

Attracting New Players and Potential Students

Detroit Bridge Workshops

The 2008 Spring NABC Intermediate Newcomer Committee, led by seasoned teachers Beverly Gardner and Gail Hanson, are an energetic and enthusiastic group. Eager to give local players the “once in a lifetime” opportunity to play in an NABC, they set out almost a year in advance to start recruiting new players who had never tried duplicate.

They put together a promotional program to run in June 2007 for bridge enthusiasts who primarily play in social games at home, at social clubs, at local recreation facilities, etc. and who had not played in sanctioned duplicate games. The goal was to get them excited about the upcoming NABC and to make them comfortable about participating. A second workshop was planned to catch the Up-North Michiganders who would be home in September.

The first workshop was wildly successful. Hoping to attract 40 to 50 players, the organizers of the event were surprised when 230 non-duplicate players signed up. Event coordinator, Connie Dugger, had to turn away nearly 50 late registrants, because there was literally no space left in the building. The interest generated by this workshop resulted in a few format changes for the second workshop which was scheduled three months later. With a limit of 240 participants, the second program was at capacity two weeks before the deadline with a waiting list. The cost was twenty dollars. A “no refund after” date was established for the second workshop to cut down on last minute cancellations, and notice was given that checks received in the mail from people who didn’t get to attend would be shredded.

Any newcomer program that is this successful deserves a closer look. Here are some details about the program and the efforts to organize it. All Districts are encouraged to give this program a try.

The Workshop. The workshop was conceived as an all-day effort, featuring lessons on technical topics, then lunch, followed by a sanctioned duplicate game with "fifth chairs" (experienced players – ideally seated at each table – to answer questions, help with scoring, etc.). The program’s goal was to show the participants how much fun it was to play duplicate and win points and, of course, to entice them to play in the upcoming NABC. Don’t underestimate the importance of lunch. The idea of lunch, bridge class and bridge play make a handsome combo.

Promotion. Input was collected from a local director, a teacher, a member who still plays social bridge and a duplicate player who attends a lot of games.

Publicity was mostly by word of mouth, (although some participants did see the unit’s flyer on the web site). A large part of the success in getting the word out was due to announcements made at local games asking players to please take flyers for their “kitchen bridge” friends.

Volunteers went to all local games, classes, civic centers and senior centers to talk to the bridge groups there, and they distributed flyers. Flyers also were given to unit members who were teaching beginners and running non-sanctioned games, with a request to give their students a pep talk about attending the workshop. One of the “fifth member”

volunteers went to some social clubs in the area and talked to their players. A sixth non-committee member was very helpful, since she was dedicated to getting the word out to every one she knew in any place she went. She even put posters up in beauty salons.

Without any specific plans, the committee and its supporters talked up the event as much as possible. It appears that their attitude and motto, a plagiaristic, "You can do it, we can help," was indeed a factor.

First-time players were told that they did NOT have to join ACBL, that there would be a lot of novices who knew no more than they did and that teachers would be at the workshop to help them. The experienced duplicate players who just hadn't played in sanctioned games for points were told that this would be their chance to see what it was like.

Registration Form. The registration form stated that participation was limited and the workshop was an all day activity. It gathered basic information on the applicants (name, address, e-mail address, phone), addressed their experience levels (1. Those with zero, or little, playing experience, 2. Those with playing experience but no duplicate experience, and 3. The others – played duplicate, etc.), provided a place to name a partner for the workshop game, asked for a list of their choice of classes from 1 to 8 (assured that the committee would try to honor their first three choices), requested information on any "special needs."

Volunteers. You can't have too many helpers. Detroit was blessed with a large number of volunteers, who were eager to make the workshop a success. But, they could have used more when their promotion proved so successful. Fifth chairs (one for every two tables) and a crew specifically for set up and one specifically for tear down are suggested, in addition to the other positions outlined in this paper. It's a good idea to have name badges for the volunteers that are distinctive to assist the participants in locating someone who can answer a question or provide help when needed.

Registration. Upon arrival, each participant was given a registration folder with their name tags clipped to the top. The folder provided a place to put handouts. Each folder contained information about ACBL, local club games, area teachers, a pencil and a tri-fold convention card holder complete with three blank inserts. The folders, "stuffed" ahead of time, were organized **alphabetically** using the names on the name tags and put on long tables in the entrance. They were handed out to the participants as they walked in the door. Two helpers were assigned to each of two different tables, and the participants drifted in from about 8:15 to 9:00. (The "greeters" were asked to watch for players who needed a N/S and were assigned an E/W, so changes could be made early,) Early birds were treated to coffee in the social hall; latecomers were routed immediately into the Pavilion for the Keynote speech.

A typical attendee schedule:

- 8:45 Check-in and coffee
- 9:15 Welcome and Introduction to Duplicate with a keynote speaker
- 9:50 Sanctuary – lesson, "Two Level Openers"
- 10:40 Commons – lesson, "Opening Leads"

11:30 Blue Room – lesson, “Doubles”
12:20 Social Hall – lunch
1:00 Social Hall – game

Game Assignments. Each person received a section and table assignment for the afternoon game in their registration packets. All students were assigned WITH their partners to their classes (if a partner was included on the registration form). If no partner was listed, players were matched according to class choices. An attempt was made for "matched" partners to be in at least one class together, and they were told with a "sticky paper" in their packet in which class they should look for their partner.

Registration folders that weren't picked up indicated any “no shows,” of which there were very few. There were 0 to 99er subs (friends or students of area members) on hand to fill in. The partner of the absentee was located and reassigned a game partner as early in the day as possible. (In the first workshop, a few people went home after the classes and didn't let anyone know. The organizers just slipped in one of the 99er partners-in-waiting. For the second workshop, no one was allowed to register if they could not stay for the entire day.)

Sections of the Game. Note that there were differing thoughts about mixing the players. For a first workshop, it was important not to discourage the more experienced players by having them play with the very new, who would take longer bidding and playing. And obviously, the goal is not to make the newbies uncomfortable either. An attempt was made to have three different groups: (1) those with zero (or little) playing experience, (2) those with playing experience but no duplicate experience, and (3) the others (played duplicate, etc.). Some people on the committee thought that a mix was normal, and they should be mixed. Nevertheless, the two game format for the second workshop (repeats play in the morning; new players in the afternoon) addressed this problem automatically.

Classes and Teachers. The participants liked the idea of classes. A few people wanted to sign up *just* for the classes. The committee made sure that every teacher was a pleasant and experienced duplicate player. "Teacher" was not as important as "expert player," defined as well versed in modern techniques and able to answer any odd-ball question that came his/her way, even if it was off topic of the class.

The goal of the teachers was to find out what the participants knew and to introduce them to what the 21st century bridge player was doing in competition, so they would not be surprised at the table. Teachers were advised to try to get one new thing across to the students, but to recognize that the students were not going to give up lifetime habits in a single 45 minute session.

Prior to the start of the workshop, the committee chair kept an e-mail discourse going with the teachers to let them know the progress of the workshop, how many signed up for their classes, when to show up, and where they would be once they were assigned a room. The teachers were asked to stay all day – a friendly face for those who took their classes. Some directed in the afternoon game; some were fifth chairs. (Check with your DIC before you ask the teachers to help direct. The DIC might prefer to pick his/her assistants.)

Lessons. The eight classes all ran concurrently at each of the three sessions and were 45 minutes long. Teachers were assigned a room and students came to them. Some of the classes were a bit crowded, and experience has taught how many people these classrooms actually hold. (Some rooms lacked air conditioning, and depending on your time of year, remember to check before the event.)

Lessons focused on very basic subjects, limited in scope. The topics were: *Three- and Four-level Preempts*, *Two-Level Openers*, *The Convention Card* (filling out and using), *Mechanics and Ethics* (how to use a bidding box, alert, call the director, etc.), *Basic Conventions* (Stayman and Gerber vs Blackwood), *Doubles* (primarily takeout), *Opening bids* and *Opening Leads*. Classes were slightly lopsided. Six had 25 to 30 per session. The other two had 40 or more in a few sessions. (Doubles and Opening Leads were the most popular picks.)

For the second workshop, the basic classes were run in the morning while the repeat participants played their game and more advanced classes were held in the afternoon while the newbies played their game.

Handouts. Teachers were required to provide handouts for their classes and were asked to print double the amount of handouts than the students they expected – for friends and others who didn't take their class, but wanted to see what they missed. The extras were placed on a table in the entry where those who wanted them could pick them up.

Class Assignments. Class assignments were made based on the requests submitted on the registration forms. The participants listed their class choices from one to eight on the registration form. An effort was made to give each person their top three class choices. Note that as the registrations come in, they should be sent in order as they are submitted to the person making the assignments. Don't alphabetize. It was discovered that the partnerships tend to come in grouped. Some groups of four to eight people would sign up at the same time, and they would all want their classes together.

Location. The committee was very lucky to have an "in" with what turned out to be an excellent location for the Workshop – a church with a large social hall and a few other areas that local directors had been using for club games.

When the pre-registration got so much larger than anticipated, they were able to use the sanctuary for the keynote speech and rent five separate classrooms to handle the expansion. With the bright idea to use the sanctuary for a classroom, they freed up a nice sized social hall, set it up for a double session game, for the lunch room and coffee center and never had to use it for a class. One of the larger classrooms was used as a lounge for the volunteers and computer central. So it turned out to be a brilliant location.

Lunch. The catered lunch was well received. There were three lines and lots of helpers. Only 30 to 40 minutes had been allowed for lunch, but it went smoothly.

The Game. This was well organized ahead of time. Each partnership was pre-assigned a section and table. (Their assignment was given to them in the registration packet.) The participants played twelve pre-duplicated (to speed up the game) boards. They were

divided into three club games of two-sections each (six nine-table sections, all playing simultaneously). The students were very excited with a win of 1/3 of a point.

For each section, there were experienced helpers – “fifth chairs.” The goal was a fifth for every two tables, but as the crowd numbers grew, that approach was lost. Fifth chairs were to help with mechanics, scoring, the movement, and they were to check the pick-up slips to see if the scores were properly entered and reflected what actually happened. The plan was to make the game as much like real competition as possible. Teachers were to answer questions later if they came up.

There was a need for more “fifth chairs.” (One “fifth chair” for every two tables is a good guideline.) Many people needed help with individual scoring and the bidding boxes. North-South used travelers and East-West pickups, so that everyone could practice scoring. Shortly after the game, section winners, overall winners and masterpoints won were posted.

Memberships. Nine ACBL memberships were sold at the first workshop. Twenty-eight new ACBL memberships were sold at the second. The new members received a sheet with free plays good for one year, offered by five clubs in different areas of Detroit. The value was \$35. The coupons were good only for newcomer games. This was a very good deal for the players and an excellent way to provide prospective clients for each of these clubs. (Note that free plays were not offered at the first workshop.)

How Did We Do? Don’t forget to hand out evaluation sheets to find out what you did right (or wrong). You can learn a lot from them. Many of the sheets were filled out. Teachers were almost unanimously rated high, the food got overwhelmingly high marks as did the facility, in spite of some of the rooms being too warm. In general, the day was touted as terrific.

Follow up. The IN Committee and the unit volunteers plan to follow up the workshops with a once a month seminar of a lesson, lunch and game to keep their new players enthused about Bridge until the Spring NABC. Who knows what will follow?

Thanks to: The committee picked up the original idea from an article in *The Bridge Teacher* newsletter by Marti Ronemus on “How to Build Your Game.” It was their inspiration piece. The situation was different in that Marti was working only with duplicate players, but it got them started on a very successful road. Thank you, Marti!