



# Bridge: A MindSport For All

*Connects People, Challenges Minds*

## Training and Development: NBO Perspectives

### BAMSA Summary Report 2023

*Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) in partnership with the Scottish Bridge Union (SBU) has conducted research on National Bridge Organisations' (NBO) experiences of training and developing international players. The aim of the research is to explore what works well, and the challenges and solutions faced by different countries.

A survey on junior and international training programmes was sent to all NBOs, via the World Bridge Federation (WBF). The questions were open-ended and 28 NBOs responded. A total of 42 responses were received as some countries submitted multiple responses via different junior captains, trainers or NBO administrators. The full [Training Report](#) with detailed examples can be found on the BAMSA website ([www.bridgemindsport.org](http://www.bridgemindsport.org)).

### Junior Scene

Large, medium, and small NBOs have vastly different numbers of junior players. Small NBOs have 20-80 juniors, medium NBOs report 10-975 juniors and large NBOs between 50 and 4000. Many NBOs appear to be unsure of the exact figures or have provided contradictory figures (where multiple responses from the same country are given). A number of factors have been identified as having an impact on an NBO's reach such as: available resources (financial and human); cultural and social relevance of bridge (in relation to the bridge culture of each country); and the levels of engagement and support from educational and governmental organisations. The reach of each NBO may impact their ability to engage and keep juniors motivated to play.

Large and medium-sized NBOs share many of the same routes into junior bridge with a large proportion of responses suggesting that introduction to bridge from family and friends is an important recruitment avenue for juniors. School engagement, bridge camps and universities are also popular routes of entry to the mindsport. However, primary school programmes run between large, medium and small NBOs vary significantly in terms of size, scope and access to resources. The most 'successful' programmes have support from government and/or educational bodies with appropriate levels of trainers and/or volunteers to run in-class and after-school activities. For smaller NBOs, one of the greatest challenges is a lack of available resources (financial and human), funding, and difficulty with gaining support from government bodies to enable wider reaching programmes to be consistently offered and to improve engagement with the mindsport.

For large, medium and small NBOs, secondary school and some university programmes are a core part of their training and recruitment structure for juniors. However, there is a large gap between the number of programmes run at secondary school level and university level amongst the large, medium and smaller NBOs. This is partly due to differences in the resources available which tend to disadvantage smaller NBOs. Additionally, all NBOs regardless of size appear to struggle to engage universities with bridge programmes, with only a limited number of university programmes being run and maintained (relative to programmes run with younger age groups in schools). This may be due to difficulties with engaging students of this age group or because of barriers to gaining access through official channels that would both enable programmes to be put in place and allow NBOs to have the adequate resources to maintain them. Similar to teaching bridge in schools, teaching in universities tends to rely on a committed insider who can set up and run a bridge club. The regular turnover of students means that teaching the game needs to be a core part of a university bridge club and can be difficult to sustain.

Similar strategies are used for identifying and recruiting junior players by large, medium and small NBOs. However, larger and medium NBOs seem to have more flexibility utilising organic 'word of mouth' strategies due to their larger network of players. Smaller NBOs may become over-reliant on one or two individuals as gatekeepers to recruitment avenues (i.e., schools and universities). The responses suggest that, when possible, a varied combination of methods may be preferable in terms of diversifying recruitment opportunities and points of entry for juniors for all levels of NBO.

It is evident that larger and medium NBOs have broadly similar setups in terms of their organisation, including key aspects such as: coordinators, coaches, mentors and training programmes, with some relying to a greater or lesser degree on certain aspects, depending on available resources. However, a lack of resources for smaller NBOs means that often there are not adequate funds to keep coordinators in post, nor to provide coaches and NPCs, as required.

## **International Scene**

Junior programmes are the greatest source of recruitment avenues for international players across large, medium and small NBOs. However, for some NBOs successes have declined in recent years. A number of differences between the uptake of the open, women and mixed categories is evident from several responses. With some NBOs suggesting fewer women make the step up. Factors including investment in the categories, the pandemic, types of training offered, and youth engagement may be at the root of the differences outlined.

Large, medium and small NBOs regularly use trials, selection committees and selection events to identify players for their national teams. However, opportunities for individual training are limited for developing international players. Whilst some training opportunities are offered within team environments in larger and medium-sized NBOs, these opportunities are not as common in smaller NBOs which can lead to frustration for both the players and the NBOs.

Large and medium-sized NBOs have significantly more professional bridge players playing at international level. Smaller NBOs have very limited numbers of professional players, which may act as a barrier in terms of having enough top-level players with international experience who can contribute to the development or training of players from junior to elite level. Additionally, a lack of a professional pathway in smaller NBOs may lead to some of the best players leaving to seek paid opportunities to play which may result in them representing a different country (on the grounds of residency). Many amateur players may struggle to undergo an intensive training regime and playing schedule if they have a non-bridge full-time job. A lack of professional opportunities to develop a professional bridge career may act as a disincentive for some players.

### **Building a Pipeline of Players**

The responses suggest that NBOs use multiple strategies to 'build a pipeline of players' with some demographics (juniors) having the greatest level of opportunities to develop overall. Junior players that show potential, benefit from a wide range of resources in terms of training, coaching and financial aid offered by all types of NBO. However, the opportunities are sparser depending on the size of the NBO and the resources they have at their disposal. For aspiring international players that are not juniors, the opportunities are significantly more limited. Whilst some NBOs offer financial assistance, fee reductions or expenses, there is a lack of focus on this avenue for developing high-quality players, which may act as a disincentive for some non-junior players looking to make the step up.

Juniors transitioning to top-level bridge can access training, mentoring and coaching across the vast majority of the small, medium and large NBOs. However, this support tends to be unstructured, informal, and dependent on the geographical location of the player. However, the use of online platforms has facilitated easier means of practicing with top-level players that may mitigate these issues to some extent.

A range of communication methods are used by large, medium, and small NBOs, with email generally viewed as the least effective way of communicating with juniors. Juniors appear to prefer social media and messaging apps for day-to-day communication, with face to face, video-conferencing and online platforms preferred for training. Despite this, many NBOs have not adapted to these changing behaviours among younger players. However, socialising and the sense of community is a central component to keeping players interested in bridge. The benefits of travel, playing at international events, free training, a love of the game and having a competitive atmosphere to flourish may also motivate players struggling to balance playing bridge with the daily stressors of life.

### **Training and Development**

The responses from the training and development sections of the survey suggest that many changes have occurred to developmental practices in relation to the recent pandemic and other economic factors (i.e. the cost-of-living crisis across Europe). These have impacted levels of

funding and support offered to bridge organisations. Large, medium and small NBOs have adopted a hybrid style approach to providing training (and practice sessions) for players and juniors using online forums and digital tools. However, in the responses, many NBOs stress the community aspect of bridge, alongside the benefits of face-to-face training and in-person live play as part of their continued strategy, especially in relation to junior programmes. These factors are deemed to be quintessential in safeguarding the social aspects of the game and player development.

The question in relation to 'desirable qualities expected of aspiring bridge players' yields some interesting differences of opinion (and diversification of practices) across large, medium and smaller NBOs. Whilst many NBOs share a preference for high levels of attendance, willingness to learn, commitment, love of the game, hard work, and focus, very few (with the exception of some larger NBOs) enforce strict policies for these practices or player behaviours via formal contracts. Some smaller NBOs also show a relaxed approach, endorsing different strategies dependent on the age of the players. This suggests that larger NBOs may have more power, or perhaps competition for places, that enable them to have greater and a more disciplined influence on the behaviours of their young players relative to medium and smaller-sized NBOs.

For large, medium and small NBOs, common features deemed to be necessary to support 'high quality' training include: good teachers and mentors; trainer reflection; planning and documentation; flexible trainers; procedures to validate the success of training (questionnaires etc); and commitment from trainers to develop high quality materials. The lack of resources for smaller NBOs may hinder their ability to draw on high level coaches, or they may rely heavily on a small pool of instructors and trainers with limited time. It is important to note that the emerging hybrid model in the bridge community (accelerated by the Covid pandemic), and the flexibility that this brings, may help to unite smaller NBOs with high performance players. Additionally, many NBOs mention they had dissatisfaction with the level of quality control in place, suggesting this may be an important area to improve.

Interestingly, the focus in terms of developing well-practiced players is almost exclusively on developing partnerships over individual skills. However, this is a more pertinent factor when discussing junior programmes, with neophytes regularly trained with technical skills before developing their proficiency in partnerships. Partnerships are developed or put together with the help of NBOs or under self-direction. However, although there are limited numbers of 'top player' partnerships, many consist of a weaker and stronger player, or a younger and more experienced player. The importance of focusing on partnerships is not a universally held view, with several dissenting voices (particularly from Poland), where they champion developing both individuals and partnerships.

Subsidising junior programmes is a relatively contentious issue for NBOs, with an uneven split across large, medium, and small NBOs in terms of access to support from educational and governmental organisations, private donations, and Federation funding. The most common funding route is from Federations, local governing bodies, private funding from events and membership fees. However, sponsorship and donations from wealthy donors are also commonplace for large, medium, and small NBOs. It is evident from responses that there are often

significant gaps in financing for bridge-related activities. This can lead to a culture of self-funding, a higher reliance on donations and private sponsorship deals to develop young players or a reduction in the amount of training and development resources that can be offered to juniors and new players. Successful junior programmes tend to benefit from support across the spectrum of funding sources in relation to educational authorities, government organisations, local governing bodies, Federations and private donors.

### **Gaining Top Level Experience**

For large, medium, and small NBOs there are several enablers for, and barriers to, players gaining 'top level experience'. For large NBOs (with ample resources and strong support from external organisations or private funders), players are more likely to be able to access sponsorship, financial help, and a variety of opportunities to play at a wide range of national and international events. This facilitates the development of skills and relationships with other top-level players. These opportunities decrease for players in medium and smaller sized NBOs (where provision of sponsorship is almost completely absent) as funding and assistance becomes scarcer. This is reported to be due to limited financial resources and engagement from educational and government bodies. For large, medium, and smaller NBOs, besides Federation support, many of the financial enablers are privately financed with only a few responses noting support from sporting or educational bodies.

It is evident that whilst many of the NBOs offer help to aspiring players, this is an area that is highly dependent on available resources (human and financial), the needs and requirements of players, and the types of players (juniors, other, professional) looking to step up to elite level bridge (from each NBO). Countries with less well-established bridge communities and financial structures may have greater difficulties accessing funding and sponsorship. Consequently, aspiring players in these geographical locations may find it more difficult to access events and training without incurring significant personal costs. This may act as a deterrent to many junior (and other) aspiring bridge players, particularly given the difficult economic challenges (across most of the world) post-Covid, and where other significant international events have caused the cost of living to increase.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

For all NBOs, 'funding' is the most significant barrier to success. Whilst many larger NBOs benefit from access to private funding and sponsorship deals, smaller NBOs often struggle to balance resources with their desire to expand the reach of their NBO. Support from educational and government bodies can act as an enabler for 'success' for NBOs providing greater opportunities to recruit and train students from a young age. However, smaller NBOs often struggle to secure stable and consistent funding, or support from government bodies and are likely to have fewer resources available to provide extensive training. This disparity can result in recruitment challenges, inconsistent training programmes, and more limited opportunities to improve membership numbers and raise funds.

Many NBOs have also struggled to adapt in recent years to changing player behaviour (short attention span, lack of commitment), generational differences amongst players, and keeping younger players engaged. To address these challenges the vast majority of NBOs currently exploit online platforms and tools (apps, new training regimes) to engage with younger players, in addition to face-to-face sessions and events. However, these strategies are often underutilised by smaller NBOs. For larger and medium-sized NBOs proactive marketing and attempts to ‘rejuvenate the image of bridge’ has resulted in higher engagement with younger players, particularly in countries that do not have ‘traditional’ bridge cultures. Whereas for smaller NBOs being able to have the ‘right people in the right places’ to run training continues to be the greatest challenge.

In terms of the wider context of the bridge community, gender issues are generally framed by NBOs in terms of a differences in ‘calibre’ of male and female players, time commitment and the (subjective) differences between the categories (open, mixed, women’s). Some NBOs have made attempts to improve uptake of bridge amongst women, as fewer women play bridge at the top level. However, for a large proportion of NBOs gender imbalances are not considered to be an issue. Whilst overt sexism is mentioned by some NBOs, it is difficult to establish if this reflects issues specifically for bridge communities or deeper-rooted societal inequalities between men and women that are played out in a bridge setting.

Furthermore, for smaller NBOs to ‘succeed’ several strategies are suggested by NBOs, such as: adapting models used by ‘successful’ larger NBOs, and pooling resources to improve coaching, training, and mentoring opportunities for players. In addition, suggestions include ‘getting young people involved’ and a greater level of collaboration with other NBOs. Whilst there are multiple avenues for smaller NBOs to take, consistent financial support is of vital importance for the development of smaller NBOs. These factors may directly impact the extent to which NBOs can support players to become international players, with resources dictating the types of training, mentoring and financial aid that can be offered.

**A follow-up [Practice Implications Report](#) can be found on the [BAMSA website](#). It provides an overview of the implications of these findings for the Scottish Bridge Union, which is likely to be relevant for other national bridge organisations.**

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