



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Sponsors in Bridge

McIntosh, I., Punch, S. and Tandy, C. (2024) [Paying to Be at the Bridge Table: An Exploration of the Playing-Sponsor Experience in Mindsport](#), *Sociological Research Online*.

Summary

Bridge is becoming professionalised at elite tournament level. Many sports rely on sponsorship. The sponsors are typically non-playing and watch from the sidelines. However, in bridge, sponsors have the unusual opportunity to participate as a player. This is rare across most sports; polo, yacht racing and motorsports, to some extent, being other exceptions.

This paper is based on 11 in-depth interviews with elite bridge sponsors. It focuses on playing-sponsors: amateur players who sponsor and also play alongside professional elite players. The playing-sponsor is important for the financing of elite bridge but occupies an, often awkward, role as both a sponsor/employer and a player. This paper explores from a sociological viewpoint how the sponsor has to act as both employer and partner, being a relatively powerful financial benefactor whilst simultaneously being widely regarded as the weaker player in the partnership. This involves a complex power dynamic and status(es) which have to be navigated.

Findings

The sponsors were asked about their objectives and motivations, and the qualities they seek in professional players. Insights are shared from well-known sponsors including Nick Nickell, Marty Fleisher, Alex Allfrey, Janet de Botton, Lynn Baker, Geeske Joel, Simon Gillis and Vinita Gupta.

- **Sponsor or Client?** Generally these terms are used interchangeably: “most people use the word ‘sponsor’, some say ‘client’,” (Roy Welland, USA). Some of the interviewees prefer ‘sponsor’ as this implies a more philanthropic position. For others, a sponsor is someone who regularly hires a team for all the main tournaments, whereas a client hires people a few times a year, on a more informal basis. Using this definition, sponsors tend to spend more hiring professional players than clients.
- **Sponsorship and work:** Few sponsors choose to balance their bridge sponsorship role with full-time work. Most sponsors own a business where they control their working hours or work part-time (or they have retired). Hence, playing-sponsors are often older than their professional bridge partners. They can be used to holding positions of power. Finding themselves as the more junior partner in terms of bridge playing ability, can be a challenging situation.

- **Being an ‘Employer’ and a ‘Teammate’:** Sponsors can be simultaneously an employer, a friend and a playing bridge partner. This can affect setting employment boundaries, playing at the table, and beginning or terminating contracts. Sponsors set ground rules as they are striving to receive the best return from their financial investment. Whilst the playing-sponsor often views their professional partner as a friend, they have a level of expectation about appropriate behaviour. At the table, the sponsor focusses primarily on their role as their professional’s partner.
- **Power dynamics in the sponsor-professional bridge partnership:** For some sponsors, the contractual nature of the relationship can help to mitigate the playing-sponsor’s feelings of guilt when they make mistakes at the table. Bridge partnerships are often tenuous, strained and fragile. A contractual relationship between sponsor and professional can push these boundaries further as an employee-employer relationship is interjected into the heart of the most crucial relationship in bridge. The power accruing from status and economic capital can conflict with the expertise and esteem of the elite bridge player.
- **The tensions and stigma of bridge sponsorship:** Sponsorship is viewed ambivalently in the bridge community. On the one hand, it raises the quality of bridge at the highest levels of the game. On the other hand, it can be perceived as unfair, that weaker but wealthy players ‘buy’ their partner and teammates in order to win tournaments. This could be seen as breaking sporting ethics of ‘fairness’ and may partially explain why some non-sponsors can be resentful and demeaning about playing-sponsors. Sponsors can be viewed as easy scapegoats. This negativity can result in the playing-sponsor downplaying praise and attributing success to their professional partners.

Conclusions

Bridge playing-sponsors operate as employer, partner, teammate and friend. They are a relatively powerful financial benefactor, whilst simultaneously being widely regarded as a weaker player and something of a liability in terms of winning.

Power represents a paradox in the world of sponsorship bridge, as the playing-sponsor and the professional are both variously powerful and vulnerable.

Elite bridge sponsorship mutually benefits both the professionals and the playing-sponsors. Yet, bridge sponsorship is not universally popular, and some believe that the playing-sponsor is undeserving of their accolades or has used their financial clout to buy them. Such opinions directly impact the playing-sponsors who are aware that there are those who disapprove of bridge sponsorship.

However, playing-sponsors are very much a crucial and continued part of the professional bridge world. From the sponsors’ perspectives, despite the negativity and stigma from other bridge players, the downsides are outweighed by the positives.

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