

NEW PLAYER SERVICES

Surveys of new players beginning their duplicate experience show they are motivated by three things:

- The challenge of competition.
- The anticipation of meeting new people.
- The promise of fun.

Creating an environment that satisfies all three of these criteria is a challenge to even the most veteran of unit boards and club owners. When the unit formulates its action plan for its Education Liaison, dealing with the needs of newer players is of paramount importance.

New Player Services is a part of the total IN (Intermediate-Newcomer) Program; however, this program's ability to positively impact the attitude of your newer players justifies giving New Player Services a section devoted to itself.

If your unit education program has succeeded in getting teachers to bring their students out to play in local games, it's important to make these newcomers feel welcome and to help them become a part of your local bridge family. New Player Services can help you achieve this goal.

DEFINITION

New Player Services (NPS) is a public relations program designed to welcome new players to tournaments and local games by helping to create a fun, friendly and comfortable atmosphere within the duplicate environment.

New players often venture into club games or their first tournament filled with fear and trepidation. Fear of embarrassment or failure may cloud the excitement of an advancing player. NPS committee members help advancing players put these fears aside. This results in a positive experience for the players – one that they will want to repeat again and again – even if they come in last.

GOAL – The goal of a New Player Services Program is growth of Intermediate-Newcomer participation at all levels.

The original idea for this program came from Anita Humfleet (Atlanta, GA) of District 7. The program has been expanded and improvised upon as it has been incorporated into various units and districts. The resulting program can be implemented to jumpstart a floundering IN program or used to establish the foundation for a first time IN program. Even units where IN Programs are successful can benefit from *New Player Services*. As Robert Jolles, top teacher-trainer for Xerox Corporation states, "If it's not broke, fix it better!"

NPS can be instituted at either the district, unit or club level. For logistical purposes, it is easiest to implement this program at the unit level. Ideally, each district should eventually have the program functioning at all levels.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

The NPS program achieves its goal through a committee of volunteers. These volunteers provide information and assistance services at a level determined by the organizing district, unit or club. The level of services provided by the volunteers can range from simple social interaction to the integral services of a regular IN program. These services are most effective when offered at sectional and regional tournaments. In addition, these services can be provided at the club level, especially at newcomer games such as Bridge Plus+.

The volunteers for the program should consist of those individuals who are interested in helping new players. These volunteers may include but are certainly not limited to bridge teachers and club owners. Initially, the organizer of the program may have to *draft* volunteers to get things going. However, history has shown that once the program is up and running there is soon an over abundance of volunteers eager to get involved. The total number of volunteers enlisted to help is up to the organizer. An essential element of the program is to choose people who possess the necessary temperament to work with new players.

NPS can be organized by districts, units or clubs. To date, the most effective programs have been started at the unit level. The Unit Education Liaison or IN Coordinators are logical choices to organize the program. Once the program is organized and running well, the volunteers may elect their own coordinator, but it is recommended that the coordinator be a member of your Education Committee.

One of the surprising aspects of the NPS program is that it is very inexpensive to implement. An effective program can be implemented by just providing special NPS badges to volunteers. These badges enable new players to easily identify the NPS volunteers. ACBL suggests using a heart logo as part of your design.

IMPLEMENTATION

1. GETTING STARTED

To get started you need:

- The support of the people in your area;
- The approval and support of the sponsoring organization;
- Funding from the sponsoring organization

Support of the people in your area: Talk with *bridge teachers* in the area to see if they would support a program to make their students more comfortable at ACBL games. Find out if they will promote the idea and send new players to these “protected atmosphere” games.

Talk with *club managers* to see if they will support a program to welcome new players. (Having help in hosting friendlier newcomer games should interest your club owners.)

Talk with the people who serve as *tournament chairmen* in your area. If your sectionals and regionals are offering the ten-point ACBL *IN Program*, interest in the NPS program will be high. If your tournaments don't all offer *IN Programs*, the New Player Services program will help get one started. (Units are encouraged to advertise and offer games for 0-5, 0-20, 0-50, 0-100, and 0-200 players every session and to provide at least 4 out of the 10 basic IN

activities at all sectional tournaments.) The NPS program works hand-in-hand with events and activities designed to bring new players into ACBL tournament play.

The same people who have offered their support for the program could serve on your committee. It is important that your committee consists of players who are friendly and have outgoing personalities.

The approval and support of the sponsoring organization: Consider putting the development of a New Player Services committee on the agenda for the next Unit Board meeting along with an initial budget or request for some type of funding.

Funding for the program: Prepare a budget for the program based on the services the program will provide. Include the costs for any organizational meetings and mailings needed throughout the year. The meetings can be as elaborate as providing breakfast or as simple as serving just coffee. (If you are not given an entertainment budget to use for meetings, be creative. You can ask to use a tournament hospitality suite one morning and have committee members bring snacks, or you could reserve a section of a restaurant that serves a buffet between sessions and ask each person to get his or her own dinner.)

Ordering badges: Be creative! You can buy plastic name holders on string and make inserts with the committee members' names and a Heart (we care) logo.

2. SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE PROGRAM

The *basic services* are provided by the hosts and hostesses who offer their time free-of-charge at IN games or in the IN area at tournaments. These NPS Committee Members will:

- Socialize
- Answer questions
- Make and pass out name tags
- Assist with partnerships
- Explain duplicate procedures such as filling out the convention card, scoring
- Assist the IN Tournament Directors as they sell entries
- Assist at the *New Player Services* area of the Hospitality Table at tournaments.

In addition to these basic services, *New Player Services* can offer any additional services requested by the Unit Board or *suggested by the New Player Services* committee. This is especially true at tournaments where additional services may include:

- Distributing candy or gifts for new players
- Taking pictures of winners
- Distributing trophies to winners
- Attending social events such as wine and cheese parties, bridge bingo and the Newcomer Reception which help the new players get to know each other
- Passing out surveys to new players.

The IN budget should cover these services. No matter what services are provided by committee members, the *focus* of the program should remain one of social interaction in an effort to create a friendly atmosphere for new players. Your committee members should wear

their badges at tournaments (even when away from their home unit or district) and they are invited to visit the IN area. NPS members are especially welcome to visit the IN area at NABCs.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL AND FOLLOW-UP MEETINGS

There are no established guidelines for how many meetings are necessary or even practical (in a large unit) per year. A kick-off meeting for all members of the committee with follow up meetings periodically is what we recommend. It is suggested that an organizational meeting take place a couple of months prior to any regional in the area. While it is possible to have committee members *rove* during tournaments, it is more effective for each person to have a specific assignment. This eliminates any conflicts the members might have in trying to plan their own personal schedules for each tournament. These assignments should include:

- Hospitality Desk
- IN Tournament Director Assistant
- IN Playing Area
- IN Partnership Desk

During regionals, committee members may not want to be on call every session. Making specific assignments makes it less stressful for committee members. The number of committee members assigned to the IN playing area depends on the size of the room and the number of participants, but there should be at least two.

Even if you begin your NPS program with just a few members, you will soon have players asking to join when they see what a valuable service you are providing. When its time to add new members to your committee, consider asking the newcomers to participate. They will feel honored and will do an outstanding job for you. It is a definite plus for your program to have someone on the committee actually playing in the IN games.

When someone joins the committee, they should be sent a welcome letter that explains the purpose of NPS and the role of the committee members. Since people might be interested in serving for only a year or two, your committee should always be on the lookout for new members.

The distinctive NPS badge allows new players to identify committee members. If it is practical, the badges should be presented officially.

In order to maintain a viable and effective committee, the NPS Coordinator should always be looking for ways to keep the program fresh. Successful programs will often lose their impact if they aren't given a new look from time to time.

PROMOTIONAL IDEAS FOR NEW PLAYER SERVICES MEMBERS

Hold a NPS poster contest and place the posters in the playing area.

Decorate baskets for passing out candy in the playing area. This could also be a contest.

Present recognition awards to the NPS members giving the most volunteer time to the program.

Don't forget to say "thank you" to committee members. This can be done with a "recognition certificate," candy, dinner, free entries, etc.

PUBLICITY

The more publicity the NPS program gets when it is launched, the faster it will become known and the easier it will be to implement.

- Unit/District publications – Write an article to get the ball rolling and then ask the editor if you can write a regular NPS column to keep everyone up-to-date.
- Posters – Use the posters generated by a contest to advertise the program and hang them at local clubs or tournaments.
- Call the local media to cover the meeting where you officially launch the program.

TRACKING THE PROGRAM FOR THE FUTURE

ANALYZING THE PROGRAM – DID IT WORK?

The unit/district board and club owners will want to know if the program is working before approving a budget for the second year of NPS. First year statistics won't be conclusive.

Here is some information you can gather to present to the Board:

- Testimonials from players in the *IN Program*.
- Surveys from new players, if your budget allows.
- Comments from teachers involved in the program whose students have had positive reactions to the new services.

TRACK PARTICIPATION OF NEW PLAYERS FOR FIRST YEAR

Record the names of the players participating in the newcomer games for each club and tournament where NPS committee members offer their services. Try to recruit a computer person in the unit to help.

RECORD EXPENSES

Keeping an accurate record of expenses for the first year is essential. Include both initial and ongoing expenses.