



Hartford Bridge Club

The ♣ with a ❤

January 2022 Newsletter

Hi Everyone,

Best wishes for a happy and very healthy new year—and we couldn't mean that more sincerely after the last year.

It's a new year and we have reason to be optimistic. So first, the good news that makes us upbeat.

Forty-eight people signed up for Laurie Robbins' January 2 practice session for her online course on declarer play, which is targeted to those with 0-500 masterpoints. We expect most of those 48 to continue and take the course. The number attending considerably exceeds our expectations. In December, 30 persons took the two-day in-person beginner bridge lessons led by Linda Starr and Felix. At least 10 more would have taken the course but for concerns about COVID. The group was hugely enthusiastic and, by every measure, the classes were a success. A large shout-out to the eight table buddies whose patience and help went a long way to making the two days a success. They were Carole Amaio, Peggy Arseneaux, Judy Cavagnaro, John Calderbank, Lori Leopold, Tom Lorch, Mary Sullivan and John Willoughby. There is an appetite to learn bridge out there and we hope, in the better times to come, to tap into that. Also in December, Bill Watson started supervised play again on Tuesday afternoons. The games have been small so far, but the participants are very enthusiastic. We are trying hard to fulfill our educational mission in these challenging times.

Speaking of that educational mission, we are pleased to announce a number of additions to our bridge library. David Margolin, a longtime member of the club and an excellent bridge player, had accumulated a number of interesting bridge books. These books have graciously and generously been donated by Linda Margolin, David's wife. They will be placed on our library's shelves this week with the inscription "Donated in loving memory of David Margolin." Please utilize our library. Many worthwhile bridge books are there. Peruse them and return them in accordance with its honor system. Please also feel free to add to our library.

Although the table count in December was disappointing—down a bit from November and way down from the previous December, we still had approximately 200 different people participating in our live and online games. On a similar note, we now have attracted 382 members this fiscal year. We continue to make excellent progress toward our budgeted play goal of 400. The club remains a vibrant and enjoyable learning and entertainment option for members who demonstrate their loyalty to the club each time they play and renew their memberships. We are grateful.

Nonetheless, we need to approach the year with sober-eyed realism to continue to make the club an attractive option. We're working hard to do so and hoping that this latest COVID surge passes quickly and allows us to get on with plans and events. We also recognize that our club is in the same boat as many clubs. For perspective, we want to share with you excerpts from the most recent Vero Beach Bridge Club newsletter. We could have written much the same words about our club.

"Dear Members: Where have all of the bridge players gone? This same question is being asked throughout the bridge world, and no one seems to have a definitive answer. Table counts are down significantly at virtually all open clubs (and, maybe to a lesser degree, at the invitational-only clubs as well). Also, hundreds of small clubs appear to have closed permanently throughout the country in the wake of, or during, the COVID-19 pandemic.

We need more people to come and play. Our club is no exception and we have not been able to buck the general downward trend. Naturally, many of us are asking ourselves what the situation is at our club. For the 13-month period from May, 2020, through May, 2021, during the height of the pandemic when we offered online games only on the BBO platform, we averaged 1,086 tables per month. For the 6-month period from June through November of this year, when we started reopening and offered some online and some in-person games, we averaged 741 tables. On average, this is a decline in participation of 32%.

The majority of our members are playing less frequently-at least at our club-than in the past, and quite a few of our members don't appear to be playing with us at all, either online or in person. Some could be playing only other, non-virtual club games on BBO-we simply do not know and have no way of finding out since BBO doesn't track which clubs its players may belong to. How can we cut costs and/or increase retention? The trend is worrisome for the future of our beloved game as well as for our club. [Excerpt from Vero Beach Bridge Club]"

Vero Beach has been, for many years, the largest member-owned club in the country. Pre-pandemic, for the year 2019, it was the 4th busiest club by table count in the country with 11,867 tables in play; now contending with alliances of bridge clubs and the attractions of BBO, it ranks 13th after 11 months of this year. We would like to make a few other comments about the Vero Beach excerpt. We did a comparison over the 13-month period from May, 2020, through May, 2021, and our club averaged 616 tables per month. For the 6-month period from June through November of last year, HBC averaged 471 tables. On average, this represents a decline in participation of 22.5%. There is no joy to be taken in this lesser decline, but the Vero Beach comparison makes clear we are all fighting the same headwinds. Unlike Vero Beach, we do have some thoughts about why the decline has occurred. BBO's online games are a major competitor. They remain inexpensive at \$2.29 and attract many of our members. These games fulfill the bridge-playing needs of a number of our members. We need to do as much as we can to make our online and live games as attractive as we can. That is difficult during the pandemic and the most recent surge, but we hope to roll out some plans soon. Secondly, the games of alliances also siphon off some of our members. They literally

occur, like BBO's games, around the clock and have large fields. At least one has even offered a potentially large cash award for participation in their games. Alas, the ACBL is doing very little to help bridge clubs like ours, the lifeblood of the bridge playing community. The challenge for us remains the same in this trying environment. How can we increase participation and retention and attract new members?

It is because of our many loyal and dedicated members that we remain optimistic that we can implement plans and new initiatives in the near future. We are reluctant to be more specific because all too often, like with the planning of the 90th anniversary celebration, we may need to adjust and reconsider during the pandemic as we take into account the health and safety issues posed by COVID. But this too shall pass and, hopefully, when we write next month, we can anticipate some clear sailing.

Take good care and stay healthy. We remain ever hopeful of much better times ahead.

Yours,

Donna and Felix