

Mark and Ausra—

I read with interest Mark's cover note and the minutes of the B's needs meetings. There are many good ideas in the list. Hopefully, many of them will be implemented. But I was struck by something in your cover note:

The District President, Ausra Geaski of Connecticut, approached me about eight months ago and asked me to initiate and drive an effort aimed at finding out what we could do about turning around the declining attendance at our regionals — particularly amongst our Flight B players....

One big lesson from our kickoff meeting in Newton was that *the attendance issue was not specific or unique to Flight B players, and if we wanted to get more Flight B players, we would have to turn our attention to Flight A as well because they indeed were a big part of the problem. We realized that we needed to focus on what is indeed the lion's share of our membership — our Flight C players. 73% of District 25's members have fewer than 500 masterpoints!*

The italics are mine. Basically, what this says is that we need to improve attendance in every flight. That would be nice, but I believe the way to that result is by concentrating on a few sectors of the masterpoint spectrum—particularly on the low end and the high ends of Flight C.

We indeed have a declining (or perhaps more accurately, an oscillating) attendance at our Regionals: Last year, Newton and Warwick were up compared to 2011, but the others were down. (See Table 1, attached). The total number of attendees for the three tournaments for which I had 3-year data was down about 15%.

Clearly we need to do something to reverse the decline.

What I learned in many years in advertising and sales promotion is that successful programs begin with an analysis: who makes up the audience that offers the greatest potential return on the investment in time and money. When you know, then concentrate on that audience.

It might pay to start with some numbers.

We can look at table counts. But this is a very coarse measure of attendance. Perhaps a better way to find out who did *not* come to our tournaments is to look at who *did* come. To do this, I took a detailed look at the attendance at our last Regional, in Sturbridge...and compared the data on the actual attendees (numbers, home states, masterpoints and putative flights) with that of all members of D25.

(There is one caveat: I only have Masterpoint and home location data on those attendees who won at least a fraction of a masterpoint. As Tables 2a and 2b show, there were some--7.3% in Sturbridge and 8.8% in Cromwell--whose data therefore are not included.)

GEOGRAPHY and SEASONALITY

Because there are seasonal, as well as geographic, influences on attendance I started by comparing Sturbridge attendance with Cromwell. Tables 2a and 2b show how many players showed up for these tournaments. Tables 3a and 3b tell how many of these attendees were from our District...and how many were from elsewhere. Tables 4a and 4b break down the attendance at both Cromwell and Sturbridge by states in D25. The first surprise, for me, was that there were substantial differences (21% from out-of-District in Cromwell; only 12% in Sturbridge. Table 5 shows where these visitors came from.

The second surprise was that in Cromwell, 19% of our *total* attendance came from two states (New York and New Jersey) not in our District. At Sturbridge, 8% of our attendance came from visitors: mostly from New York and secondly from Florida. (It also came as a surprise—and an embarrassment—that more players came to Cromwell from Rhode Island than they did from Connecticut. Clearly, the CBA has work to do).

I've only looked at two tournaments (it might pay to look at others, as well). But clearly the data indicate that our promotional efforts should extend outside our District. Advertising in the Bridge Bulletin is certainly helpful. But is it enough?

FLIGHTS and STRATA

Table 6 compares, by flights, the number of attendees (who won masterpoints) at Sturbridge with the flights for the entire membership. Here's the third surprise: Almost half of our members in Flight A actually attended Sturbridge. So, it seems, Flight A attendance is *not* a problem. Even if we somehow increased attendance to 70%, we'd only be adding about 50 players.

Not surprising is the much lower attendance rate in the B and C flights. If we were to concentrate our efforts on C-level players and increased their attendance by just 1% we'd add more players than by increasing Flight A by 40%.

As I mentioned earlier, flight attendance is a very coarse measure of attendance. Instead, let's look at the attendance broken down by MP milestones. That's in Table 7. The first two rows show that almost half of our members have fewer than 100 masterpoints. And, sadly, only about 2% of them came to Sturbridge.

I made a list of the masterpoint holding of the 868 members who won MPs at Sturbridge (it's not included in the Excel file—but I can send it to anyone who wants to look)—and compared this list with the total membership of D25. As shown in Table 7, we have 1,758 members—almost 22%—with fewer than 10 MPs. But only 6 of the 1,758 attended Sturbridge. Can we realistically hope to get more to attend our Regionals? Probably not; most of them do not even play club games regularly. So instead of trying to get them to come to Regionals, we might consider how to help our Units and Clubs get them started by coming to clubs, and then Sectionals, instead of jumping into Regional tournaments, even with 99er events.

What about the 25.6% of our members with 10-99 MPs?. Only 82 out of 2,081 (3.9%) of them came to Sturbridge. This is a more fertile field for 299er events.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Table 7 is that it shows that the more points one has, the more likely to attend a Regional...until reaching a Flight break. Graphs 1 and 2 make this point most obvious. Look at the percentages from 0-99 to 300-750: at each step there are more attendees than at the previous one. Then there was a drop-off after 750—followed by a continuous climb in attendance percentage all the way to 10,000—where it drops again.

Clearly, advancement in rank (and title) is important to our members. We should look for ways to capitalize on this in our programs and promotions.

CONCLUSION

In reading the minutes from the last two B's Needs meetings I see that there are many great ideas being suggested by members of every Unit...including some for reaching members in most every MP stratum or flight range. But there seems to be no coherent plan for the *District*...programs that get everybody on board.

There is a lot to be learned from analysis—make that *further* analysis—of our attendance data. What we learn can help us focus on programs which offer the greatest return on our investment in time and money.

For starters, we can stop trying (if, in fact we ever started) to get more attendance from the small Flight A pool (only 3% of our membership). Instead we should concentrate on the much larger pool at the low end of the MP scale—almost 50% of our members have fewer than 100 MPs.

We should also look at the top end of Flight C. There are as many members in the 300-749 range (1,346) as there are in all of Flight B (1,342). Only 18% of the top C's showed up in Sturbridge. How can we help get them over the hump to Flight B? The Gold Rush Pairs and Teams have been quite successful (maybe even *too* successful, as Bob Bertoni and other have pointed out). What do we do next?

Perhaps we should (ACBL rules permitting) revise our flights and our strats. And maybe we should have more strata and more stratified games. Why not A/X plus BCD pairs (as at the Nationals and some other Regionals)? In other words, let's try and make our schedule more attractive for players at the lower levels

And, of course, as I mentioned earlier, we should consider how best to reach players from outside our District since they make up a considerable portion of our attendance.

All our efforts to increase attendance at our Regionals have been lumped together under the name "B's Needs." Clearly that is—as the minutes demonstrate—far too restrictive and somewhat misleading. We need to concentrate on the C's. Basically, all I'm saying is that we should have a coherent District program that looks at all segments of the market—and focuses on the most fruitful segments. Everything else that can be done locally is frosting on the cake.