



International Sport Federation (IF) recognized by the International Olympic Committee

From Philippe Cronier

email : phcronier@gmail.com

Chairman, High Level Players Commission

To :

WBF NBO Presidents

WBF Zonal Conference Presidents

WBF Executive Council

WBF Advisory Committee

WBF High Level Players Commission

WBF Investigation Committee

WBF General Counsel

To John Hsieh
Commissioner for International Affairs
Chinese Taipei Contract Bridge Association

Dear John,

The HLPC (High Level Players Commission) was originally created within the WBF to facilitate the relationship between high level players and the federal governing bodies. The HLPC has been regularly consulted on the organization of major championships, the establishment of "rules and regulations", the integration of a number of technological innovations, and system issues.

Since the Chennai World Championships, the HLPC has also been involved in the fight against cheating in bridge. The setting up of a hotline on the WBF website originally allowed the reporting of inappropriate actions, an investigation and instruction procedure, followed by a report to the WBF Prosecutor and the taking of possible sanctions.

For more than a year, with the development of online bridge, the problem of online cheating has arisen.

Today, this issue of cheating and cheaters has taken a very important place in the organization of bridge and in relations between players. It poisons the exchanges between players; its management gives rise to increasingly violent conflicts. We have reached a point where the differences in appreciation are such that the future of competitive bridge is threatened and that a risk of schism and the creation of organizations parallel to those that already exist cannot be excluded.

I think, as Chairman of the HLPC, that it is essential to initiate a large and important reflection on these questions, in order to find a common ground between the different stake-holders and to give us back the means of playing together, and of living together, which are today seriously threatened.



Headquarters: Maison du Sport International – 54 av. de Rhodanie – 1007 Lausanne – Switzerland

Tel.: +41 21 544 7218 – Fax: +41 21 601 2315

President's Address: Via Moscova 46/5 – 20121 Milano – Italy

Tel.: +39 02 367 04 987 – Fax: +39 02 367 05 962



A little history

It all started a little more than a year ago, when health requirements suspended live bridge and new competitions on the Internet were born to replace it.

Soon it became apparent that a number of players were cheating. These players seemed to be much more numerous than in the "normal" competitions, probably due to a greater ease of behaving dishonestly. Some may even have thought that playing on the Internet was not "real bridge" and that unethical behaviour was less condemnable.

As specific events were set up, organized by private structures and independent of the official federations, such as OCBL, ALT or others, cheating became more and more frequent, and more and more visible.

The obligation to fight against cheating

A number of players belonging to the world's bridge elite were moved by the situation and decided to react. They wanted to form a group of experts capable of identifying cheaters and wanted to have the means to exclude them from the competitions in which they participated.

It is particularly important to emphasize how natural this approach may have seemed. Many reasons converged and still converge to get rid of cheaters:

First, from a general game ethics perspective. There can be no question of continuing to practice an activity where cheating is easy and accepted. And even less that the use of new technologies in bridge, capable of rallying a new younger population, is synonymous with laxity in terms of the regularity of the game. In order for bridge to remain a fun and educational activity at all levels, it is imperative to get rid of cheating and cheaters.

Secondly, to offer an on-line alternative to the vast majority of club players, who need their activity to be secure. They need to be guaranteed tournaments and small competitions where the table manners and daily ethical practices are comparable to what they usually find in their club.

Finally, cheating at the elite and professional levels must be dealt with without weakness. On the one hand, the best players are exposed and represent the image of bridge to everyone else. To let the best players cheat with impunity would have a catastrophic effect on the image of the game, not only within the bridge world but also in terms of external communication.

On the other hand, it is equally important to protect the "good" professionals from the cheaters. To prevent them from obtaining, in an increasingly competitive market, results that do not conform to their level and, consequently, from "stealing" the contracts of honest players. Also to give sponsors the necessary assurances regarding the players they hire, with the certainty that they are only working with irreproachable players, and not to risk seeing the results acquired called into question.

Many practical difficulties to overcome

Once the principles had been defined and a consensus on values had been reached by the majority of high-level competition players, problems began to arise in many areas.

a) First, assembling the group of investigators was not so easy. It was necessary to assemble players with proven expertise, who had enough time to devote to the exercise and who could not be



accused of bias. This goal was partially achieved. Boye Brogeland, who had been at the origin of the denunciation of certain "live" cheaters, was strongly involved and became the spearhead of the investigation commission. Many champions came and went. Today, one can probably reproach the group with both a very marked cultural colouration, Anglo-Saxon and Northern European, and the almost exclusively professional character of the players who compose it. It is a pity that players from other origins have not been sufficiently integrated over time.

b) The most important practical difficulty was of course the methodology: how to establish, with sufficient reliability to convince, the guilt of the suspected players?

The Credentials Advisory Team (CAT), created and headed by Boye Brogeland, developed investigations in separate areas, each of which had its drawbacks.

Firstly, the experts examined the deals that had triggered the suspicion against the accused players. Several methods can be used. But no matter what process is used, and no matter how carefully an incriminating "deal file" is examined, the conclusions are highly questionable: investigative work on the players' bidding system is often incomplete due to lack of information; the motivations for each other's actions are not always obvious... One promising avenue, proposed by Kit Woolsey, is to examine a large number of deals from the same player and classify the surprising deals as Incriminating/ Neutral/ Absolute. If the proportion of incriminating deals is significantly higher, the "odds" of dealing with a cheater increase.

Another method consists of obtaining a very large number of deals played by the "suspect" and comparing the result of these deals with statistical data on the result of the best pairs, on leading, in defence and in bidding. This method, developed by Nicolas Hammond, has the advantage of being relatively quick to carry out; taking into account the very large database he has at his disposal and his ability to capture new deals very quickly. Unfortunately, the problems of sample definition, comparison of the contexts in which the deals were played by one or the other, and finally of statistical reliability are such that the results obtained do not have the value of decisive proof, but are only warning indicators as to the possibly criminal behaviour of the observed player. Furthermore, the assumptions made in the algorithms are subjective and may not be agreed to by all.

The great difficulty in obtaining "evidence" that could be used in an adversarial prosecution led the group of experts to turn in two other directions. The first was to obtain information from the online gaming platforms - and particularly from BBO, which for a long time was the only platform for online competitions - about the connections used by the suspect players. Indeed, for many months, the easiest individual cheating consisted in players logging in several times, with one of the aliases kibitzing the other at the table. The cheater would then have immediate access to the deals they were playing.

If BBO agreed to provide this data, the double login information was a decisive element in the prosecution process.

There was a legal problem. What people in general (and bridge players in particular) do on their computers and specifically on the Internet is their own business - unless there is a mandate by a judge, in the same way as for a phone tap, for example. The freedom to browse is guaranteed in Europe by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). And a site which, like BBO, would disclose these data to third parties is exposed to criminal proceedings.



Solutions to circumvent these legal provisions have been put in place.

But the most important problem was not solved: how to bring the culprits to their senses? The CAT's experts then favoured a path that seemed natural: the only way to get peace of mind was to obtain confessions from accused. Thus, all uncertainty was removed and imposing sanctions seemed simple and legitimate.

The loss of consensus and the consideration of the "rights of the defence"

Paradoxically, it is from the moment this policy was implemented that the consensus around the work of the group of experts cracked. Indeed, how to obtain these famous confessions? Some players, tormented by their conscience, quickly confessed their wrongdoing. Thus appeared the confessions of Michal Nowosadzki and Sylvia Shi, then, a little later, a partial confession of Cedric Lorenzini.

Convincing the others to confess was less easy. To achieve their goals, the CAT experts used various means of pressure. In particular, they threatened the suspected players that if they did not confess, they would publish the files they had compiled and thus ruin their reputation in the bridge world.

For this purpose, the CAT had at its disposal the columns of BridgeWinners, which has become a kind of social network for bridge, quick to seize and relay "sensational" information without always questioning the relevance of their publication. Thus, on the network appeared files incriminating Giorgio Duboin, Andrey Gromov and Anna Gulevich, among others.

At that time, many voices of dissent were heard. And many players, often less active in the media but representing a "silent majority" began to question the validity of the actions taken by CAT. They insisted on one fundamental point: that making accusations about a particular player known to the general public was simply defamatory, as long as the players' guilt had not been established. The procedure adopted was such that the players in the spotlight were not given access to their files before publication, and therefore had no opportunity to defend themselves before their integrity was questioned. This was a clear violation of the rights of the defence and as such shocked many players in many countries.

This way of proceeding also resulted in the cases moving towards an increasingly confrontational resolution. Players who were publicly accused, if they refused to confess, had no choice but to initiate criminal proceedings. The lack of a regulatory environment left them with no choice but to sue for defamation in court, which was both cumbersome and damaging to the image of the game. At a time when bridge as a whole was under threat, due to the pandemic and the end of face-to-face play, the outbreak of increasingly violent cases was not reassuring. Moreover, it was inevitable that interpersonal disputes would arise, due to the personalization of the accusation. These disputes make it problematic to return to competitive bridge as if nothing had happened when we can finally play live again.

Breaking the deadlock: International Federations take action

The objectives of the fight against cheating that have been specified above are clear and consensual. For the most part - except for the part relating to relations with sponsors - they can be taken up by bridge institutions, national and international federations.



Indeed, during the incubation period of the disease, many voices were raised to criticize the immobility of public bridge organizations. According to their detractors, they should have immediately seized the problems as soon as they were known and proposed perfect and universal solutions in less time than it takes to write.

The reality was more complex, of course. In particular, the federations as a whole, with the notable exception of the ACBL, did not have statutes that allowed them to deal with "disciplinary" problems in the broadest sense of the word that might arise on the Internet. According to the statutes of the sports federations, they only have the right to act in the field of competitions that are placed under their aegis. As Internet gaming is a private activity, they do not have the right to interfere.

After months of debate, effort and legal consultations, the World Federation finally found a solution. On November 28, 2020, it promulgated a new Disciplinary Code. This one stipulates that the WBF is able to deal with cases of breaches of the rules of international bridge anywhere, including on the Internet, if they risk damaging the image of high-level bridge, which is therefore systematically the case if these breaches are made by international players.

Please note that this ability to refer cases to the WBF applies to events occurring after the promulgation of the new code. For what happened before November 28, the old code applies and the WBF (and consequently the other federations, see below principle of reciprocity) was not competent.

Even if some do not accept this reading of the new code, it is important to insist: this point of law has been repeatedly emphasized in WBF publications and no legal expert disputes it.

From this point on, the WBF has equipped itself with the necessary instruments to manage the problem of cheating on the Internet by extending what previously existed for "live" competition bridge. In essence:

If a player is accused of a breach of ethics, a report must be made to the organisation that has to deal with it via whatever suitable method is indicated on their website or in any journals. In principle, this is the NBO to which the person belongs. If the NBO does not have the appropriate structures to handle the case, it is forwarded to the relevant zone or directly to the WBF.

The report is then investigated. At the WBF level, the investigation is conducted by the new investigation committee appointed following the publication of the Disciplinary Code, under the direction of Eric Laurant. (<http://www.worldbridge.org/governance/disciplinary-committees/#Investigation-Committee>)

The Investigation Committee is then in a position to investigate an accusation, by giving the accused player the opportunity to speak. If the IC finds strong evidence of guilt it hands the case to the Prosecutor, who initiates the adversarial process in front of the Disciplinary Panel which issues the verdict and, in case of guilt, the sanctions.

One of the most important points of this procedure is the necessary respect of the rule of reciprocity. Depending on the accusations, a player's case may be dealt with at the level of his own federation or, if the federation fails to act, at a higher level. In all cases, the decision taken by the investigating body is valid, by reciprocity, in all areas managed by the WBF. Thus, if a player is suspended by his federation, this suspension will apply in all WBF member federations and of



course, in the events managed directly by the zone to which his federation belongs (EBL, USBF, etc.). Conversely, if the player is found not guilty, this decision will apply equally everywhere.

The situation today

The implementation of the new federal provisions was not immediate, of course. As a result, today we are in a hybrid situation where several systems coexist.

Private organizers continue to follow their own rules, often in accordance with CAT recommendations. The "World Bridge Tour" has been created, an organization that grants a "game license" independent of the official bodies.

In order to participate in these competitions, players must apply for a license, which the WBT, acting as a Credential Committee, can refuse without further explanation. If a problem arises in the competition, some organizers take the law into their own hands, regardless of the official procedures. Sanctions are applied which are valid in the particular area of these organizations.

The federations, which increasingly organize their own events, stick to their own rules and do not care about the decisions made by private organizations. This leads to difficult situations: players who are not allowed to play according to the WBT find themselves representing their country in official competitions. Players who are used to WBT competitions may be reluctant to meet them. Conversely, players who feel unfairly suspected and excluded may be very reluctant to meet their accusers in international competitions.

This duality of treatment cannot continue. If bridge competitions are to be held in a peaceful atmosphere and if players are to regain confidence in the organization of the competition, regardless of the place or medium in which it is held, it is imperative to unify the control, investigation and sanctioning bodies. Any other way of proceeding increases, in the short term, the risk of splitting competitive bridge. Are we going to end up like boxing, with different titles of world champions depending on the body that awards them? This prospect is both grotesque - given the small number of players concerned - and unbearable.

How do we move forward, how do we get on with our lives?

The central question that arises is simple to formulate, less to resolve: it is that of legitimacy. Today, since November 28, two legitimacies are confronting each other.

The first is the self-proclaimed legitimacy of a certain number of players who have decided, as we said earlier, to set themselves up as vigilantes, as "sheriffs" of the milieu. They were initially driven to do so by the prevailing vacuum and they fulfilled an important task. They were reinforced in their role by an environment that was favourable to them, as shown by the stance taken by certain sponsors organized in a pressure group. However, they must understand that, whatever their expertise and qualities, they have no mandate other than that which they have entrusted to themselves. They cannot speak for everyone; they cannot free themselves from distrust, suspicions of conflict of interest or of wanting to privilege an imperialist way of thinking.

On the other hand, international bodies represent a tried and tested mode of operation. The people in charge of the various issues are perfectly legitimate in their appointment. The federations are capable of managing the various aspects of the difficulties encountered by high-level bridge, whether it be legal or financial issues related to the indictment of so-and-so. They are also capable



of defining the sanctions related to this new "crime" by integrating them into the set of procedures provided for in disciplinary matters. Finally, they can guarantee the universality of the measures taken with regard to players. Players are guaranteed equal treatment regardless of their origin and position in the bridge and have the imprescriptible right to defend themselves.

How to reconcile these two entities? It is time to make proposals. As you can see, I prefer the legalist point of view and the follow-up of the procedures set up by the international federations. But, in my opinion, it is essential to take advantage of the experience accumulated by the WBT investigators over the past year.

By integrating them into the structures set up by the WBF, it could be possible to create a world working group with a double objective:

- 1/ to improve statistical methods and individual data analysis (including a call for projects in artificial intelligence) to make survey procedures more reliable
- 2/ and this is at least as important: to modify the conditions of play, both "live" and "online" to make cheating very difficult: play on tablets, video, etc...

It is also desirable and feasible to integrate them into the various committees of inquiry set up by the WBF, the EBL, the ACBL and the other zones, or even to integrate them into bodies of national federations when necessary. Those who have first and foremost sought to show a path of integrity should be welcomed with open arms, including by giving them important responsibilities within the structure.

But they must accept the universally accepted rules. In particular, it seems essential to place private events under the disciplinary rules of the WBF, as Alfredo Versace has done.

This should have three important practical consequences:

On the one hand, online tournament organizers must agree to abide by the procedures and decisions taken by the disciplinary bodies of the various federations. In other words, if a player is suspected of improper conduct, **the organizers of the site are responsible for making a report**, which they will forward to the federal body to which they belong, via the director responsible for the competition. In this regard it will be necessary to decide which authority is responsible for the organization of international online tournaments. Then they must comply with the results of the work of the ad hoc body and the sanctions that result from it.

On the other hand, **the principle of confidentiality of accusations** must be re-established in the communication of the sites and the various active members of the investigation committees. This deserves a little development. In bridge clubs all over the world, respect for the rules of courtesy and etiquette, as defined in Law 74 A and B of the international Laws of Duplicate Bridge, requires that one address one's opponents correctly. Universal jurisprudence has transformed this principle into a formal prohibition against calling one's opponent a cheat at the bridge table. Such behaviour, reported to the director, automatically leads to the exclusion of the player guilty of this breach.

I believe, as do many of the players interviewed on this very point, that this prohibition should be extended to the Internet and all related forms of publication. In other words, it should be strictly forbidden for anyone, whether they are a site manager, a member of an investigating committee or in charge of any other responsibility within bridge, to call a player a cheater, or even to publicly



imply, in hushed tones, that he or she is one. Anyone guilty of such an offence must run the risk of being excluded from the online tournament in which he or she is participating and, if he or she occupies another position, of being automatically called before a disciplinary body.

Finally, all players must agree to **abide by the disciplinary sanctions taken by the various entities in charge**. Again, failure to accept these sanctions must be referred to a disciplinary body. A few days ago, a friendly international competition was scheduled on the Internet between four national teams. Once the composition of the teams was known, two of the four teams decided to forfeit on the grounds that the other two teams had players they did not wish to play against.

It is obvious that such behaviour in an official competition is totally unmanageable and unacceptable.

It is important to make the players understand that they are not a substitute for a disciplinary body. As it stands, if a federation decides to qualify a player in its national representation, both the principle of reciprocity and the respect owed to the federation in question require the players to accept to fight against the player in question. Any other way of doing things can only turn our international events into pugilism in the short term, as soon as we can play at the bridge table again!

Dear friends, I have come to the end of this too long text. I hope that an exchange will be built around all the questions that have been raised here - and there are many. I hope that you will express your points of agreement and disagreement. Above all, I want you to enrich my proposals.

And finally, I hope that this reflection will take place fairly quickly, because time is running out: we must urgently find the conditions for living together, if we do not want the cancer of cheating and its metastases to definitively destroy the game that we love.

Philippe Cronier

Chairman, High Level Players Commission

phcronier@gmail.com