

# Training, Support and Development in Bridge

## Case Study – England (EBU)

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A survey on junior and international training programmes was sent to all NBOs in October 2022, via the World Bridge Federation (WBF). This case study is based on two responses from squad leaders in England plus a follow-up interview with a junior squad trainer. Some direct quotations are included in this report. It provides insight into how the English Bridge Union (EBU) operates in relation to the development of junior and international players, as well as the challenges and opportunities involved. In particular, regarding junior training, it shows how human the process is: “It's not about taking fitnesses, it's about building young people”. Further reports on the [Training and Development project](#) are on the BAMSA website.

### Junior Scene

The EBU has between 50 and 100 juniors currently playing with the main routes into bridge being via schools, universities, and family. There has been little engagement with juniors at primary school age groups as the EBU has struggled to maintain (previously successful) programmes. This is primarily due to Covid related issues and a key figure retiring from their position. England has around 20 participating secondary schools, although volunteers were unable to help with the maintenance of the programmes due to Covid restrictions, which has hampered efforts in recent years. Dual nationality players are also a potential source of recruitment for the junior and non-junior categories.

There has been a general decline in participating secondary schools over the last 30 years (from triple to double figures). Additionally, university level engagement with bridge in England is relatively small-scale with only six universities noted as having active programmes and junior players are predominantly identified and recruited at “junior teaching weekends”. The junior setup for England has a management structure including squad leaders who are responsible for management of players (and contracts), coaching, training, budgeting, and coordination with NPCs. The NPCs are put in place by selection committees, and it is relatively commonplace for guest ‘experts’ (professional or amateur top English players) to be brought in for training days, with four to six training weekends run per year (pre-Covid).

- Squad leaders are selected through a formal interview process in conjunction with the selection committee.
- Older juniors benefit from being treated more like adults i.e., less micro-management than younger age groups.
- There are no formal procedures for getting feedback on training from the junior categories. Most feedback is received from parents of players.

## International Scene

In England there is a large proportion of professional bridge players playing in the open category, and fewer in the women's category. This could influence why few juniors make the step up to international level in the open team in particular. Competition for the top spots is high, and often juniors are up against experienced professional bridge players in selection events. International players are identified through trials and national competitions, using pair and team trial formats and preselection in some instances with open pair trials yielding more new players recently. For the open and women's category there is no formal squad in place, but it is currently under consideration.

## Building a Pipeline of Players

**Transitioning:** *You asked the question about what happens after the juniors. Realistically, people then are at the point where career takes over heavily. They're not right on the edge of the open team - there's no real kind of push for them to go any further or any pull factor for them. People get partners, families. You might see people play the odd event, but thinking back, all the juniors from 15 years ago, apart from the ones who are playing pro, very few of them you see around at many events these days.*

Junior players who have potential are supported by squad leaders and coaches, with personalised development approaches favoured by some trainers. For potential international players who are non-juniors, there is limited support offered. Players looking to step up would need to perform well in national competitions to become noticed. There is not a formal structure in England for developing aspiring international players that have not come up through the junior programme. Juniors and non-junior players are supported in the transition to top-level bridge primarily via informal coaching and mentoring. Contact time (at the table, and with top players) is seen as a vital mechanism to assist with transitioning juniors (and other players) to top-level bridge.

There are several limitations to assisting players to top-level bridge including: few strong bridge centres with a mix of high-level and aspiring players; dominance by professional players; lack of opportunities for junior players due to competition structure and a lack of mentors willing or able to commit their time to assist junior and other players to develop.

Professional bridge can mean that pros tend to seek their own income rather than playing in the same events as young players or with young players. If the competition structure of the country changed, there might be more contact time between young players and the top players (rather than just squad practice time). Players are kept motivated, interested and engaged with bridge by attending regular training and events. It is acknowledged by trainers that it is very difficult for players to remain motivated when it is not their full-time job and that the "loss rate is very high".

## Training and Development

The structure for training adopted by the EBU is a hybrid format with some face-to-face sessions around competition time, and a significant number of online courses and online bidding sessions (using BBO and apps like Cuebids). Guest speakers are also commonplace in addition to coaching both face-to-face and via Zoom. The EBU utilises player/squad contracts that outline the commitment level and behavioural expectations of players from the NBO. Contracts can be removed if players fail to fulfil their obligations, miss too many training sessions, or if they fall short of the behavioural standards expected of squad team members (see Appendix A). However, there does appear to be some flexibility in the application of these reprimands for younger adults and teenagers who are viewed as still learning life lessons. For the EBU, players must be willing to commit a significant amount of time and effort to progress to higher level squads.

The EBU survey responses suggest that strong players and squads contribute to ensuring training is of high quality. Training is focused on contextual learning; problem solving skills; tailoring training to players' needs; practice in online bidding session; experimentation with coaching and presentation styles and creating a positive atmosphere for players to learn. Online bridge has facilitated an easier and more convenient working environment utilising online platforms for training (i.e., BBO, Zoom and RealBridge) and is viewed as having "revolutionised the training game". There is generally greater attention on partnerships than individual training. However, in the U16 category, one squad leader focuses on individual player skill development, with a shift to partnership coaching and training for the U21 and U26 categories:

A lot of my thinking on this subject comes from youth development in other sports - hearing about how they train youth footballers and make it heavily skills-based for example. In the youth setup, the focus was on developing players over winning youth titles. Clearly if you develop players well, you will have more success than not, but it wasn't the primary focus. If you develop a wide group of skilled players, you ultimately do much better further on. In bridge, some players tend to mature at different ages and partnerships aren't clear at the age of 14. Let's give them a solid technical base and then we can find what systems, styles and pairings work for them as they're older and understand themselves better.

- Training weekends happen half a dozen times a year, preferably in a venue that provides the room for free (i.e., bridge club or college).
- Junior camps are currently running in England which can be expensive to fund for parents of juniors (over £100), but hardship funds are available for those that cannot afford to pay.

**Funding:** Funding for the EBU junior programme (including sending junior teams to championships) is in the form of general donations (junior fundraising initiatives) and from the annual budget from the EBU with shortfalls being commonplace. A small budget is available for the squad leaders which is largely used for travel expenses for squad members. Creativity can help to ensure costs are kept low for training weekends:

*Historically, there have been up to about half a dozen times a year, so you find a bridge club that was willing to let you have their premises for free or, when I did it in a university town, I'd get one of the students to find a room at one of the colleges. Then you just try and find them somewhere to crash for the night. You invariably end up doing it where there's either enough people who have got families that they can crash or students who can crash on the floor.*

**Gaining Top Level Experience:** Aspiring internationals are encouraged to play at national events and adult trials, the Spring 4s, the premier league and any event where there is an opportunity to play against high quality opposition. However, limited financial support is provided to players to assist with this. Support provided consists of free entry for junior squad members and subsidies for some non-junior players entering foreign events or tournaments. The EBU website has a list of free national events for juniors.

*We wouldn't let everyone play the Spring Fours because when you get to May, you're basically at the point where you've selected your team for the championship coming up so we pick those to play.*

### **Challenges and Opportunities Facing the EBU**

Lack of funding, cost of food, accommodation and travel, a lack of contact time and limited recruitment of younger players in educational settings are barriers to success. In contrast, capturing the youth in educational settings, online training, good players willing to give up their time and the use of technology are deemed to be the greatest enablers for success. The second half of this case study explores the advantages of technology, the enablers and barriers in relation to training, and tips for teaching young players.

#### **Using Technology for Training**

*On BBO it's really difficult to build that kind of community and that vibe, in the same way as face-to-face. I got the juniors on RealBridge and thought "oh they'll start talking to each other" and what you actually find is with all these 12, 13, 14 year olds is they sit there and turn the screens off because they're too shy to speak to each other. So, it actually took ages and ages for them to do it. And some of the new ones are still a bit like that, but slowly, slowly it happened. That sense of community gradually building up over the two and a half years that we were doing it during Covid.*

- The use of BBO and RealBridge increased during the Covid lockdowns, as there was uncertainty around when there would be major tournaments due to cancellations in 2020-21. Online training has the advantage of being cheaper and saving time due to no travel requirements. This has been good for the work-life balance of some squad leaders enabling them to fit training around work and family commitments.

*I need to get back to some face-to-face teaching because I think one of the issues with computer screens can be people just getting into rhythm clicking. And they actually need to get into the mindset of how do I do this? How do I approach this?*

- Whilst more online bridge provides more opportunity to play, there also some downsides. For example, the post-event feedback is reduced if everyone is in their own home.
- In the early days of using online platforms, issues were recognised around building a community online, especially as younger players often turned off their cameras and would not fully engage interpersonally with other students. Although this has improved over time with the use of video chats and online sessions, it still persists to some extent.

**Creating a youth community:** *They also started their own WhatsApp group and it was an absolute prerequisite that the other squad leader and I had nothing to do with this. The only rule was if I hear anything that is resembling bullying or anything like that it gets stopped, stone dead in its tracks.*

*They can have their space to do their thing because, one of the things you come to realize, is that they learn far more from each other than they do off you. So anything you can do to start building that network and get them to start chatting about stuff in their own time is often far more effective than anything we can do.*

- WhatsApp groups have been proactively set up by students in order for them to have their own space to interact and learn from each other in the absence of face-to-face interaction. There is minimal monitoring from the trainers (i.e., there are codes of conduct around bullying).

The WhatsApp groups are useful for juniors to socialise, experiment and to chat in language each other understand about the content of training. This has additional ongoing benefits for youth community building which may help with retention as they transition between schools or junior squads.

- Some online sessions involve trainers “flicking between tables”, intervening when things go wrong or more structured experimentation with teaching methods such as pre-dealt sets and fixed auctions. The boards are then reviewed as a group.
- Advancement in the data analysis tool available on online platforms could be useful for further training and generally better understanding players’ strengths and weaknesses.

## **Enablers**

- A well-structured junior programme (squad leaders, player contracts, NPCs, selection committees, and ‘expert’ trainers) can assist players looking to step up to top-level bridge and improve the prospects of teams and squads.

*If you gave me group of 20, 30 kids or even 15 kids who wanted to learn the game properly within a couple of years, I could have a competitive side going. It's possible. But you've got to get kids who are interested, and then the trick is to keep them going and going. That's not straightforward. It just requires a lot of time and energy more than anything else.*

- The key to success for the juniors is having “kids who are interested” and time and energy invested to keep them motivated and engaged. Self-motivation is important for players to possess and they need to have a desire to learn.

**Retention:** *They felt that it was a load on their time, and they just wanted to go and do something else. You don't know what's the real trigger. It could be something deeper. You can't hold on too tight to anyone.*

*Others they kind of got into it. They're kind of curious. You can maybe build it a little bit, but it's really tough. If they've got that desire to want to learn, then they will get there eventually. So if you've got people who are completely addicted to the game, you just keep giving them what they need and then they'll get there.*

- Player contracts and mentors can be used to encourage engagement of highly committed players.

- For the EBU, success of training projects can be dependent on having more than one squad leader. Sharing leadership roles can mitigate issues if a trainer retires or is unable to continue, as well as allowing for knowledge-sharing regarding best practice and understanding the squad dynamics.
- England has adopted a hybrid model for training (online training mixed with face-to-face sessions) which has been successful for their training and development objectives in recent years.
- Players benefit from playing high quality opposition in national and international events but can be limited by a lack of financial resources (accommodation, travel, food etc.). The greatest enablers for success have been good players willing to give up their time; effectively using technology; and the advent of the under 16 squad.

## Barriers

- Popularity and cultural relevance of bridge in schools has faded over the years with fewer teachers playing in schools and more paperwork now necessary due to background checks etc. The number of participating schools has been on the decline since the 90s. This may point to a decrease in the popularity of bridge amongst these age groups in the UK.
- Issues can occur around burnout for younger players due to time commitment and dropout rates increase as players move up through the age groups.

*We have done badly at converting U21s into U26s. I don't know the exact answer why. Other nations have done it, but my suspicion is that they get that contact time. Look at the Dutch, the Dutch have done it very well in comparison. I suspect it's because you get a lot of people playing at the White House tournament on a regular basis. You get that critical mass of people. Other countries could replicate this by looking to set up their own local centres of excellence at clubs where they have a significant number of top players in regular attendance. You could have a top pairs event with a lot of good players playing. That is the kind of event you want – all the good players in the room. Even if you get one or two really weak junior pairs in that kind of atmosphere, if they're keen, they'll grow quickly.*

- England has not been very successful at converting under 21s to under 26s with a lack of contact time noted as a possible factor. The EBU struggles to transition junior players to international level, possibly due to the dominance of professional players in the open category.
- Interestingly having a pool of professional players can be seen as a barrier as well as an asset. On the one hand, having many professionals makes it harder to become an international player. On the other hand, it brings greater international success, helps to develop a fan-base and provides role models for aspiring players.

However, some amateurs may feel they are unable to compete for the open team once they leave the juniors and this may contribute to their dropping out of bridge. It could be useful to develop new ways of encouraging such players to transition from being juniors into keen club or county players. Perhaps an emphasis on promoting the lifelong learning and healthy ageing aspects of the game might help in this regard. The new U31 category may also be useful for this transitional stage.

*The atmosphere in some of the early days in some of the squads I was involved with wasn't the best. It could be toxic at times, bullying possibly a bit strong, but close to that. It was just a little bit macho in the sense of the dominant players in the group were male but there was a little bit of fragility in the ego, which meant that if anything happened, it was get your attack in first type stuff. ... It feels like 90% of potential new players are male. The selection happens before I even get to coach them. It happens when people are offered to learn in the first place before they've even turned a card. There doesn't seem to be equal opportunities to even try the game.*

- Historically there have been issues around gender and sexism. Numbers are gradually creeping up in terms of gender and ethnic diversity in junior squads.

*There are a number of junior camps in England at the moment. There's one in Cheltenham in April, one in Kent in October and of course the JTI (Junior Teach-In). Those have been used as training weekends, but I'm a little bit uncomfortable with that because it can cost 3 figures plus for the child to attend. I'm always worried about anything that puts a financial barrier against the child playing. That's one of my golden rules: no child should not be able to participate because they can't afford to do so, or their parents can't afford to do so. There are hardship funds for those who really can't afford it, but a lot of our kids are in fee-paying schools. And that's another issue - that the opportunities always seem to go to the same sort of social strata of people.*

- Socio-economic diversity in recruiting juniors can be an issue with the current setup in England, with there often being a lack of opportunity for those from poorer backgrounds to train. Nevertheless, current squads in England have been described as diverse and inclusive (LGBTQ+) and pride is taken in creating a safe atmosphere for people to express themselves.
- The greatest challenge to success for the EBU relates to funding, and a lack of sustained youth engagement with bridge.

*Bringing in a coach who they respect from the technical standpoint was good because they would listen. If you've got an NPC criticising every bit of playing, the team thinks, well, you ain't got a clue what you're talking about. That's not going to last long. We've had junior teams split up because previous squad coaches and squad leaders lost the respect of the players.*

- It is worth bearing in mind that a squad leader does not necessarily need to be a good technical coach. As in the example above, those with expertise can be brought in to do that role. However, coaches and squad leaders need to cultivate a relationship of trust and respect with the players.

## **Tips for teaching youth players**

**Peer-to-peer learning:** *They'll chat about things. There's often many ways you can explain something to them and you're not gonna get it right first time, but they're kind of just mucking about on their own, experimenting a bit. Yes, a lot of the bridge is absolutely diabolical, and you really shouldn't try and analyse it or take it too seriously. If they do chat about stuff, it's often in language with each other they can understand a lot better. Sometimes it's very easy as an expert (and one who's not a qualified teacher) to be far more verbose in lessons than I should be.*

**Teaching methods:** *I do things like 20 board head-to-head matches with pre-dealt sets. I have a way of doing card play sessions with the auctions I want them to follow. Because one of the problems with setting card play problems is if you let them bid the boards they're gonna end up in entirely the wrong spot. However routine you think that auction is, they will not end up in the contract you want them to.*

So I'll fix the auctions and I would go round table to table. I mean it gets a bit hairy managing 3 tables at once. You have to let 2 tables be working whilst you do your bit at another table.

- Educational models can assist in understanding how bridge knowledge can be effectively communicated to age groups and assist with development of juniors.
- Sports psychology theories such as 'catastrophe theory' and youth coaching models can be useful resources for understanding player performance difficulties as an NPC and trainer.

*There's a theory of performance called catastrophe theory which relates to the level of stress and anxiety that people are feeling, everyone's got different curves. But the important thing is that when you see someone fall off the rails, and we've all seen people completely lose it at the table, just unable to play a card, how on earth as an NPC do you get them back to functioning?*

- Tailoring training to individuals and being adaptable to people's learning styles is important for getting the most out of junior players.

**Learning styles:** *I think tailoring to the individual can be within the context of a single lesson sometimes. It is about trying to make sure that you present the information two or three different ways. Some people are visual. Some people are readers. People have different learning styles, so it's just trying to cover as much of that as possible. Some of it is practical at the table and some of it can be through the feedback. The way you deliver feedback is quite critical. I'm loathe to always answer a question - I prefer to answer a question with a question.*

**Squad leaders:** *You've got to have the right people in the right roles. Some of these are just basic common sense: know your customers and let them get on with the job. It's different if you're talking about under 16s, they might not have been to a major event before. They need a certain amount of guidance about how to manage it and what to do and procedures and other things. It'll take them a day or two to get into it. The older groups, you've got to treat them like adults. You can't micromanage them too much. So you've got to find the right balance for your players, your peers, your teams.*

- *Maybe we should institute review processes:* Seeking regular feedback from juniors and their parents could improve processes of training and development.

**Mindspport:** *Bridge is about the use of logic and lateral thinking - different types of thought processes. This seems to correlate with just what I was seeing with the under sixteens, that they get to kind of 13 years and all of a sudden something just suddenly started to click a lot more, 'cause bridge isn't just a straight logic game. There are perfect solution problems, but there's a lot of problems that are imperfect. And the action you take depends on so many contextual factors: your opposition, the state of the match, your partner, what mood you're in, how well is it going, all that kind of thing.*

*And anything could be right on the day, but often it requires a bit more lateral thinking or innovation. These are the kind of skills that you don't have necessarily when you're young. You get a lot of younger chess players that are very successful. But chess is a much more linear game. It's a game of complete information. You can see everything. Bridge isn't, and that, I suspect, is one of the reasons why we don't get players emerging at the age of eight, nine, ten in the way you do with chess players.*

**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks to those who participated in the NBO survey and interview, to Alex Adamson who provided feedback on an earlier draft and to the SBU for funding this study.



## Appendix A: Contract for Junior Bridge players (EBU)

# **CONTRACT FOR JUNIOR BRIDGE PLAYERS ENTERING THE UNDER 16, UNDER-21 OR UNDER-26 TRAINING SQUADS**

It is important that squad members (and, for those under 18, their parents or guardians) are aware of a number of issues raised, and commitments required, as a result of membership of EBU Junior Training Squads. This short contract has therefore been drawn up to focus attention on the most important issues.

### ***Commitments on behalf of the English Bridge Union***

The English Bridge Union and the Managers of the Junior Training Squads agree:

- to create a positive, friendly and supportive environment in the squad
- to provide a training and practice programme which will help squad members develop their full potential
- to ensure that all representatives of the English Bridge Union will treat junior players with respect and consideration
- to keep squad members informed of any further requirements expected of squad members and players for selected representative teams.

### ***Commitments on behalf of squad members***

As a member of the EBU Under-26/Under-21/Under-16 Training Squad I agree:

- that when I am involved in bridge activities or mixing with other bridge players, within or outside the squad, I am expected to be a good role model to younger players
- that when I am involved in bridge activities or mixing with other bridge playing juniors, within or outside the squad, I must avoid any activity that would undermine the efforts of the English Bridge Union [and/or English Bridge Education & Development (EBED)] to promote bridge as a safe and desirable activity for junior bridge players. I understand that gambling, use of solvents or drugs and abuse of alcohol is strictly prohibited.
- that I must do my best actively to encourage and support fellow members of the squad
- that I must behave in a considerate and sportsmanlike manner towards opponents and treat them with respect
- that I must use the resources made available to me as a member of the squad to help me improve my bridge, including listening to helpful advice from experienced players
- that I will not allow bridge to interfere with any academic studies in which I am involved.
- That when representing England, or playing whilst funded by the EBU, I will try to play to the best of my abilities; obey the instructions of any captain appointed by the EBU, and take care not to bring the EBU, English bridge or the England junior teams into disrepute.
- That when representing England I will wear the appropriate uniform when playing, attending opening and closing ceremonies and when team pictures are taken.
- That good behaviour is required when travelling to or from a representative event or EBU funded event with other players, when wearing EBU uniform, or in other situations where I am identifiably part of an England team or of the squad.

I also understand that there are procedures in place to deal with misconduct by squad members. I realise that if I fail to adhere to this contract or behave in a manner which is regarded as detrimental to the reputation of the EBU, the well-being of the squad or any members of it, then:

- the squad manager has the authority to suspend me from squad activities
- I may also be removed from any representative team for which I have been selected
- any such suspension or removal will be reviewed by the EBU Selection Committee who may either make a final decision or refer the matter to a Disciplinary Committee.

**Full name of squad member**

**Date of birth of squad member**


*For parents/guardians of squad members who are under 18 years of age:*

*I agree to allow the EBU to take photographs and video of my child and grant permission for these to be used by the EBU & EBED in publications, press articles, promotional material and websites.*

*I consent to my child's email being used to receive information from the EBU, EBED and the junior squad leaders.*

*I understand that some squad training activities require participation in private groups or chat rooms on social media or online bridge sites and give my permission for my child to participate in these.*

**Signed:**

**Squad Manager:**

**Squad Member:**

**Parent / Guardian (required for U18 squad members):**

**Date:**


Any information for the Squad Manager relevant to training, please list below  
e.g. medical conditions / food allergies

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**Two copies of this contract should be completed by all parties – One to be kept by the Squad Member and one by the Squad Manager on behalf of the EBU.**