

ACBL Virtual Club Games – Guest Player Policy

Due to face-to-face bridge play shutting down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACBL moved quickly to allow bridge clubs to start playing online on the BBO platform. There were three main objectives to an online social bridge club project, branded as Virtual Club Games:

- 1) Allow bridge clubs to continue to operate and generate income so that they could survive the period during which their club was shut down.
- 2) Allow our players an opportunity to play with friends from their local club. The social aspects of bridge cannot be understated. Everyone could have played in Speedball games or Support Your Club (SYC) games, but a large majority of our players want to play with the people whom they know.
- 3) Replace some of the table fee income that ACBL lost.

To implement Virtual Club Games, a list was created for each club. The list included players who had played in that club from January 2019 through February 2020. New ACBL members who listed a particular club as referring them were also added to the referring club's list. What has in effect happened is that we have turned every club into an Invitational club, but the ACBL is still awarding full masterpoints®. Why did this need to be done? Why not just let everyone play wherever they want? While allowing a totally free marketplace may have actually helped objective #3 above, it would have destroyed objectives #1 and #2. If every player could play everywhere, the friendly club atmosphere goes away and, even worse, price wars could start as clubs realize that pricing their games lower than others would attract more players. Without this invitational club concept, the ACBL might as well have just started running SYC games all day every day and forgotten about Virtual Club Games.

Virtual Club Games have worked quite well, but one major issue is that the ACBL cannot totally prevent clubs from allowing players who are not on their list into their Virtual Club Games. This is due to some BBO technical limitations, particularly when it comes to non-members (we have no way of including them on club lists). There are some genuine reasons why it might be the right to allow someone into a Virtual Club Game who is not on that club's list of members. The current policy and method of limiting players to members has been difficult to administer and, at times, has made club managers and players rather uncomfortable. After much thought and consultation with many club owners/managers and others, a new policy will go into effect.

Revised Guest Player Policy

Your online club, as an invitational club, is not required to allow anyone into your Virtual Club Game who is not a member. For Virtual Club Games, a member is someone who appeared on the particular club's list of previous players. You may, however, allow non-member players into your Virtual Club Games with the following stipulations:

- 1) You may allow anyone who has played in your club over the last 18 months who was left off your initial list of members.

- 2) You may allow your members to play with a guest partner, but the number of guest partners must be kept to less than 5% of your field, on average (the ACBL will consider weekly numbers in the aggregate, not individual games).
- 3) You are not to solicit outside players to find a partner and come play at your club. You may communicate with your members to tell them they are welcome to bring a guest partner but “selling” this too much may jeopardize your ability to stay under the allowed threshold.
- 4) Guest pairs are not allowed.

The mechanism to allow a guest player into your Virtual Club Game is to “follow” them on BBO with your VACB ID. The problem is, once you have “followed” them, that player can register for your future Virtual Club Games without visibility to you. Nevertheless, you are responsible for keeping your guest players under 5% of your total entries! To address the problem, the recommended method is to “follow” a guest player in order for them to register and then, once they are registered, “unfollow” them. You are not required to use this method, but you are required to keep your guest players below the allowable threshold.

Violations of Guest Player Policy

Repeated violations of this Guest Player Policy will lead to consequences up to and including removal of the club’s ability to run online games. Please remember that your ability to run your club games online is a privilege, not a right. None of the ACBL’s 2020 club sanctions included anything regarding running games online – any sanction was solely for face-to-face games.

While on the topic of violations, this also applies to other issues that may arise. The vast majority of bridge clubs have shown a great sense of cooperation and community and have been more than willing to assist other clubs. That being said, there have been a few incidents of what the ACBL considers as unfair business practices (examples: unreasonable price undercutting, purposefully scheduling games to mirror a competitor’s schedule, naming events to appear as a competitor’s events). Please be aware that unfair business practices (including allowing too many guest players) will not be tolerated. Depending on the flagrancy and level of these violations in the ACBL’s sole opinion, warnings, suspension and revocation of a club’s VACB rights will be considered.

Effective date: May 7th, 2020