

Restructuring Bridge Tournaments in England: A Proposal for Accessibility and Growth

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As bridge enthusiasts, we believe that the current tournament structure, relying on counties as the primary organising units, is no longer serving the needs of the bridge-playing community in England. The low participation in many counties suggests that this system is not functioning well. We propose a complete overhaul of the tournament system, dividing England into larger regions and creating a framework that balances competitive integrity with social enjoyment. This will encourage wider participation, greater convenience, and the development of players from beginner levels to the top tier over time.

Dividing England into Regions for Ease of Travel

To improve access to tournaments, we recommend dividing England into eight regions, each designed to maximise travel convenience. Instead of players needing to travel long distances for all major tournaments, most events would be held within these regions. This means players could compete locally for most of the tournament calendar, reducing travel time and costs. Instead of county events which often attract a minimal entry, leading to a poor player experience or all too often last-minute cancellation, we would advocate regional championships, leagues and knock-out tournaments.

We would consult with all the counties to establish the best regional groupings based on transport links and minimising travel times. Our aim is to ensure that all players can participate in excellent quality events without having to undertake long, inconvenient journeys across the country.

We would also structure some national tournaments based on these regions with regional qualifying heats and then a final at a central venue. These would include the Corwen Trophy, Tollemache Cup, and others. Again this minimises journey lengths for the majority of competitors.

Of course, tournaments like the Spring Foursomes and the Summer Festival would continue in a single location.

A Two-Tier Tournament Structure

We propose a clear distinction between top-tier competitive tournaments and more sociable, inclusive events. This approach ensures that players of all skill levels, from the elite to casual enthusiasts, have opportunities to participate and enjoy the game.

High-Level Competitive Tournaments

At the highest level, we would run elite team-based tournaments that would also serve as trials for representing England in all international events, with the exception of the European and World Championships. These tournaments will include:

- Crockfords Cup
- Premier League
- Spring Foursomes
- Four new high-level tournaments

To maintain the highest standard of play, entries for these events would be restricted to top players. For instance, in a 16-team event, 10 or 12 teams would be chosen by the selection committee on merit from those applying to enter, with all other teams playing in regionalised qualifiers for the remaining spots. This system ensures that the highest-quality teams can compete in the most prestigious tournaments without the need to play in early rounds of knock-out events or other qualifiers.

These tournaments would also serve as qualifying events for players wishing to represent England in all international events outside the European and World Championships. By making these events pivotal in the selection process, they provide extensive trials, offering a more reliable assessment than shorter, less rigorous alternatives.

Sociable and Inclusive Tournaments

In contrast, we would also organise a separate series of more sociable tournaments focussing heavily on pairs events, with an emphasis on creating a relaxed, enjoyable environment. Only basic systems and conventions would be allowed.

These tournaments would not only provide a pleasant atmosphere but also encourage participation from players who don't want to or don't participate in the current range of tournaments. The experts are welcome too, either playing with expert partners or with less experienced players, but they must leave their alert cards at home.

These events would focus on the social aspect of bridge, offering opportunities for players to enjoy a long weekend away at a pleasant resort, with time for tennis or visiting local landmarks in the morning as well as a leisurely evening meal.

Encouraging Development Across All Levels

A key benefit of our proposed structure is that it encourages player development from lower standards to higher levels over time. We would introduce a new range of tournaments specifically tailored to different player abilities:

1. **Beginner Tournaments:** Restricted to new players, providing a supportive environment to help them build their confidence and skills.
2. **“No Fear” Tournaments:** Designed for social players who are more experienced than beginners but not ready for high-level competition, ensuring they can play without fear of facing strong players.
3. **Club Player Tournaments:** For those looking to improve their game in a more competitive setting but who are not yet at the top level. These events would serve as stepping stones toward higher competition, providing players with opportunities to refine their skills.

By offering a structured pathway from beginner to elite, we create an environment where players can grow and progress through the ranks, knowing that there are friendly tournaments suited to their current level of ability.

Tournament Accessibility and Growth

The goal of this new structure is to make bridge tournaments more accessible and enjoyable for players of all standards, while also improving the overall quality of competition at the top level. By keeping most of the tournament schedule regionally focused, we reduce travel demands for the majority of players, making participation easier. The high-level tournaments, meanwhile, would continue to push the boundaries of competitive play in England, selecting teams to represent the country on the international stage.

This new system would streamline participation, making tournaments more accessible and appealing to a broader spectrum of players. We believe that this proposed structure strikes the right balance between elite competition and sociable participation, ensuring the continued growth of bridge across England.

European and World Championships

For these two events, our goal will always be to field the strongest possible team, guided by advice from top players. In the past, automatic selections like Terence Reese and Tony Forrester were common. Today, Andrew Robson and David Gold lead the way. We propose pre-selecting this pair and consulting them on the two best pairs to complete the team. Results from the high-level tournament program would serve as a strong guide, though selection would not be strictly based on those results. While the selection committee consists of skilled players, we believe that distinguishing between players at the highest level requires input from those who have excelled on the international stage.

Although participation has never been restricted by gender, the open team has effectively operated as a men's team, with a separate women's team competing alongside. At present, only the open team receives financial support for travel and accommodation, while the women's team does not. This imbalance is unjust, and we propose offering equal financial backing to both teams.

At the top levels of bridge, most players are professionals. When they are asked to represent their country, they have to take time off work. For the European and World Championships, we would not only cover travel and accommodation costs for both teams equally, but also compensate players for loss of earnings. While some may feel uneasy about paying professionals on top of expenses, it is important to understand that this is not a holiday for them. Just as professionals in any field wouldn't spend their holiday doing their usual work, bridge players at this level are representing their country, not taking time off.

We believe these additional costs should not be passed on to the ordinary members. They can and would be fully funded through savings within the tournament program, ensuring that support is provided without imposing any additional financial burdens on grassroots players.