreciated the opportunity to have an explicit voice.

Considering the positive response, the Board of Governors will hold similar meetings in the future.

# What did the polls show?

Before considering the poll results one must recall the group sampled: Primarily unit officers and club owners. The group was composed almost entirely of very experienced players. This population biases both the poll results and the takeaways from the discussions; no one should take this as anything approximating a scientific study of an unbiased sample.

Key takeaways follow; complete results are in the appendices.

# Takeaways regarding online club play

The key takeaways from the polls on online club play were:

- Most people prefer large or fairly large club games, but...
- Most people prefer to play against players they know.
- Most people prefer games run by their local club or an affiliate; some, but far fewer than half, prefer games run by the ACBL.
- Most people feel their club play needs are being met right now.

# Takeaways regarding tournaments

The key takeaways from the polls on tournaments were:

- A substantial number (about 35%) feel we should not be running tournaments at all right now.
- Only 17% feel that tournaments should be run if local organizers believe it safe, with specific rules under local control. Remember, this is from a group of, among others, unit officers, i.e., the local organizers themselves.
- About two thirds of players would attend a tournament right now, but a majority of those have specific (and sometimes conflicting) requirements regarding safety (specifically masks).

# Appendix 1

## Poll results – Online club play

Q1. Considering options for online club play, right now I have available to me:

- About the right options – 56%
- Too few options – 18%
- Too many options – 21%
- I don't play in online club games – 6%

Note: sample size for polls = 338, including some duplication (313 unique respondents)

Q2. When playing online I prefer:

- Playing in very large games (multiple sections) — 27%
- Playing in fairly large games (one large section) — 38%
- Playing in medium-sized games — 26%
- Playing in small games — 4%
- I don't care — 14%
- I don't play in online club games — 5%

Note: multiple choice question; sum = 113% (numbers do not add because of rounding)

Q3. When playing online I prefer to play against:

- People I know (strong preference) — 39%
- People I know (weak preference) — 25%
- People I don't know (strong preference) — 2%
- People I don't know (weak preference) — 4%
- I don't care — 30%
- I don't play in online club games — 4%

Note: multiple choice question; sum = 104%

Q4. I prefer to play in online club-level games run by:

- My local club (and they now have games that satisfy my needs) — 61%
- My local club (but they don't have games that satisfy my needs) — 16%
- Another club with which my club is affiliated — 19%
- Another club, with which my club is not affiliated — 6%
- The ACBL — 17%
- BBO — 6%
- Someone else — 1%
- I don't play in online club games — 4%

Note: multiple choice question; sum = 130%

# Appendix 2

## Poll results — Face to face tournaments

Q1. I think face-to-face tournaments should be:

- Postponed completely until conditions are safer — 35%
- Run selectively, with strict mask and vaccination requirements — 26%
- Run selectively, without masks for vaccinated players — 22%
- Run if the organizers believe they can be run safely, under local control — 17%

Q2. If a face to face tournament were running right now in a place that was convenient for me I would:

- Attend — 25%
- Attend only if masks were required — 21%
- Attend only if masks were not required— 10%
- Attend, but only under some other condition(s) — 10%
- Not attend — 34%