

International Players Questionnaire

1. Background

A survey was sent out in August 2023 to 80 players who have played or trialled for Scotland or in the First Division of the National League over the previous five years. 34 responses have been received (27 men and 7 women). As such, it is important not to put too much weight on some of the individual numbers but when aggregated they provide valuable insights.

This is a preliminary analysis, examining the questions from the survey that look at the direction that the respondents feel should be taken.

2. Classification of Players

The respondents were classified as follows:

No international experience	Level 1	3 people
Fewer than ten international appearances	Level 2	12
Ten or more international appearances	Level 3	8
Regular international appearances for over 20 years	Level 4	11

3. Summary of Findings from Core Questions

1. Scotland's ambitions for the next 5 to 10 years (Open Team in the European Championship)

The players with little or no international experience (Levels 1 and 2) were generally optimistic that the Scotland Open team could reach the 2nd quartile or qualify.

Experienced internationalists (3 and 4) were less optimistic. There were 3 who thought we had no chance at all of improving, at least with our current players, and none who thought we could qualify.

In total, the high majority of answers put Scotland in the 3rd quartile or 2nd quartile (top half but not qualifying). Amongst L1 and L2 players the median target was 2nd quartile while for L3 and L4 players it was to move up to the 3rd quartile. Several people expressed the view that with our current players we have no hope of improvement.

There was more positivity around the Women's team, where top half was expected and Venice Cup qualification seen as possible. There were reservations expressed about our capability to field competitive teams in both the Mixed and Women's categories at the same championship.

2A. What people have found most useful in improving their game

The strong theme coming through was that the most common way to learn was from better players, either:

- being mentored
- playing them as opponents
- accessing their advice
- reading their books, articles and analysis
- watching them playing each other

All three respondents who have been part of a squad (GB) listed it as a factor in their improvement

A willingness to work on your own game and your partnership came through as significant.

2B Things least of help to the development of the players

4 of the 11 were about playing poor quality bridge.

3 were about different aspects of the trial and selection processes.

4 related to breaking through into the upper levels of Scottish bridge: the difficulties in gaining recognition and acceptance.

Our players need to play better quality bridge, and there is a limited amount that the SBU can do about that (such as recommending certain events, and organising good quality events online). On the other hand, the problems with the trials and the unsupportive, or even negative environment that aspiring players can find themselves in risks Scotland not making the most of its small pool of keen up-and-coming players.

2C Experience of Mentoring and Qualities Needed

8 players said they had been mentored and all saw it as positive and helpful.

Most contributed their thoughts on what would make a good mentor:.. Someone who is:

- Temperamentally suited to the role
- Knows what they are talking about
- A good communicator
- Supportive of the pair and in tune with their approach
- Will to do the role for a considerable period of time.

2D What events should we use to develop our good players?

There were many comments to the effect that what was needed was good opposition and encountering different styles and systems.

Through having had the opportunity, L3&4 players were much more likely to mention playing in representative international events. A range of Scottish events was mentioned. Most L3&4 players led with events outside Scotland as being the most helpful.

There were more mentions of playing in English events than Scottish ones and the Spring 4s was the individual event most often specifically mentioned in the comments.

2E&F The value of one-off coaching sessions and what people would like

There were few comments on this subject and those who had participated in one-off coaching sessions have had a mixed experience. The general sense was that these have rarely been offered in Scotland, and some people have benefited through seeking them out elsewhere.

For what people would like, hands on advice and analysis from experts were the most common themes, which echoes the desire for access to mentors/experts in 2A. Card play, defence, slam bidding and competitive bidding came up multiple times. In total, there is a wide range of useful suggestions here, some for aspiring players in general and some for our leading pairs, tailored appropriately for their audience.

3A How effective are trials in identifying our best pairs?

Three messages came through from the L1&2 players.

1. Some think trials are the best, or indeed only, way to select a team
2. Many think that there need to be long trials to provide valuable results
3. Some think that the trials system is failing us

From L3&4 players, who have a history of selection through trials and then playing in the resultant teams, there are four messages:

1. Many think that trials are a poor basis for selection, though they may provide some input into the discussion.
2. Many highlight issues with both pairs or teams trials
3. A few support long trials as the best approach to get meaningful results
4. One believes that we are currently in a hopeless situation

Scotland's results in recent years, especially in the Open category, support the view that we are not selecting our best pairs. This is partly a vicious circle, with the strength of the event leading some pairs to prefer to play in other categories, giving us a smaller and less experienced pool to select from.

3B Could the format be changed to improve that?

The majority of L1&2 players are happy with the trials system, with some suggestions for small improvements. Some would like to take a different approach.

The majority L3&4 players who commented were opposed to the continued use of trials as the primary method of selection, preferring the creation of a squad and selection from within that. Some were willing to continue with trials but wanted them to be modified to ensure that weak pairs are not included or that there is no guarantee of selection. Two wished to continue as are.

On the whole, less internationally experienced players favour trials while those with extensive international experience believe that they have not resulted in Scotland picking its best team for many years. The more experienced players believe that at the very least the quality of a trial has to be kept high, or that trials should be dispensed with partly or altogether in favour of an assessment of performance in a range of major events.

3C Other than the Trials and the National League, what events should the selector consider?

Across the board, the Scottish Cup and the Winter 4s are considered the most significant Scottish events. It is to be expected that if any event is highlighted as significant in the selection process then more of our top players will participate in it.

Excluding the Scottish Cup and Winter 4s, L1&L2 players see more value in Scottish events than those in L3&L4.

L3&L4 players see more value in the Gold Cup, the Spring 4s and international events than L1&L2.

Extending the range of events under consideration would mean that pairs had more opportunities to show what they can do, and that the selection would be made on the basis of broader evidence.

3D How should past international success be taken into account when selecting?

There is general agreement that past international success is significant. The L3&4 players feel this more strongly. In the Open team we have had little that would be considered success in recent years so this tends to apply more with the Women's and Senior teams. Amongst some L3&4 players there is a view that international events, especially the longer and tougher ones, are different from domestic events and that it takes time to learn how to play in them. This is part of the challenge of how we can develop our pairs without creating a closed shop.

3E How important is it for success that there are long term partnerships, and should selection processes have a bias towards them?

3E Analysis

L1&2 players were divided on the importance of long term partnerships.

L3&4 players valued long term partnerships highly, where the partnerships had a history of success, of continued work, or of improvement. Many commented that completely new pairs have a lot of work to do to be ready for international competitions. Many commented that a history of failure was as big a negative as a history of success was a plus.

6A. What benefits or issues would you see with the creation of an international squad?

A majority of the players saw advantages for training, team building and, if it is done right, in helping juniors and less experience players to progress. The main issues were around the creation, or appearance, of a closed shop, which would be demotivating from those on the outside.

A number of issues were raised about the practicalities, including the amount of time required of participants, the impact the squad would have on national events and how it would work when players might be interested in multiple categories with different partners. Should a squad approach be adopted it would be necessary to carefully consider these issues. However, there was a strong feeling, especially amongst L3&4 players that it was worth giving it a go, and that it seems to be the best chance of improving our chances for the future.

6B How would you go about forming and renewing the squad?

Only one player mentioned the holding of a trial to decide on squad membership. The high majority saw the decision on squad membership resting in the hand of the selectors/international convenor, guided by results and the commitment shown by the players. It is recognised that this could be problematic – it relates to the 'closed shop' concern in 6A and to those in 2B around a culture that can be negative towards aspiring players. A balance needs to be struck with the selectors picking the bulk of the squad but with a mechanism whereby some pairs can win a place (subject to committing to the time and activities).

6E How much time commitment should players make per year?

There is no common answer, but it is clear that everyone expects the pairs to be working round the calendar with a mix of activities and a commitment to participate in major events.

4. Conclusions

1. The current approach is not working and has very little of chance of starting to work.
2. Selection should be based upon performance in a range of internal and external events.
3. If trials continue to be run they should just be one factor in selection.
4. We need to work with our best, keenest and most promising players to improve their standard and readiness to play in the toughest events.
5. Our players need to be playing against good opposition from not just Scotland or even the UK, but more broadly in order to improve their skills and learn to cope with other styles.
6. There is support for a squad system which will provide coaching and the opportunity to play in tough matches and events outside Scotland in return for commitment and willingness to learn.
7. We need to be working to support players to transition from Junior to Open, but equally to help other keen but less experienced players to develop into contenders for our national teams. This could be aided by having a two level squad – one for those in current contention and one for future prospects.
8. Over the next five to ten years Scotland should aim to move into the third quartile of the Open in the European Championships, and to be eyeing the second quartile. This improvement should lead to improved Camrose results, with the team tending to finish in the top four or even three.
9. We should be aiming to see the Women's team consolidate in the top half of their event with more regular appearances in the Venice Cup.

5. Analysis of Responses By Question

1. Scotland's ambitions for the next 5 to 10 years

L1&2

To win Camrose Series events. To qualify for knockout stages of European/World events	QUAL
To be a team which top countries/players treat with respect	COMP
To be competitive	COMP
Have a competitive base (at least 5 or 6 pairs) in each category. Europeans: Open – above 2/3 mark. Women, Senior, Mixed – top half	COMP
Top half of the field. Top 2 in the Camrose	50
Top half of the field in all categories	50
Aim for respectability	COMP
Competitive in all categories (no lower than 2/3 down in rankings)	COMP
Developing young (school age) players. Improving experience levels of our teams	Youth
Realistic chance of qualification from European events	QUAL
Mid table would be a huge achievement for Open	50
Significant improvement in international results	COMP

L3&4

Top half of Camrose at least half of the time. 3 rd quartile of European Open. Top half of European U25 and U31 events.	3rd
European Open: Respectability. Other Europeans: to win. Camrose Series: to win.	COMP
Above average finish in European Open	50
Open Euros- aim for top 2/3 initially	3rd
European Open: 3 rd quartile in 5 years, 2 nd quartile within 10. Women and Seniors: top half with occasional qualification	3rd
Be realistic – our Gold Cup winners, world class pairs have gone. We have had false expectations since we lost our best team after Pau.	NO
We have no configuration of players that could be competitive against the many pro teams	NO
Build the open team from youth with the aim of qualifying for world championships	Youth
To be competitive against slightly above average teams	COMP
Get to the 3 rd quartile in Open. Top half for Women.	3rd
Realistically, next 5 years be in top 40% of Seniors and top 50% of Open.	50

Analysis of Comments on European Open Team

Of the twenty players that responded, there was a wide range of opinions.

	1 & 2	3 & 4	All
To be competitive/respectable:	6	2	8
No chance of meaningful improvement with current players	0	2	2
Rely on youth development	1	1	2
3 rd quartile	0	4	4
2 nd quartile/top half	3	3	6
Qualify for worlds (1 st quartile)	2	0	2

To be 'competitive or respectable' may cover a fairly wide area but probably means being not far above or below average. Players with more experience tended to make more specific statements. If we were to divide the 'competitive/respectable' answers between 3rd and 2nd quartile then the table would read:

	1 & 2	3 & 4	All
No chance of meaningful improvement with current players	0	2	2
Rely on youth development to improve	1	1	2
3 rd quartile	3.5	5	8.5
2 nd quartile/top half	5.5	4	9.5
Qualify for worlds (1 st quartile)	2	0	2

The players with little or no international experience (1 and 2) were generally optimistic that the Scotland Open team could reach the 2nd quartile or qualify.

Experienced internationalists (3 and 4) were less optimistic. There were 3 who thought we had no chance at all of improving, at least with our current players, and none who thought we could qualify.

In total, the high majority of answers put Scotland in the 3rd quartile or top half (but not qualifying). Amongst L1 and L2 players the median target was 2nd quartile while for L3 and L4 players it was to move up to the 3rd quartile. Several people expressed the view that with our current players we have no hope of improvement.

There was more positivity around the Women's team, where top half was expected and Venice Cup qualification seen as possible. There were reservations expressed about our capability to field competitive teams in both the Mixed and Women's categories at the same championship.

2A. What people have found most useful in improving their game

L1&2

Bidding practice

Discussing hands played

Working hard

Playing better players

Playing at the highest level

Playing people from outside Scotland

Mentoring from an expert

Playing with a better partner

Playing in the Camrose (needing to deal with pressure)

Playing in the trials

Access to experts for advice

A committed mentor

Access to experts for advice

Access to experts during hand reviews

Practice matches v int teams (new systems/styles from Scotland)

Reading bridge books (especially card play)

Expert reviews of hands after matches (Liz)

Playing in good events and in top teams

Playing in high quality events

Playing against top opposition

BBO bidding session with pre-programmed criteria

L3&4

Reading

Playing with strong players

Playing against strong players

Watching strong players

High quality hand analysis and discussion

Using the internet to get access to good information

Coding

Bidding practice

Post game review

Hard work

Better oppo

Better oppo

Outside Scotland

Mentoring

Better partner

Higher pressure events

Better oppo

Expert advice

Mentoring

Expert advice

Expert input to review

Outside Scotland

Reading

Expert input to review

Better oppo

Better team

Better oppo

Better oppo

Working on partnership

Reading

Better partner

Better oppo

Watching experts

Post game review

Reading

Playing in good competition	better oppo
Watching good matches	Watching experts
Training from a top class player	Training
Working with a mentor	Mentoring
Partnership bidding practice	Working on partnership
BBL junior squad	Squad
Playing in tough events	Better oppo
Playing against good players from other parts of the world	Outside Scotland
Reviewing hands with partner	Post game review
Bidding hands with partner	Bidding practice
Watching top class matches	Watching experts
Reading	Reading
Being willing to develop and learn a system	Working on partnership
Building a long term partnership with well-discusses understandings	Working on partnership
Playing good quality opposition	Better oppo
Good quality training sessions	Training
Close study of Deep Finesse analysis	Post game review
When I was keen and worked hard	Hard work
Watching, listening, talking to top players	Watching experts
	Expert advice
Learning from the best players	Expert advice
Playing with better players	Better partner
Self study and willingness to learn	Hard work
Committing to a partnership, playing, building a system & agreements	Working on partnership
Constructive support from senior players	Expert advice
Playing outside Scotland	Outside Scotland
Coaching sessions	Training
BBL squad	Squad
Reading	Reading
Listening to and playing better players	Expert advice
Mentoring	Mentoring

BBL Squad

Squad

Reading

Reading

Listening to better players

Expert advice

Playing better players

Better oppo

Reading

Reading

Analysis of comments on how the players improved

	L1 & L2	L3 & L4	All
Post game review	1	3	4
Playing better opposition	6	5	11
Playing in high pressure events	1	0	1
	6	5	11
Playing outside Scotland	2	2	4
Mentoring	2	2	4
Playing with a better partner	1	2	3
Playing with better teammates	1	0	1
Being part of a squad	0	3	3
	4	7	11
Reading	1	5	6
Expert advice	2	5	7
Expert input into post game review	2	0	2
Training	0	3	3
Reading books, articles and analysis	1	6	7
	5	14	19
Watching experts	0	4	4
Working hard on your partnership	0	3	3
Partnership bidding practice	1	1	2
Post game review	1	3	4
	2	7	9
Working hard on your game	2	2	4

The strong theme coming through was that the most common way to learn was from better players, either:

- being mentored
- playing them as opponents
- accessing their advice
- reading their books, articles and analysis
- watching them playing each other

All three respondents who have been part of a squad listed it as a factor in their improvement

A willingness to work on your own game and your partnership came through as significant.

2B Things least of help to the development of the players

There were very few comments on this question:

Poor quality bridge

Playing non-serious games with a partner who doesn't appreciate the benefit of treating all sessions as important

Too much social bridge

Too much mediocre bridge

Poor quality opposition and competition in Scotland

The trials and the selection process

Poor selection decisions (sometime passing up on the chance to give experience, sometimes sending a team that is too weak to benefit)

Trials (resulting in the best team not being picked)

Teams trials make it very difficult to break through

Lack of support for aspiring players

Being unable to find a compatible partner and teammates

People made strong assumptions about my ability/potential based on errors I made at the table – they would assume then I wasn't any good and didn't recognise that I was on a very steep learning curve. I was put in a box as not a competent enough player for a long time before people would finally accept I had potential to get on national teams.

Insufficiently welcoming environment for aspiring players

There is a lack of supportive/collegiate/peer-to-peer approach to bringing on developing/aspiring players within Scotland

Analysis of things least of help to the development of the players

4 of the 11 were about playing poor quality bridge.

3 were different aspects of the trial and selection processes.

4 related to breaking through into the upper levels of Scottish bridge: the difficulties in gaining recognition and acceptance.

Our players need to play better quality bridge, and there is a limited amount that the SBU can do about that (such as recommending certain events, and organising good quality events online). On the other hand, the problems with the trials and the unsupportive, or even negative environment that aspiring players can find themselves in risks Scotland not making the most of its small pool of keen up-and-coming players.

2C Experience of Mentoring and Qualities Needed

9 players said they had been mentored and all saw it as positive and helpful.

25 commented on the qualities that would be needed:

Temperamentally suited - 14

Patience	7
Supportive	2
Calmness	1
Good temperament	1
Truly approachable	1
Sense of humour	1
Honest	1
Non-judgemental	1

Knows what they are talking about - 13

Bridge playing ability	7
Knowledgeable	4
Wisdom	1
Insight	1

A good communicator - 12

Give constructive feedback	3
Good at explaining	2
Coaching not instructing	1
Non-judgemental	1
Positive	1
Fair	1
Constructive	1
Open minded	1
Good at listening	1

In tune with the pair and their approach - 9

Able to identify strengths & weaknesses	3
Accept their approach/philosophy	2
Understand their motivation	1

Know the pair and their needs	1
Focussed on pair, not individuals	1
Respect the pair	1

In it for the long term - 4

Have the time to spend	3
Commitment for a long period	1

2C Summary

A good mentor is someone who is:

Temperamentally suited to the role

Know what they are talking about

A good communicator

Supportive of the pair and in tune with their approach

Will to do the role for a considerable period of time.

2D What events should we use to develop our good players?

International	L1 & 2	L3 & 4	Total
Europeans	1	2	3
Camrose	0	1	1
Olympiad	0	1	1
General		2	2
			7
Scottish			
Scottish Cup	1	2	3
Winter 4s	1	2	3
SOL	2		2
National League	1	1	2
Edwin Berry	1		1
Gold Cup		2	2
Trials	2		2
			15
(Not good enough)	0	2	2
England			
Spring 4s	2	5	7
Gold Cup	1	1	2
Brighton	1	1	2
Eastbourne	1	0	1
General	0	2	2
			14
Abroad			
Chairman's Cup	0	2	2
Killarney Congress	1	0	1
American Nationals	1	1	1
Polish Senior Teams	1	0	1
World Bridge Series	0	1	1
European Open events	0	1	1

World Open events	0	1	1
General	0	3	3
			9

2D Analysis

There were many comments to the effect that what was needed was good opposition and encountering different styles and systems.

Through having had the opportunity, L3&4 players were much more likely to mention playing in representative international events. A range of Scottish events was mentioned. Most L3&4 players led with events outside Scotland as being the most helpful.

There were more mentions of playing in English events than Scottish ones and the Spring 4s was the individual event most often specifically mentioned in the comments.

2E The value of one-off coaching sessions

There were few comments on this subject. The general sense was that these have rarely been offered in Scotland, and some people have benefited through seeking them out elsewhere. The comments regarding sessions attended were:

Little benefit

I have not found them helpful

I haven't found the one off training sessions we have sometimes had of value.

I have had no beneficial coaching sessions

One off coaching has limited value – snippets of value. Don't get much from the technical sessions because I can read them in books.

Of some use

There have been a number of coaching sessions over the years and I'd honestly say that almost all of them have been useful to some extent.

One off coaching on most subjects is beneficial but only as a starting point for work by individuals and partnerships

The occasional workshops delivered by SBU have been helpful, but perhaps try and fit too much into one/two days (but organisers evidently keen to pack in as much as possible given these happen maybe once every two or three years, so this is understandable!) More frequent events, each with fewer topics so can go into more detail might be better?

Useful

Expert bidding and defense treatments [are useful]

The session in the last one where we got to bid and discuss 20-30 auctions with "an expert" was extremely useful. Our partnership lacks good hand evaluation skills and the insight to see possibilities.

Yes, all the sessions I've been to have been valuable albeit to varying degrees. The sessions by externals have been particularly useful – eg Brian Senior. And the best was a three day Kokish intense training event.

Yes.

2E Analysis

There may be a place for one-off sessions, but they might work better as part of a training curriculum.

2F What training would help?

This topic often veered away from individual sessions and into activities that would be useful as part of a structured programme. Where that occurred the answers have been considered in the appropriate section. Suggestions were:

Sessions with specific subjects

Detailed advice from established successful internationals e.g., Dutch/Polish players

Competitive bidding

Bridge skills (far more important than systems). We need to train "attitudes" in Scotland.

Not sure. Training on certain topics may not suit everyone.

Topic covered usually aspects of the Play of the Hand, (and its associated topic, the Defence).

I think one off coaching would be very useful on all aspects of the game.

I prefer actual training to sessions where we play hands and talk about them afterwards. Some topics that will always come up, because they are challenging, are:

- Slam bidding
- High level competition
- Defence and carding (this is difficult to teach but an awful lot ofimps are won and lost on defence)

I think just playing gives me the best idea of what is going well and what is not and then I make conclusions based on that.

Perhaps some training in trying to improve our system. Also it would be helpful if weekends were arranged whereby the top players could assist us mortals to improve in the game.

Detailed Hand analysis by an experienced coach would be invaluable.

Psychological work mental stamina

From a Scottish perspective overall slam bidding and high level decisions are consistent problems.

We consistently fade as matches wear on it seems to me. I think some focus on mental techniques to address that

Discussions/analysis with top players.

International standard player testing a pair's system

How to be a good team-mate and function well as a team – sports psychologists have a lot to offer.

Cardplay.

2F Analysis

Hands on advice and analysis from experts were the most common themes. Card play, defence, slam bidding and competitive bidding came up multiple times. In total, there is a wide range of useful suggestions here, some for aspiring players in general and some for our leading pairs.

3A How effective are trials in identifying our best pairs?

L1&L2

1. Trials are the way to do it

The only way to do it – selectors should not be allowed to pick players

Fairly effective and fair. Everyone should be able to enter and we should respect the results

The National League is pretty good. Pairs trials seem a bit more random

2. Trials are fine but need to be longer/different

Should be long and meaningful. Then the results must be accepted.

Need to be at least 3 weekends and at least 8 tables

Short trials are ineffective. The NL is useful if it is over 3 or more weekends

Trials are only moderately effective – the format should match the tournament

3. Trials are a poor way to identify our best pairs

Teams trials do not result in the strongest team

Trials are a lottery

Very questionable to pick on such a small amount of information when we have other results to look at

We are failing to produce functioning teams that succeed

Three messages came through from the L1&2 players.

4. Some think trials are the best, or indeed only, way to select a team
5. Many think that there need to be long trials to provide valuable results
6. Some think that the trials system is failing us

L3&L4

1. Trials are ineffective for selection

Trials are not very effective

We should not be running trials

We should not be selecting based on trials

No, our trials system is not picking our best pairs or producing our best possible teams.

Trials are not very effective

This should be obvious to anyone in Scotland. We cannot afford to pick teams that lack our best pairs and players. We do not have the depth of talent to compensate.

2. There are factors in trials that make it harder to get our best team

Pairs trials in a small field are random and it would be better to save time by drawing lots. Teams trials are better far from perfect.

Teams trials group together people who are friends rather than the best players. Good for helping to identify promising pairs

Short trials with all who consider themselves to qualified generally results in an under qualified Camrose team.

Pairs trials are a complete lottery. Not the best way of identifying our best pairs. Teams trials are better.

The "open" trial system has been incontrovertibly shown to be really ineffective. No Camrose wins in the last 24 years when all trials have been open.

The selectors are over-reliant on the results of trials and tend to be overly focused on butlers both in the trials and in the Camrose (and other international events). However, they provide good practice and doesn't shut the door on new pairs.

(Would give trials) 6/10. Selectors should select. The rules have often stated in a pairs trial that the 1st and 2nd pairs are guaranteed but the third pair will be selected - but nearly always the selectors have gone for the 3rd pair and seemed too nervous to 'select' on the basis of previous experience etc.

3. Trials are okay if made long

Three week trials would probably get you there but we have one weekend trials with weak fields.

Trials need to be over 150 to 200 boards to be meaningful.

I have long favoured Teams Trials, though they make it hard for new pairs and developing players.

4. Nothing will help just now

For the Open team, there is little we can do until better players come through.

From L3&4 players, who have a history of selection through trials and then playing in the resultant teams, there are four messages:

Many think that trials are a poor basis for selection, though they may provide some input into the discussion.

Many highlight issues with both pairs and teams trials

A few support long trials as the best approach to get meaningful results

One believes that we are currently in a hopeless situation

In summary, those who regularly play for Scotland do not believe that our existing approach is leading to Scotland fielding good, well prepared teams.

3B Could the format be changed to improve that?

L1&2

1. Trials are fine, but should or shouldn't be pairs/teams

Auto-election brings many potential problems. Trials is the only legitimate way.

Run pairs trials, not teams.

Pairs trials

Teams if possible

Strongly believer there should be pairs trials, not teams.

Go with team trials

2. Trials are fine but should be regular pairs, committed to practicing

Pairs must make a commitment to training and playing

Trials might be more effective if entries had to show their level of commitment prior to the event – what tournaments have they played in, do they have a mentor, how often have they been playing together and over what period of time etc. It often appears that players think “Oh, I’ll have a go at the trial” and phone round to find someone to play with rather than it being a genuine test of a regular partnership.

3. Trials are fine but we need to better understand the results

Work through the scores on individual boards to get a clearer evaluation of the results

4. Trials are fine but we should have some restrictions on who can take part

Some restrictions on who can play in the trials, or make it harder to reach the final stages.

Exclude inexperienced pairs (but have a coaching programme open to them).

5. We should place less emphasis on trials, or move away altogether

The NPC should be appointed in advance of trials and select - consulting with his “top” pair – to create a team with team spirit.

Selection based on results across the season. Top two pairs in by right, third by selection.

Bring through young players, partnered with existing experts. Take the hit of initial bad results.

Analysis of L1&2

The majority of L1&2 players are happy with the trials system, with some suggestions for small improvements. Some would like to take a different approach.

L3&L4

1. Move away from trials to a squad system

A squad system with selection based on performance in major events over recent years.

Aim to develop a squad and develop players. Bring our best pairs together with promising players. Any trials should be by application with the weakest pairs excluded.

The selectors should select from amongst those pairs who are good enough – not open entry. We should be looking to build a team. We may not have sufficient good pairs to hold a trial.

Perhaps the Camrose should be restricted to those willing to be coached. Once the coached players gain better basics they will win the trials anyway but will also be able to compete better in international competition Surely that's what everybody wants.

Squad of c6 pairs selected – aimed at the Open Europeans on a 2 year cycle. 1x Open trial for a Camrose Team (or something) to keep people outside the squad happy. But most events are selected from the squad. I think the English approach is a reasonable hybrid. Trials with some guarantee of selection to the winner. But focus on selection to get the best team out.

Instead of trials run squad sessions. Pick 8 pairs. Look at who is working, who is going abroad? Select from them. If there are to be trials then it should be Invitation only.

Gold Cup/Spring 4s etc much higher quality than Scot trials so success (near success) in these or similar competitions around the world is a surer indication of the strength of a pair/team than our trials. Within Scotland, create long (eg 48 board) head to head matches on partial league basis.

We need to move to a squad.

2. Continue with trials but with restrictions

Make it almost impossible for players who have no business applying to play on the team. Teams trials where practical.

I understand that there is a desire to be inclusive and to encourage people who might be at an earlier stage of their bridge career, but I also wonder if there is a case for refusing to allow pairs to enter if they are demonstrably not good enough.

Restricting the pairs/teams that can play in a trial and making them over a long duration.

Either have a pre-trial weekend to sift out the very inexperienced pairs or make people write why they want to enter and what they have achieved so far and how they are developing etc as a pair

There should be long team trials for selecting teams for long Euro events. Having a very short trial for a long event seems inappropriate.

Carry on with trials

I am very happy that the "new" format is teams rather than pairs. Team harmony is very important and should be taken into consideration when selecting the final pair.

There is no other way that can possibly be seen as fair and reasonable. Without trials new pairs would not break through.

Make changes to selection approach

For long events, the selectors need to pick a TEAM, not three pairs. Having the right NPC is also important, and the players should be consulted. (If there has been a teams trial, then the winning team should also be consulted on the additional pair.)

Long trials with no guarantee of selection for the winners.

The selection policies often mean that the strongest team is not selected for any of the categories. With players eligible for multiple categories, the strategy and communication needs to be much better.

Selectors should select. Trials/National League should just be a guide along with participation and performance outside of those events – both Scottish and foreign.

Analysis of L3&L4

The majority L3&4 players who commented were opposed to the continued use of trials as the primary method of selection, preferring a squad system based. Some were willing to continue with trials but wanted them to be modified to ensure that weak pairs are not included or that there is no guarantee of selection. Two wished to continue as are.

3B Overall analysis

On the whole, less internationally experienced players favour trials while those with extensive international experience believe that they have not resulted in Scotland picking its best team for many years. The more experienced players believe that at the very least the quality of a trial has to be kept high, or that trials should be dispensed with partly or altogether in favour of an assessment of performance in a range of major events.

3C Other than the Trials and the National League, what events should the selector consider?

	L1&2	L3&4	Total
Scottish Cup	4	8	12
Winter 4s	3	8	11
SOL	2	1	3
Edwin Berry	3	0	3
Men's Team	1	0	1
Women's Teams	1	0	1
District Leagues	1	0	1
Other Scottish teams events	1	0	1
Scottish national pairs events	0	1	1
Gold Cup	2	5	7
Spring 4s	1	5	6
Eastbourne	1	1	1
Other EBU team events	2	1	3
Chairman's Cup	0	2	2
European Open	0	2	2
US National	0	2	2
International teams events	2	3	5
International representative	1	5	6

3C Analysis

Across the board, the Scottish Cup and the Winter 4s are considered the most significant Scottish events. It is to be expected that if any event is highlighted as significant in the selection process then more of our top players will participate in it.

Excluding the Scottish Cup and Winter 4s, L1&L2 players see more value in Scottish event than those in L3&L4.

L3&L4 players see more value in the Gold Cup, the Spring 4s and international events matches than L1&L2.

3D How should past international success be taken into account when selecting?

L1&2

Not at all. Each year is a new year

It should be an element but not the only consideration. No further back than 3 years

If a medal is awarded from an international (European/World) competition, then that pair/team could be selected automatically for the following year's Home International series.

I do think that previous success in International events should carry some weight and a points scale could be used [decreasing over 12 years]

If going back no more than 2/3 years

Yes, as long as the partnership remains hard working and committed to developing

L3&4

Yes

It seems obvious that past performance over say the last 5 years must be relevant in any selection process.

Probably last five years as there does need to evidence of recent success/achievement to avoid a player being assumed to be 'top' past their sell-by date. Needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Recent successes in these against England/Republic suggests quality.

Past international successes (plural) are a major indicator of ability.

Previous international performance should be taken into account. Repeated failure at Camrose level without signs of improvement should make the selectors think twice about sticking with a pair. Repeated success should encourage the selectors to keep picking them. The long events, such as the World Bridge Games and European Championships are different from anything that we encounter elsewhere and take time to learn how to play in. I have certainly felt better equipped to play in them again by having gone through them a few times.

Ignoring previous international (-level) events is plain stupid. We recently ignored a women's' pair who had won the Lady Milne 4 of the last 8 years. Laughing stock material. For an established pair, there should be virtually no limit for how far back.

Forcing established pairs with a strong international track record to play trials for their place is very much a case of valuing the process more than the outcome.

International success is important (above average performance on Butlers of large strong events in particular). Anything over 5+ years ago is of low relevance though.

Basing a European team on pairs with a record of success is a Good Plan; it helps new pairs to settle in, and opponents treat you with more respect. Recent success would be more useful.

Yes. The Scottish tournament scene is also so weak that there is very little we can draw from results in it, and covid has only magnified that problem.

In terms of how far back you can go – 4 years is the absolute outside in terms of evidence I think.

5 years.

3D Analysis

There is general agreement that past international success is significant. The L3&4 players feel this more strongly. In the Open team we have had little that would be considered success in recent years so this tends to apply more with the Women's and Senior teams. Amongst some L3&4 players there is a view that international events, especially the longer and tougher ones, are different from domestic events and that it takes time to learn how to play in them. This is part of the challenge of how we can develop our pairs without creating a closed shop.

3E How important is it for success that there are long term partnerships, and should selection processes have a bias towards them?

L1&2

Unimportant

I don't think there should be a bias towards long term partnerships as this will be a disincentive to new ones.

I tend to agree with Zia, I do not favour a very long term partnership at top level.

Successful are partnerships not necessarily long term, but questionable whether trials should allow entry to scratch partnerships. There is also the use of exemptions that favour previously successful partnerships

Important

Ideally a pair should be playing together for 3 years to be ready for international matches.

Long term partnerships who have achieved some success should be rewarded for that, but that value should "degrade" over time.

Very important, but no guarantee of selection can be offered.

If we look at the top nations, long term partnerships seem to be very important.

L3&4

Unimportant

Long term partnerships are only as good as the players. Selection should not be biased to them.

Not important except successful long-term partnerships, of which there are currently none in the Open category.

Important under the right circumstances

Long-term partnerships are OK but can get into a rut. A new partnership of 2 talented players prepared to work hard at their agreements is often a better bet.

Long term success is a plus, long term failure is the biggest negative you can have.

Repeated failure at Camrose level without signs of improvement should make the selectors think twice about sticking with a pair. Repeated success should encourage the selectors to keep picking them.

Having long term partnerships is good if you have used that time to constantly improve your system and both parties can remember it. People who have simply played together for a long time is not that valuable.

A flexible approach is required with some emphasis on recognising the benefits of longer term partnerships.

Important

The selection process should consider the length of partnerships. Pairs who have not been playing regularly together for a season will have poorer levels of understanding and can be 'found out' in international events

Big emphasis on long term partnerships. A new partnership, even top players, should have had a lot of success in the last (say) year as well as any trial success. We should even consider pairing players up.

Long-term partnerships should definitely be favoured, and the selectors must have some discretion in picking the team, though with some guarantees for those who perform well in the Trial.

Long term partnerships are preferable and this should be taken into consideration by selectors

What a long term partnership has that a newly formed partnership does not have is the emotional ability to ride out disappointments and disasters. Such experiences are essential!

Long term partnerships and those who have worked hard in developing their partnership must have a greater chance of success. It is demoralising when random pairs have a good trial weekend and then get found out at a higher level.

We need formats that reward partnerships. That means a squad to me. There are too many teams we need to select – 7 in a European year – and with overlapping participants we can't have trials of suitable length. If we are going to get anywhere we need long term partnerships. So the process should heavily bias towards them.

3E Analysis

L1&2 players were divided on the importance of long term partnerships.

L3&4 players valued long term partnerships highly, where the partnerships had a history of success, of continued work, or of improvement. Many commented that completely new pairs have a lot of work to do to be ready for international competitions. Many commented that a history of failure was as big a negative as a history of success was a plus.

6 Use of a squad for international selection and development

6A. What benefits or issues would you see with such an approach?

L1&2 Benefits

Good for training

The idea of having a squad could be effective for training.

Shared learning

More access to wider range of people who can advise and/or be approached. (At present I am able to ask a small number, but a wider pool – thus sharing the load – would be good, and of course different experts can help in different areas.

Easier to put in long term strategies, activities can be more focused so those involved will benefit more.

Good for juniors/less experienced pairs

This is an excellent idea especially for the juniors.

Less experienced pairs would feel involved in the process and part of the overall team. Selectors get to see more players and can assess their ability – current and potential

Good for team spirit/continuity/planning

Continuity and team spirit.

Build a bit more team harmony. Surely this would be beneficial especially if sending teams away for long events.

The team knows well in advance that it is due to be part of the team and can plan ahead.

If all pairs were of a standard that means any would be worthy of selection then it's a good idea---but do we have that at the different levels (open, senior, ladies)

None. Judging by the questions it looks as if you have already made your minds up

L1&2 Issues

Question value of a squad or its place in selection

If it is for the purpose of selecting a team without a trial, I think it will have problems. How to select the squad? How to select the team from the squad?

Not a fan of squads

For older players [than juniors] it could be more difficult to make it work

Squads would be seen as excluding others

Those outside the squad may see it as a closed shop

A major minus is that everyone else who is not part of the plan can lose motivation to play in various events and get better and might lead to frustration that they have been overlooked without merit.

Some will feel excluded unfairly

Protocols would need to be established to make it work

Pairs may decide to break up and leave the squad, criteria for picking the team might be difficult to define but without these there may be a feeling of “well they’re always going to pick A, B and C so what’s the point”

There are a lot of protocols that need to be covered when it comes to players dropping out either as a pair / individual and what it means for their standing with the SBU / chances to be selected in the future.

L1&2 General Comments

If all pairs were of a standard that means any would be worthy of selection then it’s a good idea---but do we have that at the different levels (open, senior, ladies)

None. Judging by the questions it looks as if you have already made your minds up

This could work. Squad pairs to be invited to join if together for approx 3 years showing some successful results in major events and showing commitment to stay together and improve.

L3&4 Benefits

Good for training/practicing

A squad allows us to focus our support, including training.

Such an arrangement has many advantages. It implies a certain consistent quality of opposition which is what is needed.

Players can share knowledge and experience, partnerships can receive system mentoring, healthy competition for places in the team

Vision: a team that plays together, enjoy each others company, improving through pro coaching, about 8 pairs, and we only invest in those who will do the work. We have to keep up with modern theory and methods.

We need players that will commit. Those who do will improve.

To secure commitment to both pairs and individuals improving, to get greater dedication to working hard on the game when representing one’s country rather than turning up with little prep/practice/discussion etc. To encourage peer support and peer-to-peer learning, share resources and ideas, group learning/training is also more cost effective than if individuals/pairs sought to pay for coaching themselves.

Good for juniors/less experienced pairs

It provides, by having 2 squads, the probables and the possibles a means of progressing from “promising youngster” to the serious contender.

Good for team spirit/continuity/planning

A squad can help build rapport and a real sense of 'team'.

Main benefit would only be if we could develop a squad mentality. This requires great people management skills, as many English Premier league managers will admit.

Biggest benefit is that we'll develop stronger teams.

Advantages: continuity, team bonding (mmm...)

L3&4 Issues

Squads would be seen as excluding others

It can become self-perpetuating with the addition of new pairs or removal of less-performing pairs causing aggravation and controversy.

Exclusivity

It would likely annoy people just stuck on the outside. So I might ringfence one Camrose weekend per year for an open trial for those not in the squad.

Needs effective leadership and strategy that does not prematurely close doors or opportunities for the most keen players, whilst also getting a balance and expecting a certain standard of play before just letting anyone keen in who is a long way off representing Scotland competitively – that is hard to do well.

Will fail without player commitment

If pairs all compete with each other and not commit to developing the squad, I would forecast that the method would be disastrous. It is, however, a good idea in principle.

Practicalities

Need an organiser to run them

The big problem is practicality. Apart from the Senior Team, many of those whom you would wish to be part of this will be of working age and possibly also have families. Could they afford the sort of time commitment this would require? They certainly would be unlikely to manage it and also play in SBU events.

Some people are eligible for more than one format. A squad works best if a pair is committed to playing together all year round and not eg, in one partnership for open events and a different partnership for seniors.

L3&4 General Comments

No strong views except a squad must include the best players.

I think it would be worth trying this. We may not get it right first time but we never know until we do it.

It has certainly worked well for some countries.

I really like this approach.

EBU and others do something on these lines so copy them.

The plus is it gives us a chance in future.

It may well not work but anything else would leave us praying for dumb luck in somehow players emerging and self developing.

6A Analysis

A majority of the players saw advantages for training, team building and, if it is done right, in helping juniors and less experience players to progress. The main issues were around the creation, or appearance, of a closed shop, which would be demotivating from those on the outside.

A number of issues were raised about the practicalities, including the amount of time required of participants, the impact the squad would have on national events and how it would work when players might be interested in multiple categories with different partners. Should a squad approach be adopted it would be necessary to carefully consider these issues. However, there was a strong feeling, especially amongst L3&4 players that it was worth giving it a go, and that it seems to be the best chance of improving our chances for the future.

6B How would you go about forming and renewing the squad?

L1&2

Based on domestic results

In the hands of the selectors

L3&4

Making sure the squad is reviewed regularly, and getting feedback on squad leaders or the international convenor to avoid biases creeping in, is important.

Through domestic and international results, and helping junior pairs to transition

Assessment of commitment, potential and ability

Promotion and demotion between probables and possibles squads

An initial trial followed periodically by others to refresh, perhaps every two years

Selectors to decide, with continued membership being conditional on meeting the commitments

Selected from those prepared to commit and young enough to be worth the investment

It's important to have more than one squad, reviewing each regularly. Being flexible in squad size also must be helpful.

Continuation in the squad to depend on results

Yearly review – there needs to be a way of playing into a squad if prepared to commit to the work. Squad size could be flexible

6B Analysis

Only one player mentioned the holding of a trial to decide on squad membership. The high majority saw the decision on squad membership resting in the hand of the selectors/international convenor, guided by results and the commitment shown by the players. It is recognised that this could be problematic – it relates to the 'closed shop' concern in 6A and to those in 2B around a culture that can be negative towards aspiring players.

6E How much time commitment should players make per year?

L1&2

At least one session per week

3-4 weeks

F2F 1 day a month, online tournament at least every 2 weeks + time with mentor

4-5 high standard international events per year + monthly squad events

At least something small weekly

L3&4

1 evening per week

Partnership bidding most days, group events at least monthly

At least 20 days per year

Who know. Try 8 week-ends in the first instance

Engage with coaching and training (2 or 3 times a year), form teams to enter high quality competitions outside of Scotland (at least 2 a year), seek feedback on their system (one-off exercise), work through exercises regarding partnership agreements (maybe every month)

2 x 3 hours most weeks + at least one full weekend a month

6 weekend

Minimum one night per week + weekend events

At least the equivalent of one full day per month

6E Analysis

There is no common answer, but it is clear that everyone expects the pairs to be working round the calendar with a mix of activities and a commitment to participate in major events.