

Bridge Training and Development: Player Perspectives

Overview

We polled 95 players who either have played, or are seriously aspiring to play international bridge. We had responses from across the globe (primarily after sharing via bridgewinners.com).

Players were asked across a series of questions

- What route they took into top-level bridge
- What has helped their development to date
- What they'd like to see more of
- What their training looks like
- What motivates them

This player survey complements an NBO survey, see:

[*Training, Support and Development: Perspectives of National Bridge Organisations \(NBOs\)*](#)

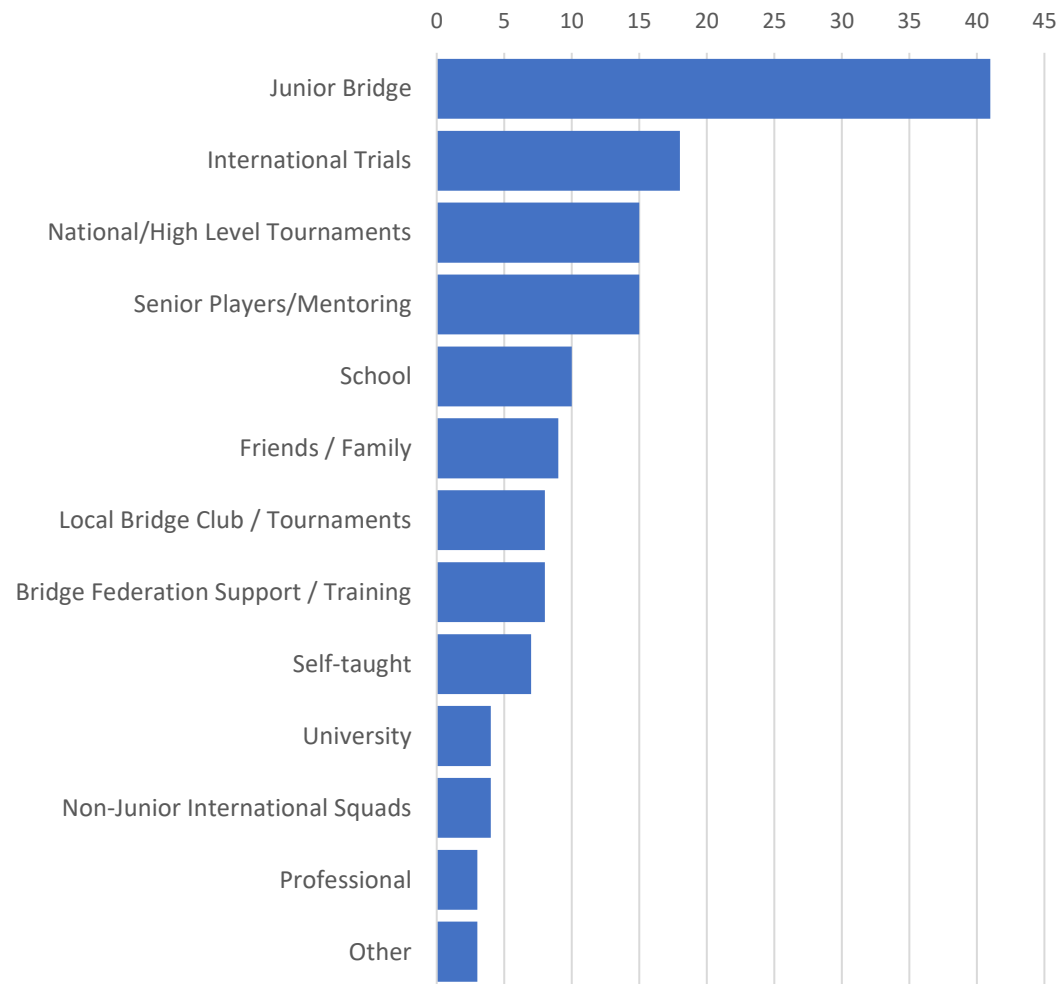
[*NBO Survey Summary*](#)

There are a number of key themes which recur across these categories:

- Players appreciate the involvement of senior players in helping players make the next step, and being accessible for guidance/advice – this was a strong theme across almost all categories
- There is no real consensus on what good training looks like, but developing strong partnerships and having good resources available were recurring themes
- Players benefit from a coach or mentor who can help them target specific development and tailor their training appropriately
- There is no substitute for playing in the highest standard available – and the internet has made this easier than before
- Development also requires commitment, hard work and the right attitude from players – the overarching theme from the responses was how much individual drive and commitment is fundamental, and the NBO is often more of an enabler of the player's success.

These all point to certain questions for the NBO (SBU in this case) in how it sets up to best support developing players as they take steps towards becoming full internationals.

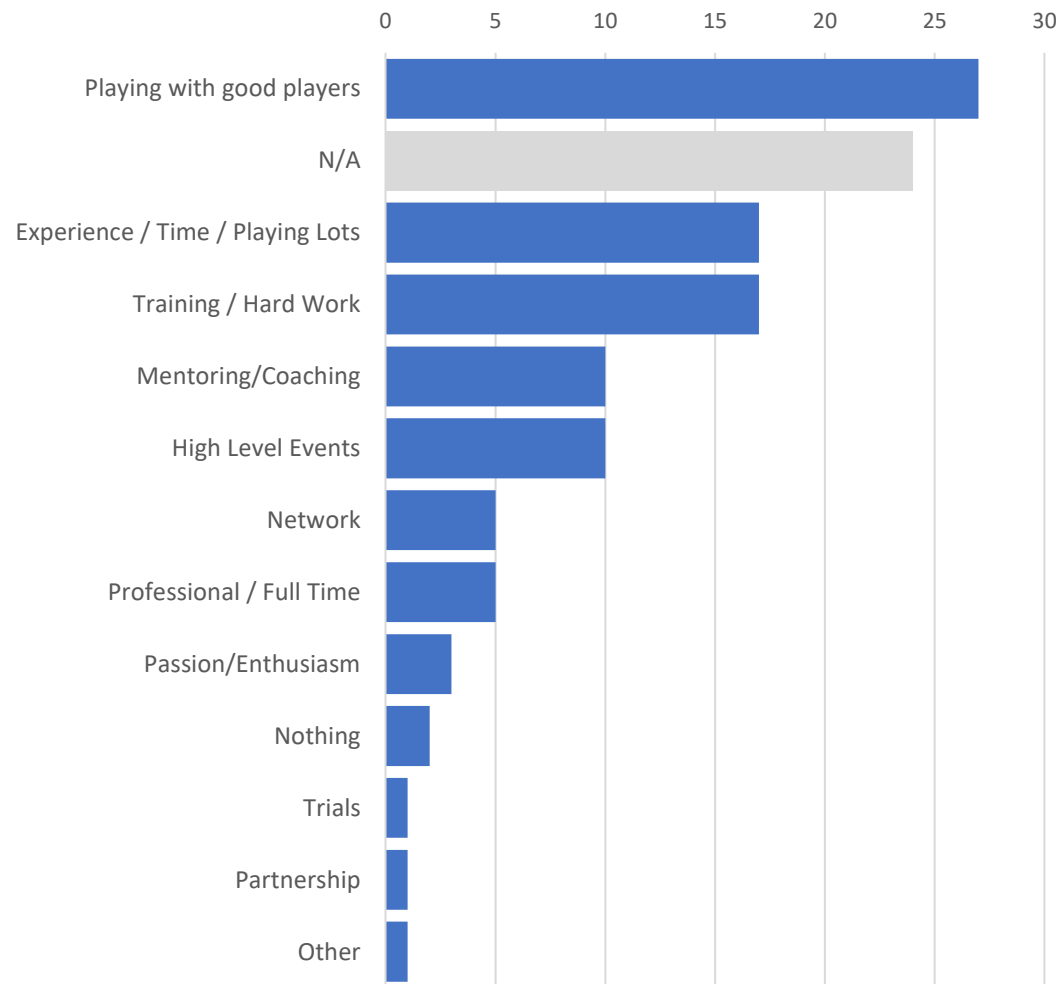
What was your path into international bridge? E.g. how did you start and how were you identified/trained/selected?



- The most common theme was respondents either are juniors or entered top level bridge via junior set-ups
- Where this wasn't the case, players had usually played well in national events, and/or won places in trial events
- In both cases, respondents mentioned the support of established players in helping them make the step – either as mentors or teammates
- The route into junior bridge was more varied – some mentioned schools, but also local bridge clubs, friends/family and university were mentioned

My best friend at school came from a bridge playing family so he taught me. Then I just played, talked and read about bridge. No formal coaching but Open players often willing to play / talk with juniors.

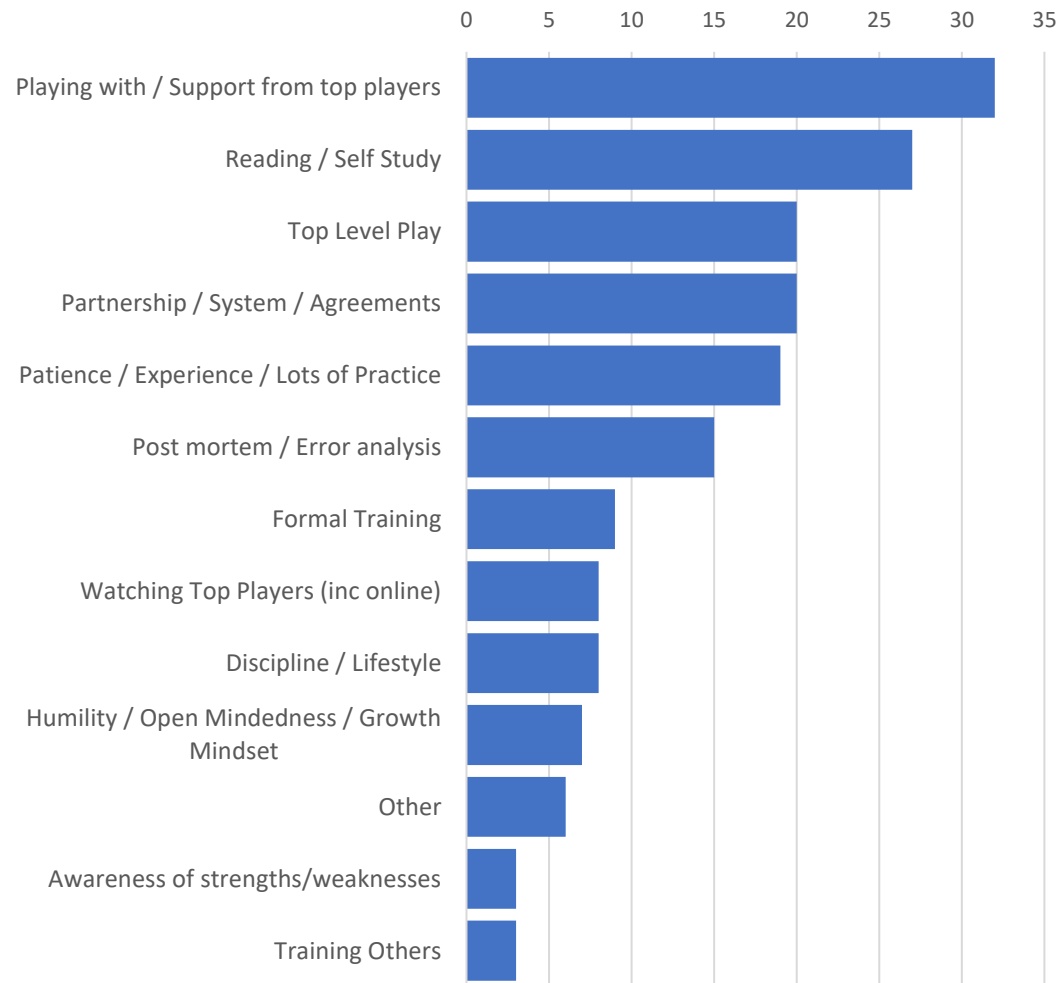
What helped you move from junior bridge into top level bridge in the other categories?



- Respondents frequently cited experience of playing with stronger players, and of top level players offering advice and guidance – either informally, or in a formal mentor/coaching role
- Many also cited sheer time to cover a lot of boards and put in hard work
- Players also mentioned playing in the highest level events possible

Brazil did not have a lot of players, so it was natural for junior players to be drafted by stronger open players to start an "internship" of sorts. I played with a World Champion (Carlos Camacho) when I was 20 yrs old, and with others down the path.

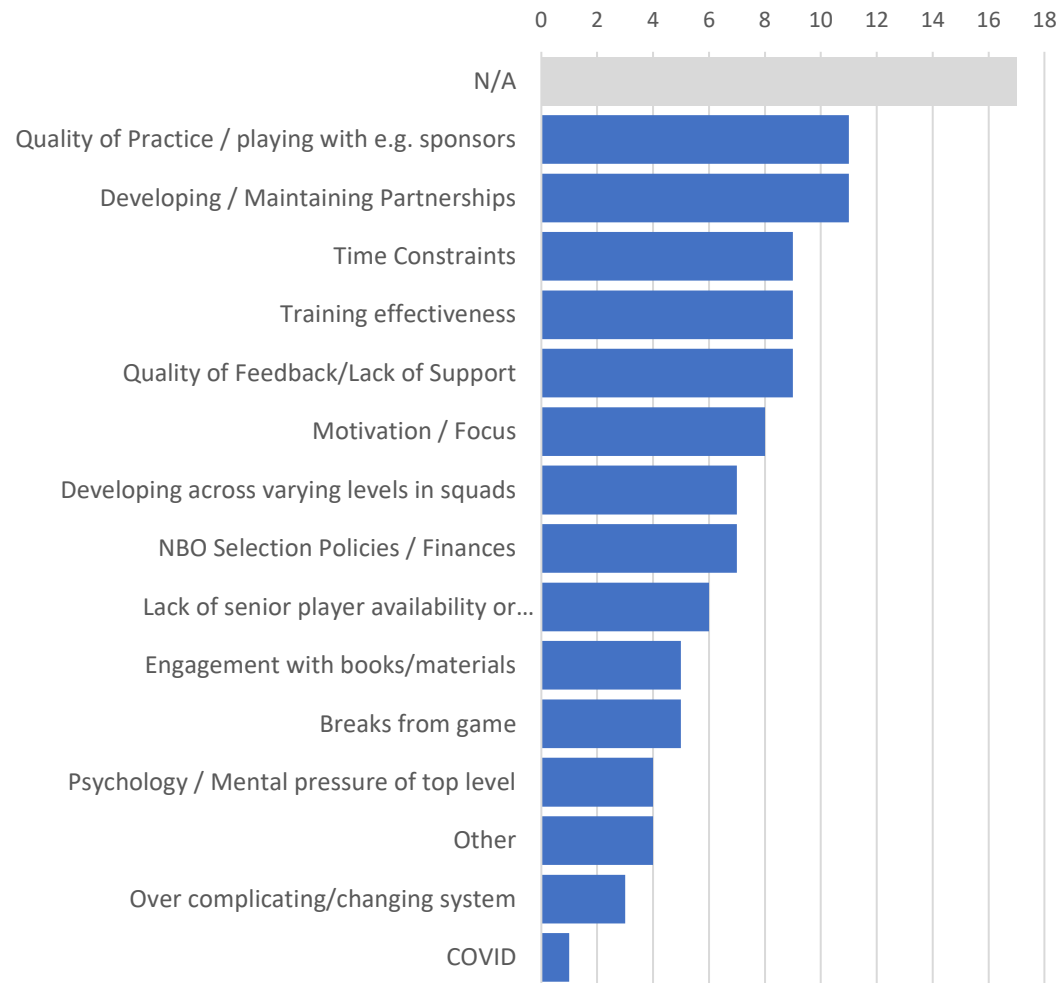
What has worked well so far in terms of your development as a player?



- Again respondents clearly recommended being able to play with or have support from top experts as an important factor in their development to date
- Many also mentioned extensive reading/self study, and putting in lots of time with partner e.g. in system discussions
- Interestingly, few mentioned formal training events

Plan, do, study, act - fixed partnership where we agreed on ambitions, goals, training effort and method, system etc. Always evaluate afterwards with learning together as a purpose. Good to practice a lot as Well

What has not worked well and why?



- Frequently players mentioned playing in poor quality games or with poor quality partners (or adjusting game to e.g. play with a sponsor) actually harmed their development
- Several respondents also mentioned challenges in forming and maintaining effective partnerships, and challenges of both needing the right time and aligned goals
- Non-professional players also indicated having the time available as a big challenge, or having taken a break from the game it was difficult to maintain progression
- It was clear that people's different learning styles affected their answers – some mentioned poor training weekend experiences, others that they struggle to engage with books and articles
- People also mentioned that training can feel untailored or irrelevant if trying to be applied to a large mixed ability group

Mid to large groups of mixed abilities where experts give talks on random topics. For example, one of our only directed training sessions before a world championship involved a top expert and author coming to talk to us about transfer splinters! What a waste of time. Most of the time, set problems are too much about solving puzzles and not about actually competing under duress against elite opposition.

SBU ACTIONS

How do we create the right high quality training opportunities for people? Can we put in place a coach or mentor who will tailor development plans to the needs of individuals or partnerships?

What would you have liked to have happen that would have helped you to progress as a player?



- The resounding theme here was that senior players being available and approachable to support discussions and pull players upwards is desirable. This could be informally or through formal coach/mentor schemes.
- Players also frequently cited desire to play more top level bridge, and higher quality training sessions, as well as the ability to build better partnerships
- In terms of NBO support, some players would like to see more funding, but also there were several comments about the culture/atmosphere created by the NBO, the lack of transparency, and the lack of any interest in player development or training pathway/programme

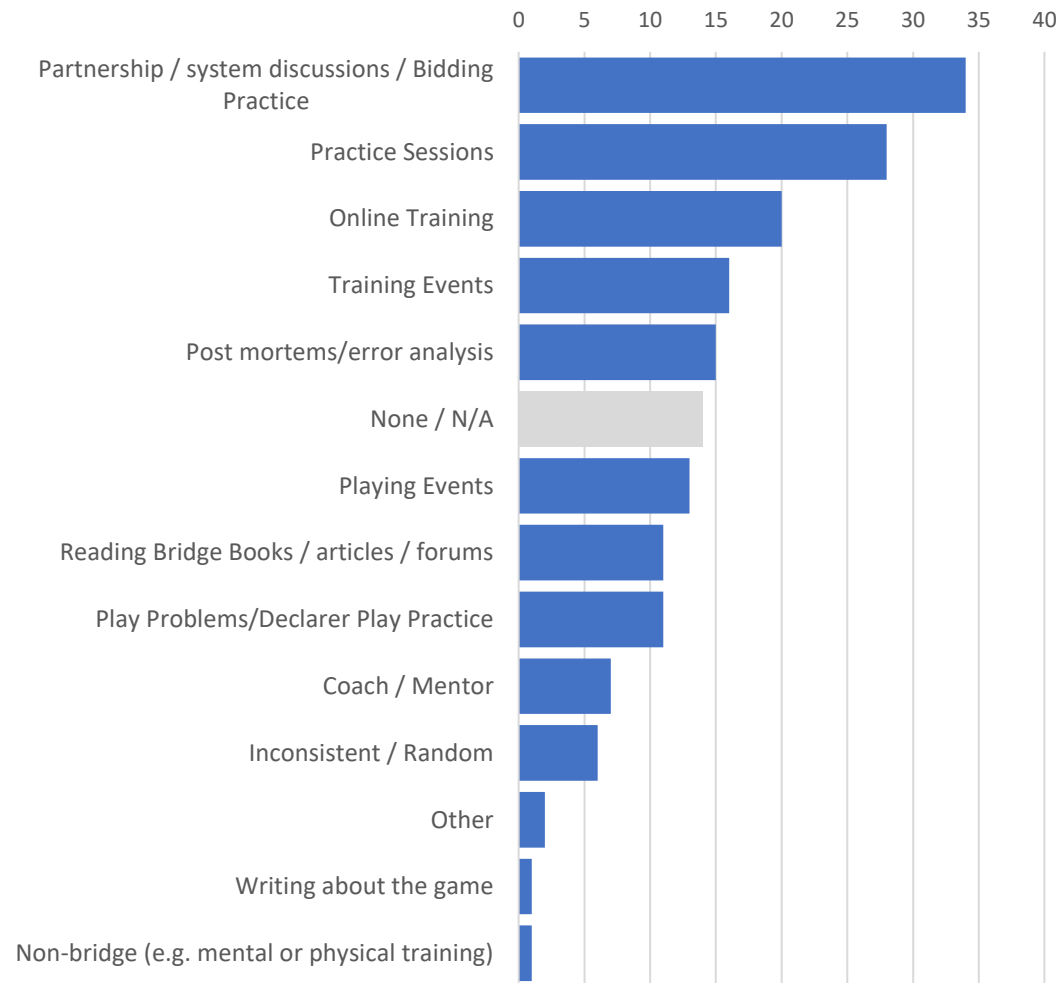
I would have liked the national body to identify promising juniors and young players and help them via training, mentoring and possibly concessions in entry fees and associated costs of playing.

A really good coach

SBU ACTIONS

Developing players benefit and want more senior player access – with players needing to be open and approachable. How do we support players to play in as much top level bridge as possible? The SBU also has an important role to play in setting the tone/culture.

What did/does your training set-up look like?



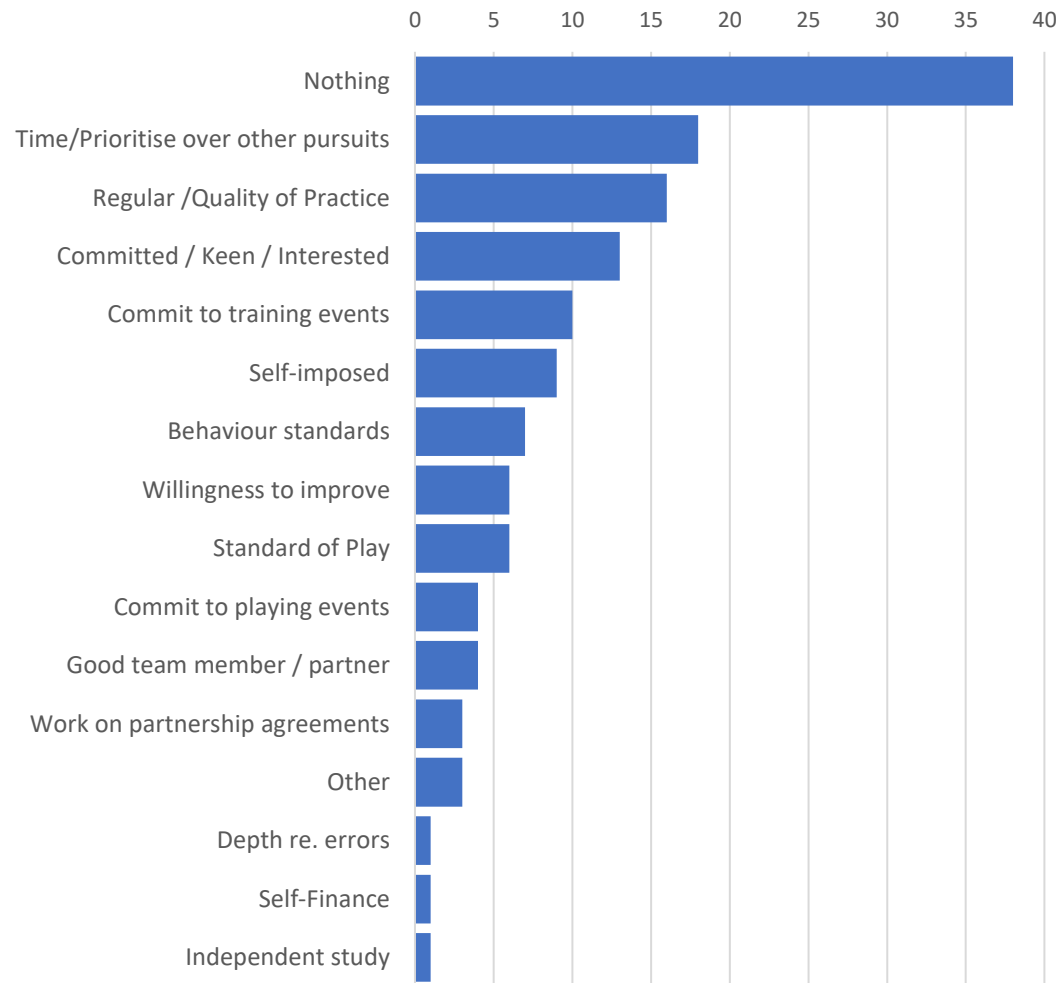
- The most common training involved partnership bidding on BBO or Cue Bids, or in system discussions with partner
- Other frequent themes were regular practice sessions (often online), and less frequent training events – though the frequency of these varied by country, ranging from monthly to twice a year
- Individual activities were less commonly mentioned, and are perhaps more sporadic in nature than being seen as part of a training set-up?

BBO bidding sessions with paid coaches, reading bridge books regularly to keep combinations fresh, playing as much against good opponents as possible.

SBU ACTIONS

Would our Scottish players currently have a training set-up? How can we best help people structure and commit to their development – this could be done by a coach who isn't actually an expert but does bring the discipline and planning?

What was expected from you? E.g. time commitment, attitude etc.



- Many respondents felt there was no expectation on them as part of their development
- Where there were expectations it was largely time-based, prioritising bridge over other pursuits, and putting in regular practice of sufficient quality
- Where people mentioned attitude, there was an expectation of commitment and behavioural standards, but this was not consistent

A professional attitude, willingness to learn, accept other players/coaches opinions. One day per week central practice and then more time for bidding practice and of course playing tournaments

SBU ACTIONS

Should we ask for formal commitments, or put in place informal ways e.g. setting up regular team training. In other pursuits there would be more formal expectation on attitude / commitment – should we be asking for the same?

What makes training and development high quality?



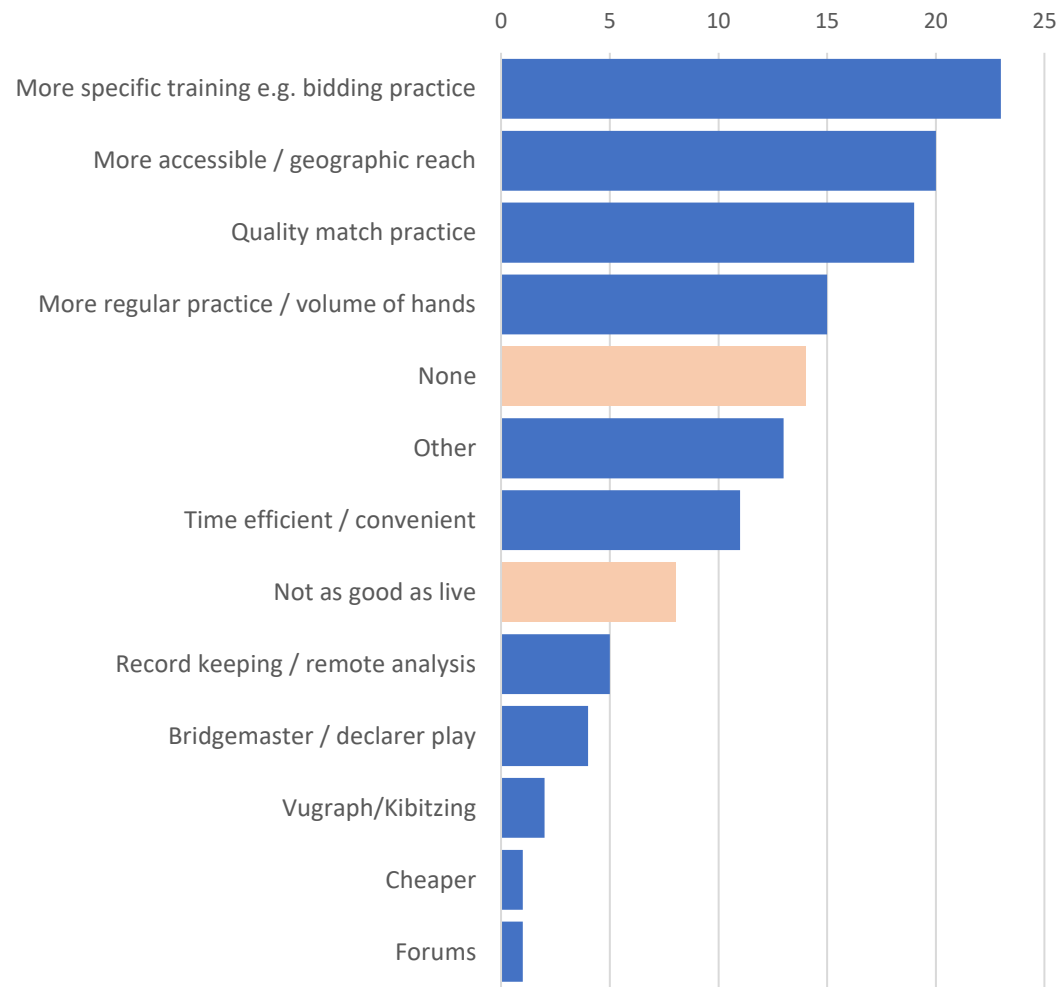
- Players felt the most important features of training and development were:
 - Having a quality teacher and/or coach who could tailor the delivery to the level of their student. Responses were split as to whether this person has to be an expert themselves, or more of an expert coach who can guide and push players
 - Players being committed and immersing themselves in the training – it was mentioned that this can be difficult online, but also that at some training events people ‘go through the motions’ rather than really bringing the right attitude
 - The involvement of senior players, as partners, helping run sessions, holding post mortem discussions, or being available for questions and opinions
- Several responses mentioned having the right attitude to go back in depth over hands

(1) Singular focus on the task at hand. (2) Having specific explicit goals for each training session. (3) De rigueur constructive (as opposed to destructive) yet frank post-session hand-by-hand debrief. (4) playing as much as possible against high quality opposition

SBU ACTIONS

We need to identify how best to harness a coach/mentor and where we can involve senior players. However we should also demand commitment from trainees to get the most from any resources used.

What opportunities has online bridge provided for training and development?



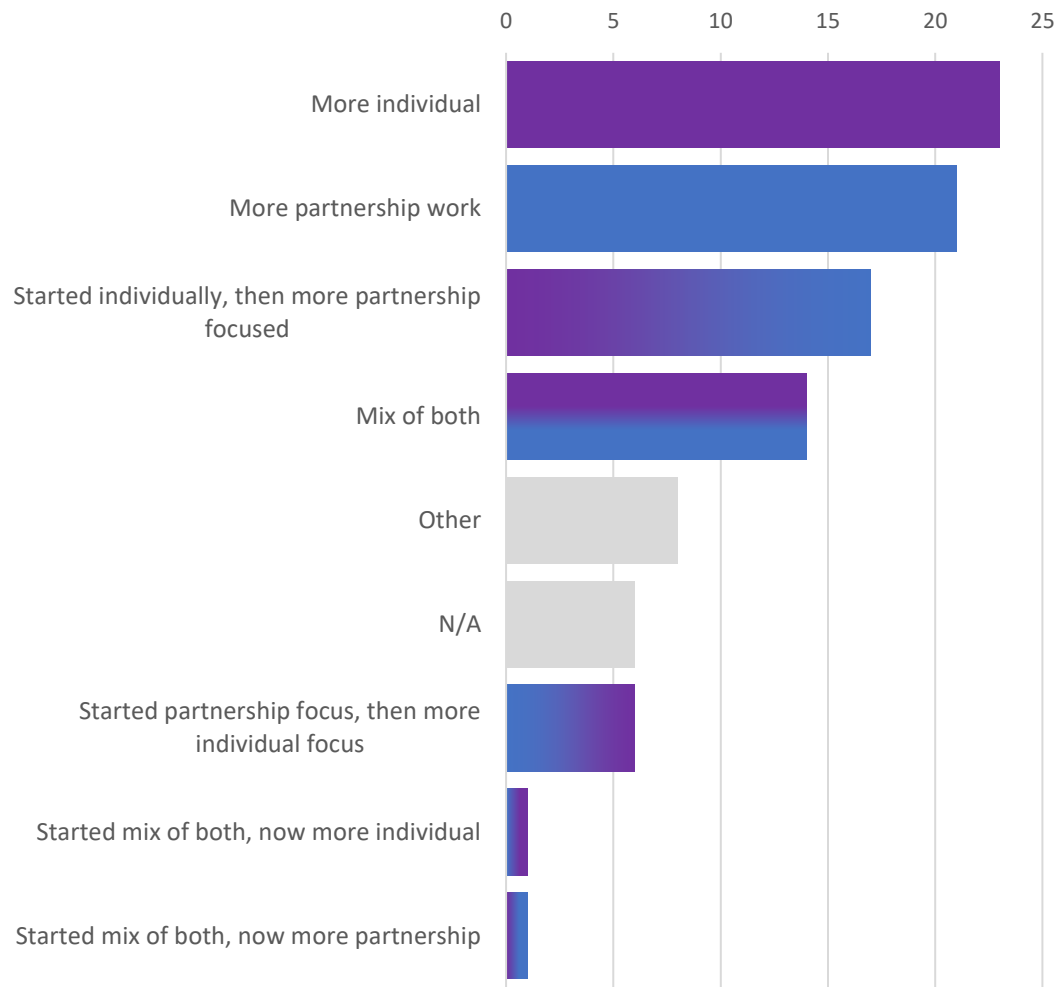
- Players most often mentioned using online tools for more tailored or specific training with hand generation and bidding practice etc.
- A main plus of online was deemed to be the accessibility – helping partnerships and players compete across large geographic distance, and also being more time efficient getting through more volume and without the need to travel
- Many players mentioned the new online events in place since COVID, and the high quality experience they offer for quality match practice – some mentioned this combined with the online records meant they could easily analyse, or a coach can look at a later date
- However a subset of players mentioned strongly disliking the online environment or that it offered no benefits over and above live

Online bridge has always been a significant part of my training and development. Given that my partner and I have often lived in different cities, it has often been the most effective platform to train over. Add into that mix a mentor who lives in another different location, then it has always been about convenience.

SBU ACTIONS

Online offers Scotland great opportunity as good players are geographically spread (including in England) and the quality available online would be much greater than regular live bridge events. Should players have to record a certain amount of e.g. bidding work to demonstrate commitment?

How much of your development was as an individual vs as a partnership? Has that changed over time?



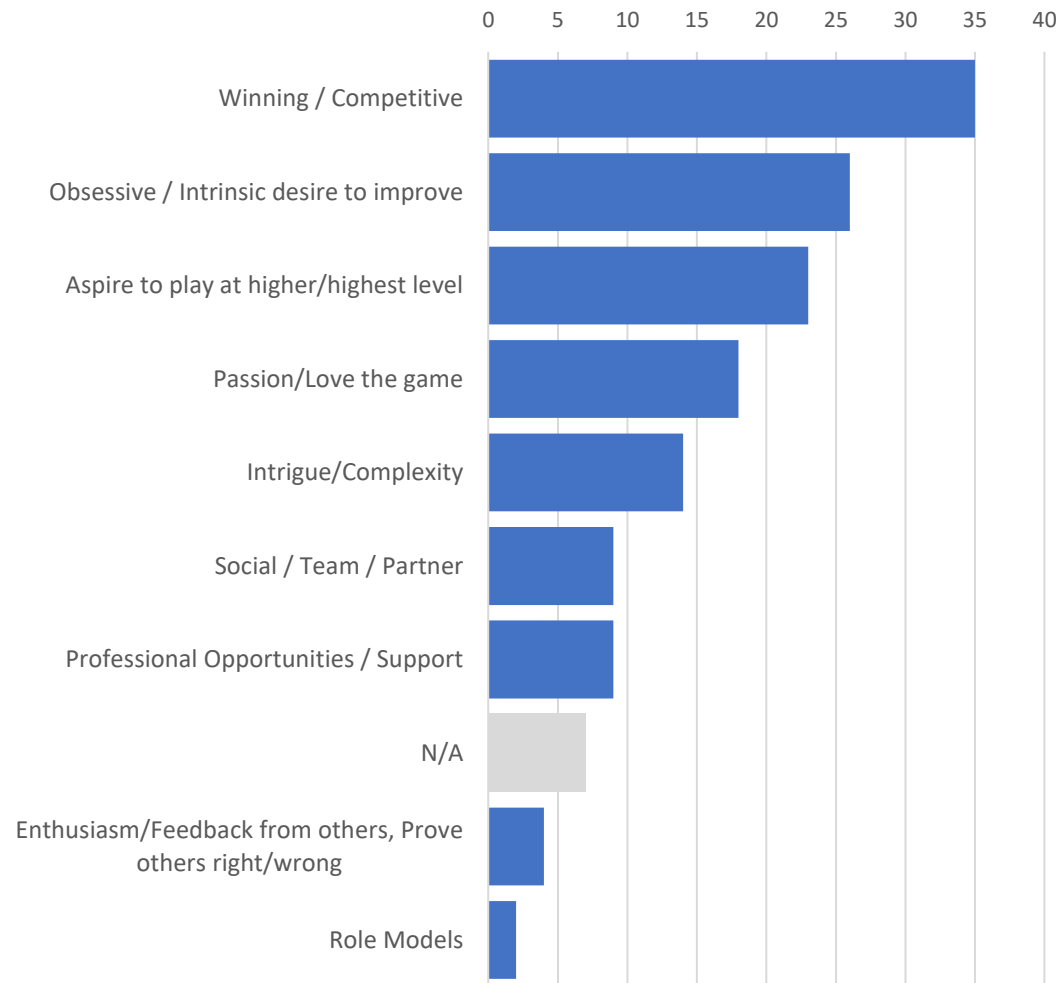
- Players were very much divided on how much of their development was **individual** vs **as a partnership**
- Where people expressed more individual development, this was often either due to their learning through e.g. books, or through mixing up their partnerships, or no serious partner being available
- It was mentioned by several players that they used to work more individually but now invest more time in partnership development

I've always played with a bunch of different partners so it's usually been as an individual. Although now that I'm a little more experienced I focus a lot more on partnership development.

SBU ACTIONS

Whatever training is put in place needs to be flexible and facilitate both individual and partnership development – we have to realistically recognise partners will develop at different rates and life will get in the way. However to achieve top performance good partnerships are key.

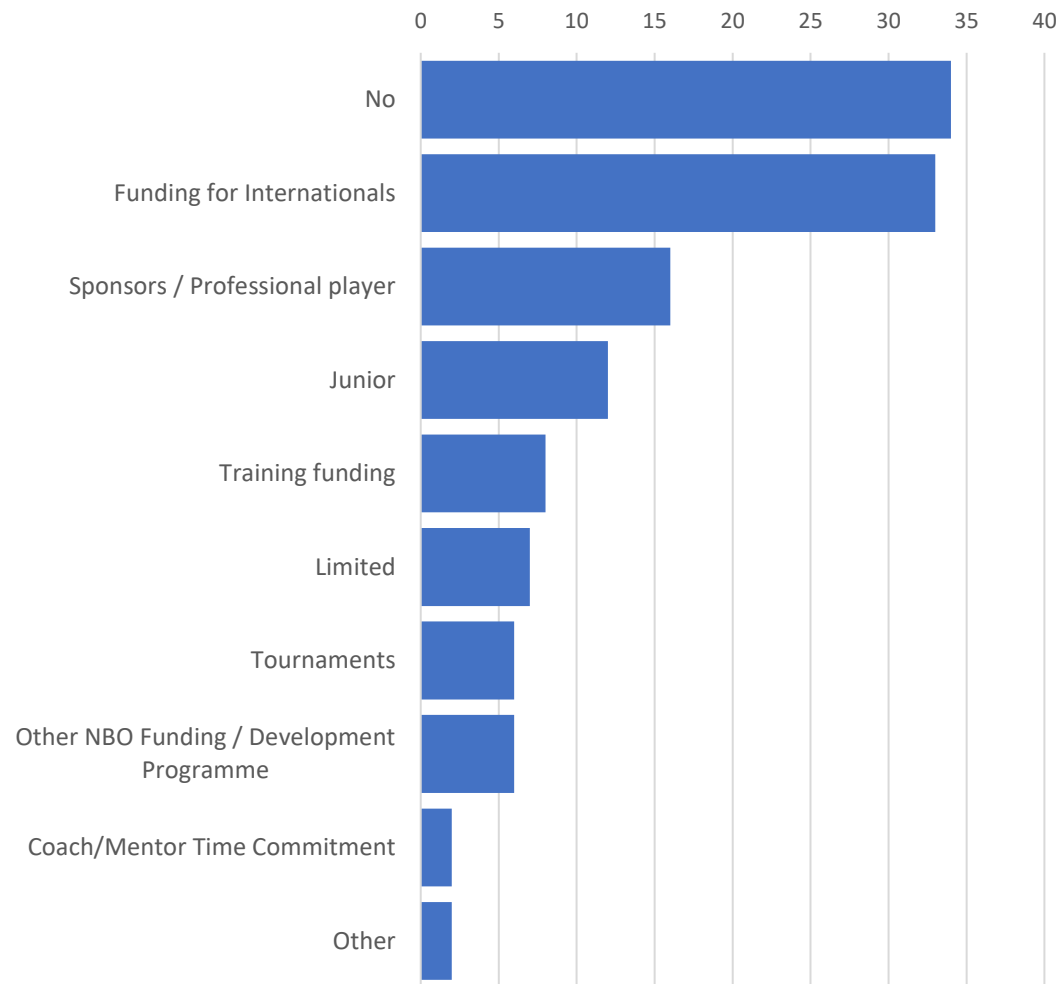
What has enabled you to be motivated to improve?



- The strongest theme was that people are motivated by competition and success
- However many also mentioned their own internal drive to improve, at times regardless of results they were motivated if they were doing the right things
- Many (particularly juniors) mentioned being motivated by their desire to play at the highest levels
- Several respondents mentioned a pure 'love for the game', with others mentioning a love of the complex nature
- Interestingly, social benefits and extrinsic motivators were less prevalent – though some players mentioned the desire to play professionally, or the desire for recognition / to prove others wrong

Obsessive will to win and competitive instinct

Did you have any funding support? If so, to what extent did it make a difference to your development as a player?



- Where people did have funding, it was primarily to cover expenses on international events
- Second most common funding was that of professional players having sponsors
- Other areas of NBO funding mentioned included funding tournament entries and training weekend expenses – particularly for Junior players who could not afford to enter otherwise
- NB The funding wasn't discussed in much detail by most respondents

We had some funding and that triggered the central practices. I think it had a great impact and is one of the reasons the Dutch have been successful the last 2 decades or so

What events would you encourage aspiring internationals to play in?

There was a resounding response of play in as many of the highest standard events you can play in:

In the UK specific events mentioned frequently:

- Spring 4s
- Gold Cup
- Premier League
- Crockfords

However there were several comments that the UK bridge scene is not sufficient and to play the best you have to be able to travel (see right).

It is important to play in stronger fields and get beaten up in order to improve, playing against weaker opponents does not help players to improve to the next level

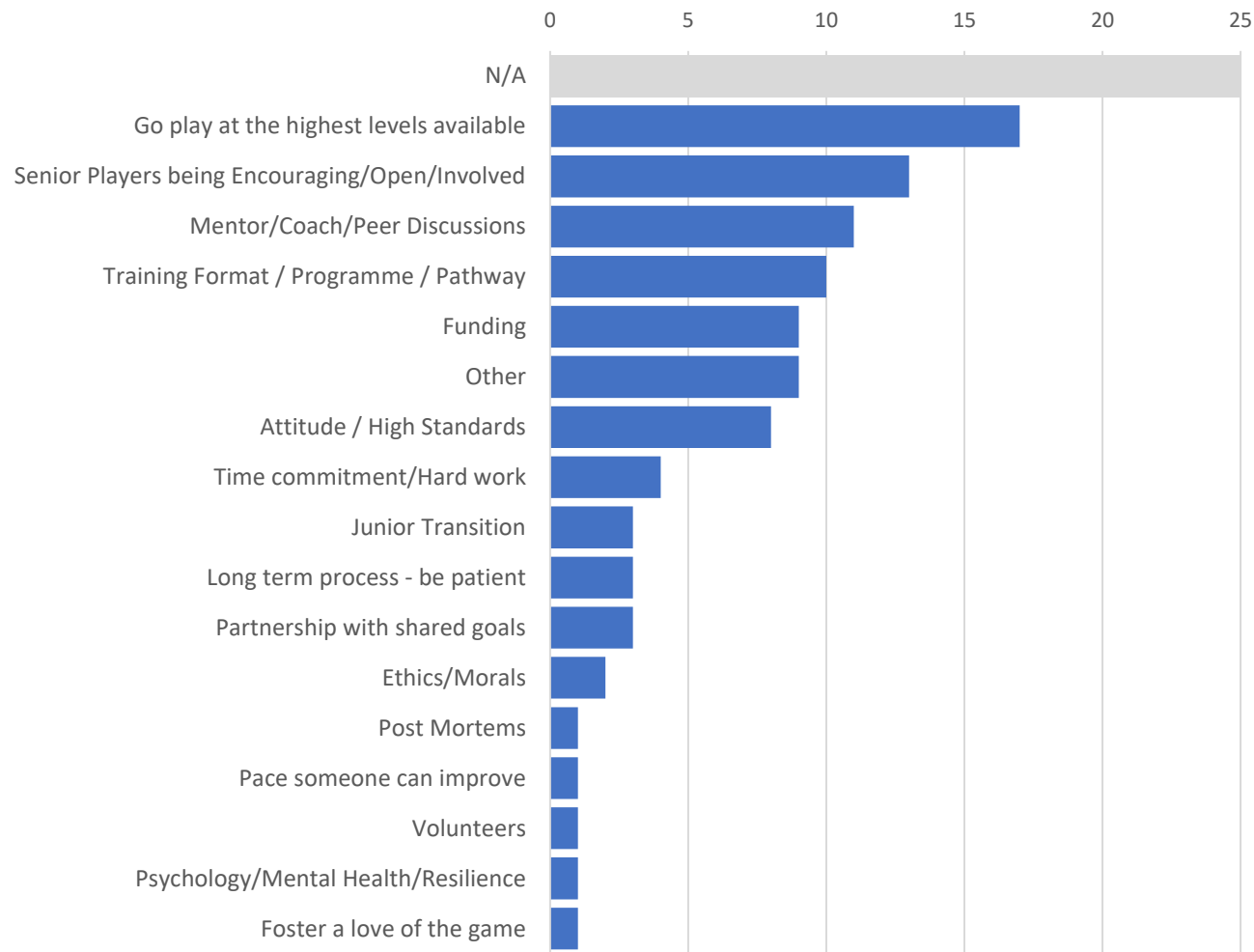
Global events mentioned frequently:

- American NABCs
- Swedish Chairman's Cup
- Pula Festival of Bridge
- German Bridge Trophy
- Open events e.g. Rosenblum
- Gold Coast Teams
- Yeh Brothers Cup

Players also mentioned the online events which are high quality and offer good quality opposition:

- OCBL and ALT tournaments
- Friendlies organised vs other countries
- Expert duplicate clubs / sessions

Any other thoughts or comments on how you best support people to become international-standard players?



- These responses largely reinforce themes from previous questions – recommending players push themselves to play at the highest level and that senior players have an important role in supporting players to develop
- For NBOs the most relevant elements were creating the right pathway and coaching support, with funding where possible
- For players there were several comments about bringing the right attitude and holding yourself to high standards at all times

What do we expect from players in order to be able to be 'international standard'. What work do they need to put in? What success should they be having? Providing a pathway and a framework will help ensure that people have a clear goal and help to provide the tools to do it.

SBU ACTIONS

We need to encourage players to always play at the highest standard available. How do we encourage senior players to play with promising new players? Do we have a chicken/egg problem re. whether our good players are really good enough!