

CONTRACT BRIDGE ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

Minutes of International Committee Meeting for Trialists, held over Zoom on 1 December, 2023

A meeting of the trialists and potential trialists was held by the CBAI's International Committee (IC), over Zoom, on Friday 1 December 2023.

Attendees were: Gráinne Barton, Conor Boland, Martin Brady, John Carroll, Martin Carroll, Ciaran Coyne, Luca Crone, Harold Curran, Karel De Raeymaeker, Hilary Dowling-Long, Margaret Farren, John Ferguson, Margaret Fitzpatrick, Peter Goodman, Mairead Haugh, Suzanne Hill, Sonya Hillis, Sheila Horkan, Marie James, Mary Kelly-Rogers, Bríd Kemple, Niall Kilroy, Michael MacAuliffe, Orla McEntee, Aoife MacHale, Ann Murphy, Fearghal O'Boyle, BJ O'Brien, Maire O'Connor, Derek O'Gorman, John Phelan, Lucy Phelan, Johanne Powell, Breda Synnott, Teresa Rigney, Tomás Roche, Fran Ronan, Kathleen Vaughan, Terry Walsh, and CBAI CEO Dermot O'Brien.

Derek O'Gorman chaired the meeting on behalf of the IC. He indicated that he would commence the meeting with a short summary on behalf of the IC, would address some questions that had been sent to the IC in advance, and would then open the meeting for questions and comments from the attendees. He hoped the meeting would be participative; the IC was keen to hear feedback from trialists and potential trialists, and their wishes would be taken into consideration in the organisation of trials.

Derek outlined the schedule of CBAI trials that had been agreed and "set in stone" for future reference. The Camrose trials, over the October bank holiday weekend, had the benefit of a four-day timetable, and the IC felt, given that the event itself was over two weekends, the extra day should be utilised. The Lady Milne is over a single weekend, and the trials occupy three days. Trials notices had been posted 3 months in advance of the trials themselves.

All trials had utilised a teams rather than a pairs format. In the view of the IC, based on their experience, team chemistry was very important in selection, which argued for teams trials. It was noted this was the format used by many of the leading bridge nations. In addition, the mood of the last trialists' discussion was in favour of teams, although there had been opposing views. He noted that there is no shortage of high-quality international events (EBL transnationals, major EBU events like the Spring Fours, etc) that give pairs the opportunity to create partnerships and test themselves at the highest level.

The IC had listened to some criticisms levelled at last season's trials. The number of boards had been increased, and longer round-robins had been played, and a semi-final/final approach had been adopted, in accordance with the view of the last trialists' meeting. Slow play had been addressed, and the committee had received no reports of slow play as an issue in this season's trials. Crossimps scoring was available as a matter of course in the trials.

There had been a commitment to hold trials outside Dublin periodically, and it was felt that regional bridge centre offered the most suitable facilities. The Camrose trials in Limerick had gone very smoothly; Derek thanked the local organisers for their part in making sure that was the case. No decision had been taken in terms of venues for next season as yet.

The Pre-Qualifier (PQ) trials had been a great success. They had attracted a decent entry, been popular with the participants, and had created completely different sets of qualifiers between the two years. All would have benefited from the experience. It was proposed to continue with these trials, and, as an additional incentive, the CBAI had offered €1,000 worth of coaching to each of the qualifying teams as part of their prize. A consolation prize of a bursary of €500 was also being offered to the runners-up in the Lady Milne and Camrose trials in years in which only one team

was selected for the event proper; the bursary was to be used on a bridge-related activity to be agreed with the IC (e.g. entry into an overseas competition of note). As a result of this season's experience, it was proposed that a formal "match manager" be appointed (on a paid basis) to look after the non-TD elements of the trials weekend (venue, facilities, set-up and close-down, etc) to assist the TD. It was also proposed to develop closer links with the trials committees of the IBU and NIBU to ensure better co-ordination in the future.

Derek concluded his opening comments by thanking his committee colleagues, Lucy, Hilary, Martin, and Ciarán, for their hard work during the year, and noted that, as a result of the rotation policy that applied to the IC, two spots would become available at the end of season. He encouraged people to put their names forward to ensure that international bridge continued to be well looked after.

John Carroll echoed Derek's comments on the usefulness of high-level overseas competitions; he and his partners had found them invaluable in their development. He welcomed the increase from 144 boards to 196 in the Camrose trials, but felt the format of a qualifying knockout phase and subsequent semi-finals/final meant that not all boards mattered, as they did in most international competitions, including the Camrose itself. Either there should be a carryover, or, better still in his view, a longer complete round-robin format should be adopted. He welcomed the junior players, and the qualifiers from the PQ trials, and felt it was not optimal that, in the current model, they had to go home at the halfway stage this year. Terry Walsh said that he agreed strongly with this final point.

BJ O'Brien raised the issue of adding a Mixed Teams competition to the home internationals calendar. Apparently Julian Pottage of Wales had written to the BGB secretariat with this suggestion. Dermot O'Brien, as the CBAI's BGB representative, responded to this question. Whilst the BGB committee welcomed the idea of a mixed home championships in principle, both costs and calendar might prove stumbling blocks. Several nations were already stretched by the five weekends already in play, and Julian's proposal to alternately drop one event to allow for the mixed weekend seemed likely to be unpopular. It was agreed that this was an interesting idea, but needed further consideration.

John Ferguson asked whether the upcoming IBU Senior Trials would be on a teams or pairs format. Derek responded that no final decision had been taken on this, but it was most likely to be teams.

Gráinne Barton welcomed the innovation of the bursary for the runners-up and the coaching for the PQ winners. She agreed with John Carroll that all boards should count in our trials; that's what happens in the Camrose, European Championships, etc. She has maintained for some time that closing dates for entry should be considerably earlier than currently, which would allow more time for the IC to weigh up the issues on the format, and would allow players to plan flights/accommodation/days off work well in advance.

Peter Goodman agreed that a double round-robin was the best format, and that it is used in other countries. He noted that some other home countries reserve the selection of the team for the second weekend of the Camrose until after the first weekend has been completed, and wonders if this should be considered. Bríd Kemple agreed with this. She also noted that the Irish women's team had received a last-minute invitation to the inaugural Women's Champions Cup, when the Israeli team withdrew at short notice. It had proved impossible to accept this year's invitation at such short notice, but the possibility of further invitations to this event needed to be built into our thinking, especially as this season's clashed with the Lady Milne trials. It was noted that invitations to the Champions Cup were based on the preceding European Championships, and as such would generally be known well in advance. Bríd also said that she has proposed to the IBU Council that a stipend be offered to the IBU Women's Team to play in the Spring Fours; offers of a similar nature from the various bodies need to be co-ordinated.

Martin Brady passed on two comments on behalf of someone else who could not attend the meeting. Firstly, in the case of established partnerships, could partnership rather than individual points be used to establish eligibility, and secondly, consideration should be given to sending three pairs on as a qualifying team from the PQ trials, rather than two as currently. On the first point, Derek noted that derogations could be sought, and, in the case of an established partnership, would generally be viewed favourably. On the second, Dermot noted that the two qualifying pairs currently had the option to add a third pair (qualifying by right rather than from the PQ trials) to make a team of 6, but that option had only been exercised in one instance out of four thus far. Martin responded that he realised this, but his questioner felt that having six qualifiers from each trials event would expand the range of talent more quickly.

Gráinne Barton said she was in favour of a mixed home international championship. In many events, the mixed competitions attracted the highest numbers of all; if that were the case here, perhaps the trials would fund the end-competitions satisfactorily. Bríd Kemple felt it was important to have someone on hand to congratulate the winners of the trials, especially those winning their first caps. Derek and Dermot responded that the match manager role would encompass a formal opening and closing component.

Sonya Hillis commented that she felt 12-board or longer matches would be preferable for the PQ trials. Derek wondered if this were feasible in the time available. If not, then the event would need to be run on a Swiss basis. Sonya said she would prefer this, but Fran Ronan said she felt it was more appropriate in the PQ trials that all played all. Sheila Horkan supported this view.

Tomás Roche said that the IC should know the number of entrants sufficiently in advance to decide on the appropriate format/schedule, rather than having pre-formulated models. Entrants could be split into two seeded groups if necessary. He felt that the best-performing pair from the trials should be selected to represent Ireland. Derek responded that while he understood the logic of that, the IC had decided on a teams format for the moment; if a team of four won, they could choose another pair, and the rankings would presumably play some part in that choice.

BJ O'Brien noted that the mood of the players at this meeting, in contrast to the last one, seemed to favour double round-robins rather than a format of semi-finals/final. Derek said he too had noted that; the IC would consider this carefully in deciding on the format for next season's trials. Tomás Roche stated that a double round-robin favoured the strongest teams. He preferred a single round-robin in stanzas with a mandatory change of pairs.

Karel De Raeymaeker raised the issue of the standard of trialists. Apart from a few junior players, he felt there has been little new blood in years. He'd like to see a clear development path for promising younger players. Derek agreed that, from his observation, some other European nations seem to be sending new, and younger, players to tournaments. Martin Brady said he was glad that this had been raised – his perspective was that a core element of the role of the IC was to ensure the development of new international-standard players. Fran Ronan noted the role of the Junior Committee in developing junior players; perhaps the older aspirants need a similar coaching effort behind them. Derek and Dermot noted the commitment to coaching for the PQ trials qualifiers, and Dermot also noted that a new, and younger, pair had qualified for the Lady Milne this season, and had won the two most recent Women's Pairs Championships, which was a good sign.

Luca Crone, with support from Martin Brady in his professional capacity, noted that junior players may find it difficult to commit to trials that involve play on the Friday afternoon. Derek accepted this, but said that there would always need to be a balance between the total time allocated to the trials and the requirement for participants to take time off work/study.

There being no further comments, Derek thanked the participants for their input. He was pleased that there had been lots of new ideas, and noted that there seemed to be a change in mood in relation to the most appropriate format for trials. The IC would reflect on all those ideas in its deliberations on next season's trials. Dermot thanked Derek and his committee colleagues on

behalf of the CBAI, and the members, for all their hard work during the year. We are fortunate that such experienced and otherwise busy people give up their time to volunteer in the services of Irish international bridge.

Appendix

The IC Convenor subsequently received a communication on matters not discussed directly during the meeting. He felt it was appropriate to add it here as an appendix. The main points were:

The primary function of the IC is to select the best Irish team(s) to compete each year in the Camrose, Lady Milne and Teltscher competitions. The best performing pair in the trials (regardless of format) must be selected by the IC to represent Ireland.

Every pair should play against every other pair in the final round. In a round-robin every pair should play at least one stanza against every team. While each pair must play a minimum of 50 % of the boards, no pair should be allowed to play two more stanzas than other pair of a six-person team.

Any pair that considers themselves good enough to play for Ireland should be allowed to enter a qualifying round for the trials, with automatic entry to the final round being reserved for pairs with a minimum level of National Points (maybe 500).

No addition of a pair to a team should be permitted once the final weekend of the trials commences.

A single round-robin is the best and fairest approach. The earliest start should be 10:30 am, and latest finish should be 9:30 pm. The first half of each match should be played first, with the second half being organised to ensure the higher scoring teams play directly in the final stanzas.

An American Swiss approach should be used where there is an uneven number of teams, to avoid a sitout.

A substantial break (minimum 100 minutes) should take place at the mid-point.

The IC should consider having different trials formats over a number of years, with players voting for their preferred option at the end of the cycle.

The entry fee for the trials should reflect the number of boards played by each team.

Consideration should be given to qualifying six pairs from the trials to form a squad. The Coach or Captain should then select the team for the event based on performance during practice sessions and results in major competitions during the season.