

**MESSAGE FROM ACBL PRESIDENT, GEORGIA HEATH  
IN RESPONSE TO LETTER FROM DISTRICT 25, WHICH FOLLOWS.  
(These letters are also published on ACBL. ORG)**

Dear Members of the ACBL,

On May 22, 2020, an undated letter was distributed to District and Unit Officers by the ACBL's District 25 officers, Director-in-Charge, and Tournament Manager. While I do believe in the right to free speech, that right does not include disseminating falsehoods about the ACBL and specific individuals. A copy of that letter is attached to this response.

Some of the letter is the writers' opinions about issues facing the ACBL. We encourage advice and comments from our membership and volunteers. However, there are allegations which are factually incorrect. Many of these are about Jay Whipple, former ACBL President, a member of the Board of Directors from 2014 through 2019, and owner of The Common Game and Deep Finesse.

In that letter two main accusations were made. I will address each in turn.

**1. The Board will prohibit Districts and Units from exercising their historic rights to hold Regional and Sectionals, respectively, online during the coronavirus pandemic, the effect of which will reverberate after the pandemic ends.**

A motion under review proposes that Districts and Units run online Regionals and Sectionals, respectively. That motion has not yet been formally acted upon.

While it is true that Districts and Units have traditionally run face-to-face Regionals and Sectionals, ACBL regulations are silent related to online Regionals and Sectionals. We simply never contemplated a pandemic that totally shut down mass gatherings all over the world prohibiting face-to-face bridge play, including tournaments. The future may or may not include online Regionals and Sectionals run by Districts and Units, but that day has not yet arrived, partly due to technology obstacles.

Frankly, we are focused on the survival of the ACBL as an association, the survival of bridge clubs, and the future of bridge as an entertaining and relevant pastime.

**2. The BOD continues to out-source much of its responsibilities, and pay out substantial fees, to a besmirched and recently reprimanded former BOD member.**

The ACBL Board does not out-source its responsibilities. We meet regularly by conference call, GoToMeeting, GoToWebinar and Zoom. We met for five days during the times that were previously set aside for Board meetings during the canceled Columbus NABC. We have two special board meetings planned before the regular meeting in July. Committees and

task forces meet frequently using Zoom or similar technologies. As is our usual practice, we discuss the business of the ACBL and act on assigned tasks, motions and discussion items. The Board and its committees and task forces are fully engaged during this time of crisis.

The “besmirched and recently reprimanded former BOD member” I assume is a reference to Jay Whipple who departed the ACBL Board in December 2019. Jay has been instrumental in the process of getting the Support Your Club games and virtual clubs up and running online. These games are essential to the survival of our clubs. He is significantly involved in the technical side of these games. He does not make ACBL or Bridge Base Online policy.

The ACBL Board does not pay out substantial fees to Jay Whipple. In fact, the Board does not pay any fees to him. The ACBL is not paying him or The Common Game any fees for his work during this pandemic. If a club chooses to use the enhanced version of The Common Game, the club will pay The Common Game \$100.00 per year. The ACBL will pay nothing.

District 25 may think Jay is “besmirched”. They had a dispute with him last year. Jay was not reprimanded by any official body of the ACBL because of this dispute.

Later in the letter, it is stated that “[w]hatever other benefits TCG (The Common Game) offers, clearly one of them involves financial benefits to its founder. Issues such as conflict of interest, since this person was recently a BOD member and even ACBL President, appear to be of no concern to many of his BOD peers.” The result of a conflict of interest investigation by the Audit Committee of the BOD was reported out as part of the minutes of the Summer 2018 Board of Directors Meeting. The investigation found no conflict of interest and the Board of Directors determined that each transaction involving The Common Game was fair, reasonable and in the ACBL’s best interest. The investigation found there was no financial benefit to Jay from the services he provides to bridge. To date, there continues to be no financial benefit to Jay. The letter goes on to state that Jay reportedly receives “from the ACBL an undisclosed amount for every online table”. This is just not true. Jay receives no money from the ACBL for his services.

These aspersions about Jay offend me to the core. Jay has donated not only his time, but that of his employees, at no cost to the ACBL. Management and staff of the ACBL work closely with him making the expansion into online bridge possible. To disseminate inaccurate statements like these is irresponsible and inappropriate. As far as I am concerned, Jay served the ACBL with distinction during his tenure on the Board and continues to selflessly give his time as a member to add value to the ACBL.

These statements are also an insult to the Audit Committee and its members, who, I assure you, take their responsibilities very seriously.

The letter goes on to elucidate several other minor complaints regarding recent actions of the Board and management: (i) the Board legislated an online Regional without consulting the Districts; (ii) ACBL management “decreed” a silver week event without legislative process

required by ACBL Bylaws and awarded increased masterpoints® without any action by the Masterpoint Committee; and (iii) the rollout of the Board reorganization from 25 to 13 members will alienate Board members from any natural constituency.

It is true that the early May online Regional and the upcoming week-long Silver Linings event were planned without consultation of the Districts, the Units or the full Board of Directors. The ACBL Bylaws do not speak to masterpoint awards and ACBL regulations provides that quantitative changes to masterpoint awards will be effective only after two readings of a motion to do so. I, as Board President, was notified of the arrangements for the online Regional and the Silver Linings week before they were announced, and the changes I requested were made. I believed then, and still believe now, that these actions were within the purview of Management to take as a business response to the crisis created by the coronavirus. However, now that work does not have to be done as quickly as before, the Board will be involved in these decisions. A meeting previously scheduled for May 28 has been pivoted to address that issue. Management has provided to the Board a plan for the rest of 2020. That plan will be discussed by the full Board at the upcoming meeting. Changes may be required, and parameters will be established for when Management must consult with the Board before taking any action. However, it is not the Board's intention to hamstring Management as they make day-to-day business decisions during this pandemic.

The silver masterpoints to be awarded during the Silver Linings week online games are not quantitative changes to masterpoint awards – they are a temporary inducement for online play during a crisis. If any of you expect the masterpoint awards being awarded during this crisis to be permanent, you may be disappointed. Regulations about online play after face-to-face bridge play resumes may look very different because the situation will be very different. Management and the Board are grappling with these issues of bridge post-coronavirus. The Competition and Conventions Committee and the Masterpoints Committee are discussing issues raised by the new online games and will be presenting motions for the Board to consider in June and July.

The reorganization of the Board of Directors currently in process is not an attempt to get rid of Units and Districts. This movement to reduce the number of Board members was spearheaded by some members of the Board of Directors but also by many members of the Board of Governors. It was a consistent, multi-year effort. In the final attempt to draft a plan that would be approved by the then-existing Board of Directors, the first requirement was that Units and Districts would continue to operate as they always had. It was clear that any attempt to reorganize the Board that involved eliminating Units and Districts would fail.

It is interesting that this letter states that the motion to allow Units and Districts to run online tournaments has only four supporters. As preparation for voting on this motion next week, I had asked each committee of the Board to discuss it. I try to attend all committee meetings. My estimate, based on the comments that I have heard, is that there are more than four Board members currently in favor of the motion. But this motion has been thoroughly considered by the Board. It was discussed at length via email, at our May 13 every other week conference call,

and in multiple committee meetings. Management is opposed to the idea because it does not have the resources to run these tournaments at this time. This resource problem may, in fact, ultimately reduce the number of Board members in favor of this motion.

In closing, when I chose to run for the position of President of the ACBL Board of Directors, I knew that criticism would be part of that job. What is said in this letter about me, even though inaccurate, is the letter writers' right. But I do not have to sit back and allow them to spread lies about volunteers or to denigrate my fellow Board members for doing their job to the best of their ability. Many members of the Board are working much harder than usual during this crisis. I have asked committees and task forces to take advantage of no face-to-face games to push their work ahead, and they are doing so. And the efforts put forth by our employees during this time are amazing. We have completed projects that would have been unbelievable pre-coronavirus. The recent layoffs mean the remaining employees are operating with very full work-loads. And yet, despite all of this effort, it looks like the ACBL will suffer significant losses this year due to the collapse of face-to-face games and tournaments. If it were not for the online games, that loss would have been staggering. The ACBL Board of Directors, staff, Management and numerous volunteers are working hard to make sure the ACBL is still here next year and that you get to enjoy some bridge play this year while you shelter in place.

If you have ideas for the future or feedback on the actions that we have taken, as always communicate them to your Board of Governors Representative or to your District Director or send an email to me at [district8director@acbl.org](mailto:district8director@acbl.org).

Take care and stay well.  
Georgia Heth  
President, ACBL Board of Directors  
May 24, 2020

## **Attachment to ACBL President's Response (Original Letter)**

To: District and Unit Officers

From: Officers of District 25 (New England):

Jack Mahoney, President  
Curtis Barton, Vice President  
Carolyn Weiser, Secretary  
Joseph Brouillard, Treasurer  
Lois Deblois, Past President  
Peter Marcus, Director-In-Charge  
Sally Kirtley, Tournament Manager

Re: Recent and Planned Decisions by ACBL Board of Directors

To whom it may concern:

We are writing to you about several issues that either have been recently addressed by the ACBL Board of Directors ("BOD") or will be decided at a planned BOD meeting on May 28. We are concerned that the trend represented by a continuing series of BOD actions demonstrates that the people we have elected to represent us on the national Board have abdicated their responsibility to the long-term health of bridge in favor of an inbred collegiality that serves no constituent's interests.

First, the BOD has indicated that it will prohibit Districts and Units from exercising their historic right to hold regional and sectional tournaments, respectively, online during the duration of the pandemic. This hiatus from live bridge could be far longer than many have forecast, long enough in fact that any policy decisions made during that time could reverberate even after the resumption of live bridge.

In addition, the BOD continues to out-source much of its responsibilities, and pay out substantial fees, to a besmirched and recently reprimanded former BOD member. As custodians of bridge in your District or Unit, you can be in on the decision whether this really is the direction you would choose for the ACBL.

### **Online bridge: From curiosity used by a few to major platform in the near term**

When live bridge so suddenly halted, a mass migration began to online bridge. First, we applaud the ACBL for helping BBO to integrate member needs with the technology. In these efforts, BBO has been a flexible and potent partner, quickly expanding capacity for the various virtual games that have provided needed funds to clubs in many localities.

So far, so good. However, the BOD then, without consulting with the Districts, legislated the first on-line regional. We are pleased that this emergency measure was a resounding success for the ACBL, which reportedly received a badly-needed \$250K in income from those 4 days.

However, more recently and troublingly, the ACBL has now scheduled a "silver week" event, run by the virtual clubs, that will charge players a premium and award triple points (all silver, traditionally the domain of ACBL Units). As detailed later, this event was decreed by the ACBL management without any legislative process.

Considering these and likely more such events on the horizon, now seems to be the time for Districts and Units to decide how relevant we plan to be during and after this crisis. Recently, District 25's BOD representative proposed that Districts be allowed to run on-line regional tournaments during the weeks in which their now-canceled live tournaments would have been played. His proposal included a schedule of sanctioning fees that would greatly benefit the ACBL while allowing the Districts (if they so choose) to offer some normalcy to their players, many of whom might prefer to play in events limited to their District or Unit peers, to people they know.

While logistics for such events would need to be worked out, it is very likely that District and Unit participation would recruit more players, allowing those entities to generate significant revenue for their own purposes and for the ACBL.

Yet, to our amazement, an overwhelming majority of your BOD representatives has expressed no interest in this proposal. Even the prospects of greater player participation generating increased revenue for the ACBL, improving the organization's bottom line so that it might bring back valued employees, many of whom were furloughed after decades of loyal service, has excited no discussion among a majority of the BOD.

From multiple reports, only four of 25 BOD members are in favor of allowing the Units and Districts to sponsor online sectionals and regionals. That means, for most reading this, your BOD representative feels that you, as a Unit or District officer, have no current utility to the ACBL and so should be excluded from creatively participating in the evolving format of online bridge.

For decades, our game has been organized from clubs to sections to regions. Traditionally, we have blocked out six weeks a year in which localities do not compete with national events; during the year's other 46 weeks the ACBL has shepherded but not interfered with the right of Units and Districts to organize and run their own tournaments. But now, the ACBL seems to believe that such a long-term arrangement offers no useful precedent for current "emergency" plans. In other words, in the blink of an eye, Districts and Units have become irrelevant.

Considering the vector of this evolving policy, it is not unreasonable to ask whether, when "real" bridge returns, the BOD might continue to legislate Districts and Units out of existence. Ready to be rolled out is a reduction of the BOD from 25 to 13 members, meaning that 10 members of the "new" BOD would be elected from multiple Districts, effectively alienating BOD members from any natural constituency.

Should this trend continue, the BOD might well decide that Districts and Units have seen their day and are no longer economically viable. Should it choose this path, the BOD could claim primary jurisdiction over all bridge organizations in North America, just as it is doing now "virtually," with clubs operating as independent businesses and the ACBL running, on its own, small tournaments (let's call them sectionals) in many areas frequently and then larger tournaments (let's call them regionals) occasionally. The national BOD could pay local groups or individuals to make the arrangements, find hotels or other sites, for the ACBL to sign contracts, and then arrange for locals, either as volunteers or for small amounts of pay, to do local jobs like publicity, hospitality, caddying, etc. However, in this model the ACBL would run the tournaments and all the receipts would go directly to the ACBL.

This appears to be the model to which the current BOD aspires: Find a rationale to completely remove the local organizations from any bridge decision-making so that, when our game returns from online to physical tables, the ongoing reorganization can continue and be completed.

If you have long felt that local responsibility and involvement in bridge is not beneficial, and that the League would be far better off were the ACBL Board of Directors to control local as well as continent-wide bridge events, without any local distraction (more bluntly, without local organizations taking “the ACBL’s” money), then tell your BOD representative that you agree that centralizing control and cutting you, the units and districts, out of the bridge decision-making process, is the way to go.

However, if you see a benefit for local organizations to be active in bridge, both at physical tables and online, particularly when online bridge may be “all there is” for an extended period, then press your BOD representative to explain his/her position to excise units and districts from online bridge.

### **More related issues**

In addition to this usurpation of local bridge organizations’ rightful roles, the ACBL, under the direction and through the actions of the BOD, continues to operate recklessly and the President to act not as legislatively authorized but in an authoritarian way. Just in the last few weeks:

a) Despite ACBL bylaws that require any (!!) changes to masterpoint regulations to be approved by the BOD, and, in fact, to be approved in two successive BOD meetings, the ACBL management, with the backing of the ACBL President, scheduled, without any review by, let alone approval from, the BOD, an on-line “silver week” at the clubs with a 3X point increase.

When apprised of the illegality of that action, President Heth replied that the event had been publicized and so was too late to retract. She did not even attempt to legitimate her executive decision by retroactively submitting the proposal to the masterpoint committee and then, if approved, passing it on to the full BOD for the first of two mandatory readings. In this refusal to act according to the Bylaws, she made it clear that she had no interest in the organization’s governing law or the views of BOD members and the general membership.

b) For many years, The Common Game (“TCG”) has provided services to ACBL players. This service has allowed clubs to effortlessly pool their results so that players can see how they have performed not just against their local competition but in a much wider arena. While the commonality of the hands has caused some concerns, mainly those raised by diverse club starting times, the risks thus far have proved to be minimal. But this once limited and beneficial organization has grown into a gigantic entity. The founder of TCG was also the proponent and driving force behind the ill-conceived REACH games that would have transferred authority over Regional games from the District to the national BOD. Whatever other benefits TCG offers, clearly one of them involves financial benefits to its founder. Issues such as conflict of interest, since this person was recently a BOD member and even ACBL President, appear to be of no concern to many of his BOD peers.

Now, this has ramped up, with this person reportedly receiving from the ACBL an undisclosed amount for every online table. What are the services provided by TCG? They are remarkably minor. At a time like this, with no active bridge activity, and an entire Information Technology Department on staff, the services of TCG could be replicated by in-house ACBL services.

In conclusion, the train on which we are riding has gone off the rails. You must decide whether you care. If you think that recent decisions are all good, that an individual who is no longer part of the ACBL governing structure can use his continuing influence to divert what should be in-house efforts to his outside business, that ACBL Presidents should heretofore be encouraged to act at whim, and that your

local bridge organizations can be easily replaced, please tell your BOD representative you approve of the job she/he is doing.

But, if you feel your BOD representative is representing only him/herself and his/her BOD friends, if you would prefer that the BOD and the President follow its organization's Bylaws, and you want the ACBL to operate for the benefit of all bridge players, not a small few, then please tell your BOD representative that, if current trends continue, starting with the upcoming vote that would prevent Districts and Units from running their own Regional and Sectional tournaments, you will make your displeasure known now and when the next BOD election comes up.

We appreciate your support in reading this letter, your assistance to improve the ACBL, and any support you can offer to refocus the BOD on its role of benefitting all bridge players. Please share with us your thoughts and reactions. If it turns out that we are standing alone when we thought we were part of a like-minded crowd, we will reluctantly accept that reality. Thanks.