

16 March 2021

D19 Unit Presidents,

ACBL recently sent a letter to all District and Unit Presidents announcing tentative plans for the return to face-to-face (F2F) bridge. The ACBL BOD and ACBL Management devoted much of the 10-12 March ACBL BOD meeting to this topic. Questions have arisen from some Units about how various aspects of the return to F2F play, and in particular a return to F2F Sectional tournaments, should be managed.

I would like to share with you information and considerations pertaining to the return to F2F play. Please share this information with your Unit Boards and with the clubs within your Units.

Timing for the return to F2F Sectionals. Dates in the ACBL letter are widely viewed by ACBL, District, and Unit level officials as aspirational, with a shot at being achieved in some locales while impractical for others. They are not requirements – nor can they be, given widely varying COVID circumstances and regulations among locales. Indications are that rather than being inclined to take sponsors to task should they be unable to meet expectations for an anticipated date for return of F2F bridge, players are instead interested in there being prudent planning and decision making for a safe return to F2F play, whenever it takes place. Sponsors' priority and focus for the return to F2F Sectionals (as well as club games, Regionals and NABCs) is on how to do this safely, with mindfulness of financials, and not a fixation on an arbitrary date.

An ACBL-wide policy on the timing of the return to F2F tournaments for all Units or Districts would be impractical. If a uniform policy were to be imposed, it would necessarily default to the lowest (most conservative) common denominator. Given the range of circumstances with the pandemic, vaccinations and local regulations, it would be far too much for the ACBL to develop, tailor and evolve policies for 300 disparate Units. (Texas and Florida are presently wide open, whereas there is little indication of when Washington, some other states, and Provinces would begin to allow events like club games, much less a Sectional tournament.)

One way to think about a return to F2F play is as a progression – club play, then Sectionals, then Regionals. Early on in the pandemic the D19 board discussed the merits of taking a measured approach to a return to F2F Regionals by monitoring developments (e.g. attendance and safety measures) with the return to club play, Sectionals, and with Regionals in other Districts.

A Unit board back East is not targeting its next F2F Sectional until mid-December because its players are wary of returning to the table until a substantial portion of the population has been vaccinated. A Unit board in the West is meeting with the clubs within their Unit to discuss conditions and plans and to assess how players feel about a return to F2F play under various policies for vaccinations and masks; consideration is being given to not allowing players to play in clubs without evidence of having been vaccinated. A large club in Florida that runs eight

games a week in normal times has told players not to play there unless they are vaccinated (despite Florida being wide open).

A District in a red state that has opened up has a Regional scheduled for Labor Day weekend. It is looking at requiring players to wear masks. That District, and others, have Regionals planned prior to the October 2021 date in the ACBL letter. In some of these cases, venue contracts impose large cancellation penalties after a certain deadline. ACBL Management has been asked to look at increasing the lead time to 100 days for confirmation of ACBL's ability to support a tournament.

ACBL is working on a process to determine and implement what will be workable for its role in a return to F2F play. This will account for things like the vaccination status and plans of TDs, and a fuller picture from sponsors on event cancellations, enabling a better projection of staffing requirements and the matching of resources to requirements.

Around mid-April, ACBL HQ should be putting out an update on matters related to a return to F2F play. It is anticipated that it would address criteria for issuing F2F event sanctions and safety protocols.

Expectations for safety procedures. It is impractical for the ACBL to develop, provide and update safety procedures for tournaments in 300 Units when the state of the pandemic, vaccination programs, and local regulations vary greatly. It simply does not have the time or resources to take this on, or to adjust procedures as conditions develop.

Units and clubs, in planning when and how to run events, should determine the safety procedures they will employ, guided by local (state/province/county/city as applicable) regulations on group sizes for indoor gatherings of various types, mask wearing, distancing, cleaning of surfaces, evidence of vaccination, and other relevant factors.

It seems to me that until things begin to settle into some form of normalcy, prudence would dictate that hospitality should be very lean, if offered at all.

Guidance on directorial/staffing changes. A number of ACBL TDs have been furloughed during the pandemic. Some geographic areas have few ACBL TDs – one sizeable District has only one. Travelling TDs from distant areas would incur large costs at a time when tournament finances will already be under great pressure as a result of likely depressed attendance numbers. Management has thus been asked to explore the possibility of assigning a single TD to tournaments and, as needed, filling the remainder of directing staff requirements with local directors. If this approach were to be adopted, director costs could actually be lower than in the past.

Protection for clubs. The ACBL letter communicated an expectation that Sectionals would begin to return in August (noting that this is subject to change) and Regionals would begin to

return in October. It did not establish those dates either as requirements or, given vastly differing circumstances, as applicable ACBL-wide.

Units understand their events impact clubs by drawing players away to tournaments, and that this is the case in normal times and will be so during the return to F2F play. Some Units are communicating with clubs to consider and adopt what's in their collective best interests for the return to F2F play.

Clubs are not being left unprotected. Clubs with F2F sanctions are permitted to run virtual club games on BBO. This financial lifeline is providing \$3M per month in much-needed revenue to ACBL clubs. In some cases this has yielded far greater revenues and net income than clubs realized from pre-pandemic F2F operations. Smaller clubs that do not have sufficient numbers of tables to run standalone virtual club games of their own are able to pool with other clubs in a hierarchical or peer relationship in order to participate in virtual games and gain the financial benefits.

It is universally accepted that F2F clubs are the backbone of bridge and that an existential threat to them is an existential threat to the ACBL and to the game of bridge as we know it. Candidate means to aid F2F clubs in their recovery are being identified and discussed by the ACBL BOD's Strategic Committee, the ACBL BOD, and Management. This includes consideration of the relative landscape, going forward, for F2F and Virtual clubs, the continuing presence of online club games being anticipated.

I hope this information is helpful. I will follow up with relevant substantive updates as they become available.

Please feel free to contact me with comments, questions, concerns and suggestions.

Thanks,
Tim
D19 Director