

Esther Says, "Is ACBL Bridge Dying, and What Can YOU Do to Help?"

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen¹

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<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

Any even only partially-sentient duplicate bridge player must realize that ACBL bridge has entered perilous straights. It was not always so!

Bridge did have its "hay day", in the 1920's and the 1930's. Sharon Osberg, a bridge Partner of a bridge player named Warren Buffet, noted in a November 27, 2005 article in the New York Times, titled "Bring Bridge Back to the Table", that

Bridge used to be very popular. In 1938, three bridge books--"Complete Contract Bridge," "Culbertson's Own New Contract Bridge" and "Five Suit Bridge"--made this newspaper's best-seller list. In 1957, "Goren's New Complete Contract Bridge" also made the list--for four weeks. Films like "Shadow of the Thin Man," "It's a Wonderful World" and "Sunset Boulevard" featured characters playing bridge. Matches were covered in newspapers, magazines and on the radio.

She also noted that:

One famous game in the 1920's captivated the public's attention for months. On Sept. 29, 1929, John and Myrtle Bennett of Kansas City, Mo., invited their friends Charles and Myrna Hofman over for a game of bridge. Things were going well until several hours into the match when Mr.

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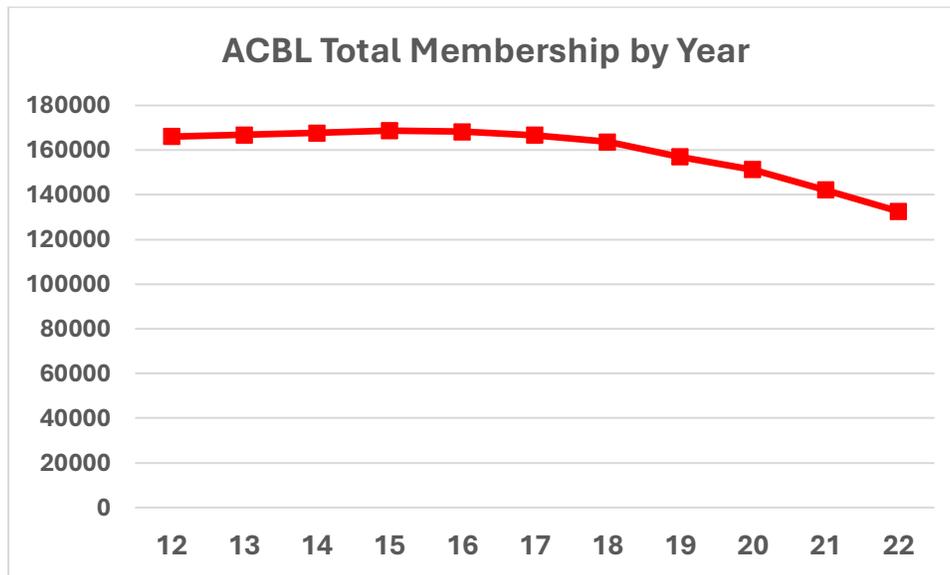
¹ As noted in an article in the Winter/Spring, 2024 article in The American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) Journal, https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/ABTA_1_24.pdf, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! So this article was really, really written by Bruce Thompson.

Bennett overbid. A domestic brawl ensued, and suddenly Mrs. Bennett walked into a bedroom, returned with a gun and shot her husband several times. Mrs. Bennett was charged with first-degree murder, but she was acquitted on the ground that the shooting was accidental.

The Wikipedia entry on "Contract Bridge" says that "The number of people playing contract bridge has declined since its peak in the 1940s, when a survey found it was played in **44%** of US households."

Certainly there are *many* reasons why people play bridge. Karen Walker, on her website, succinctly summarizes many of these motivations in her article, "Why Play Bridge?".²

But the ACBL membership trends have been dire. These trends reflect a decline in ACBL membership over 10 years of **33,476** members. The trend is illustrated in the graph below. This represents a *decline* over 10 years of **-20.1%**, or more than **1 in 5 members!**



Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted ACBL membership. But this decline began **before** the emergence of the pandemic in March, 2020!

² See: <https://kwbridge.com/why.htm>

Examination of the Health of Bridge on a *Club-by-Club* Basis

Another way to evaluate the health of ACBL bridge is to examine ACBL data on a *club-by-club* basis with a particular focus not only on the current status of bridge at the club level, but also by examining *club-level* activities that are intended to draw new members into bridge, and thus forestall further deterioration in the health of bridge. This was done by examining publicly-posted ACBL Club data identified state-by-state by a GOOGLE search, for example, of "ACBL CLUBS GA". This research was conducted primarily to investigate 5 questions:

1. How many ACBL Clubs in each state are still sufficiently active to be listed in the ACBL Clubs Database?
2. How many ACBL Clubs by state are sufficiently active that they are listed as hosting Club webpages posting bridge information of any kind?
3. What percentages by state averages of ACBL Clubs listed as hosting Club webpages posting bridge information are in reality broken or no longer active?
4. How many games per week on average by state are ACBL Clubs listed in the ACBL Clubs Database as hosting?
5. What percentages by state averages of ACBL Clubs provide their members with "limited" games (e.g., 0-99 MPs, 0-299, 0-499)?

Here the 50 states were first ranked by population. Then data were examined for (1) the largest 5 states, (2) the smallest 5 states, and (3) within the states ranked by population 6th through 44th for every 3rd state.

Number of Active ACBL Clubs by state. Data were provided for a total of **838** ACBL Clubs across the **23** states examined here. At one extreme, the 3rd largest state, Florida, had **166** ACBL Clubs. At the other extreme, the 46th largest state, South Dakota, had **2** ACBL Clubs.

State-by-State Averages of ACBL Clubs Hosting Club Web Pages. Across the 23 states, an average of **36.3%** of ACBL Clubs hosted Club webpages to post Club information of any kind (e.g., competition results, schedules, lesson information, useful learning websites). The percentages of ACBL Clubs hosting webpages ranged from a low of **12.5%** (Vermont) to a high of **63.4%** (California).

State-by-State Averages of ACBL Clubs Hosting Club Web Pages that Are Actually Broken/Inactive. Across the 23 states, an average of **30.9%** of ACBL Clubs listed as hosting Club webpages actually host pages that are not accessible because the pages are unavailable or no longer exist. This statistic is particularly important because it may be indicative of ACBL Clubs listed as hosting games that in actuality are **not** being held because Clubs are no longer really active.

					% Clubs	WPage	Avg n of	% Clubs w
Rank		Population	Clubs	WPage	WPage	Broken %	Games	Limited
1	CA	38,965,193	142	90	63.4%	34.4%	3.0	28.9%
2	TX	30,503,301	92	41	44.6%	51.2%	2.8	17.4%
3	FL	22,610,726	166	77	46.4%	36.4%	3.7	21.1%
4	NY	19,571,216	61	19	31.1%	36.8%	2.7	13.1%
5	PA	12,961,683	58	26	44.8%	23.1%	2.3	13.8%
7	OH	11,785,935	45	12	26.7%	50.0%	2.1	15.6%
10	MI	10,037,261	45	18	40.0%	38.9%	2.3	22.2%
13	WA	7,812,880	39	11	28.2%	9.1%	2.4	5.1%
16	MA	7,001,399	35	14	40.0%	7.1%	1.9	20.0%
19	MD	6,180,253	17	5	29.4%	20.0%	2.7	17.6%
22	MN	5,737,915	11	4	36.4%	25.0%	3.6	7.7%
25	LA	4,573,749	16	4	25.0%	50.0%	4.9	62.5%
28	OK	4,053,824	11	2	18.2%	0.0%	4.3	18.2%
31	IA	3,207,734	21	7	33.3%	28.6%	1.5	19.0%
34	KS	2,940,546	29	6	20.7%	0.0%	1.8	20.7%
37	NE	1,978,379	5	3	60.0%	66.7%	5.8	60.0%
40	HI	1,435,138	9	4	44.4%	0.0%	2.8	11.1%
43	MT	1,132,812	8	3	37.5%	33.3%	3.4	37.5%
46	SD	919,318	2	1	50.0%	100.0%	3.5	0.0%
47	ND	783,926	6	2	33.3%	0.0%	2.2	0.0%
48	AK	733,406	5	2	40.0%	0.0%	2.4	20.0%
49	VT	647,464	8	1	12.5%	0.0%	1.9	25.0%
50	WY	584,057	7	2	28.6%	100.0%	1.7	0.0%
Mean					36.3%	30.9%	2.9	19.8%
Max					63.4%	100.0%	5.8	62.5%
Min					12.5%	0.0%	1.5	0.0%
Range					50.9%	100.0%	4.3	62.5%
SD					11.8%	33.6%	1.2	18.4%

State-by-State Averages of ACBL Clubs Hosting Any "Limited" Games for Newer or Less Experienced Players. The lowest percentage of ACBL Clubs hosting any "limited" games was **0.0%**

for South Dakota, North Dakota, and Wyoming. The *highest* percentage of ACBL Clubs hosting any "limited" games was **62.5%** for Louisiana. The average of the state-by-state percentages of ACBL Clubs hosting "limited" games was **19.8%**. Hosting "limited" games reflects (1) *sufficient ACBL Club membership "critical mass" to be able to offer this playing "gateway" to newer players, and (2) sufficient ACBL Club interest in trying to attract players to bridge!*

The "ACBL Sanction" is Both a "Boon" and "Bane"

Although people new to duplicate bridge may not realize it, anyone can petition the American Contract Bridge League for a "sanction" to administer duplicate bridge games under ACBL rules that then generate ACBL "MasterPoints". The ACBL "sanction"/*license* is a very *valuable* "property"!

Owning a "sanction" entitles the "sanction" owner to charge *playing fees* that can be used to pay for bridge equipment (e.g., bridge Boards, BridgeMates to record scores, playing space). This means that "sanction"/Club owners have an incentive to teach players how to play, or play better, and to create a friendly, comfortable game environment.

But some "sanction" or Club "owners" actually earn their *incomes* from their Club ownerships. So, some Club owners may be incentivized to prioritize their incomes over the interests of their players. Esther says, "*If ACBL Clubs become permeated by a culture of parochialism then the prospects for the health of bridge will dim quite considerably!*"

A commendable example of *responsible* "sanction" ownership is reflected in the history of the Savannah Bridge Club:

<https://www.bridgewebs.com/savannahclubs/page43.html>

The Savannah Bridge Club is run as a *community-owned nonprofit* organization. This ownership model creates an environment that encourages *graciousness* and *bridge mentorship* as discussed in Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen's webpage posting, "Why, I, Play, Duplicate, Bridge":

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Y I Play.pdf>

What Can be Done to Forestall the Deterioration in ACBL Bridge Participation?

There obviously is no "magic bullet" to restore the health of bridge to what it previously was in bridge's days of glory. But interventions can be conducted at different levels.

National-Level Interventions. Certainly *national-level* efforts can be made to interest new players in bridge and to then facilitate their on-going development and participation. For example, ACBL makes just such efforts via the excellent instructional articles published in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin. And various individuals also have contributed mightily to these efforts. For example, Patty Tucker's "Learn Bridge in a Day" instructional sessions have been well received by many ACBL Clubs who sponsor her training.³

Club-Level Interventions. Certainly some ACBL Clubs are sufficiently situated to make efforts to attract newer players to bridge and then facilitate their further development. For example, some ACBL Clubs are able to offer affordable in-person lessons. And any ACBL Club that is able to mount a Club webpage should be able to post a "Useful Links" tab linking to the numerous excellent, free Web resources to help newer players learn to play bridge or improve their bridge skills.

What YOU Can Do to Help Bridge Grow, or at Least Stabilize. In reality the task of helping bridge flourish ultimately inevitably falls to each of us as individuals. We each must make ourselves available to new or newer players when they have questions or ask for advice. And we each must be willing to participate in instructional competitions such as "Eight is Enough", or "Sharks & Minnows", or "Guppies & Minnows". And each of us individually can ask our ACBL Club leaderships to make lessons available, or to post helpful bridge instructional resources on "Useful Resources" tabs on Club Homepages.

³See: <https://catchmelater03.wpcomstaging.com/>



Esther says:

"The only way we can ultimately help bridge is by acting individually, one new bridge player at a time, either directly, or by what we are able to persuade our Club leadership to do!"

Esther says:

"Do **NOT** think about what can I do individually to replace the **33,476** members that ACBL has lost during the last 10 years! Instead, think about, 'What can I do to add *1, single, individual* new ACBL member?' Beaches are built one grain of sand at a time! Ask your Club leadership to do 'the right things': supportive environments, mentorship games, and a good list on the Club Website of 'Useful Bridge Learning Resources'!"

2024 ACBL Annual Table Counts⁴

Top 15 Virtual Clubs

(in **Tens** of Thousands)

1										2										3														
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5									
				9			8						7	5				4							3				2					1
									6																									
1.	Southeast Bridge Consortium									Knoxville TN										34,469														
2.	Duncan Bridge Center									Palm Desert CA										31,735														
3.	Vero Beach Bridge Center									Vero Beach CA										26,391														
4.	SE Carolina Club of Clubs									Eustis FL										17,969														
5.	BAND Online									Plano TX										13,179														
6.	Louisiana Bridge Association									Metairie LA										12,374														
7.	Big Orange County									Knoxville TN										11,915														
8.	ACBL Clubhouse									Horn Lake MS										8,016														
9.	Richmond Hill Bridge Club									Richmond Hill ON										5,360														
10.	Palm Beach DBC									Boynton Beach FL										5,216														
11.	Lee's Bridge Club									Toronto ON										4,244														
12.	Leland Bridge Club									Leland FL										3,258														
13.	Stephan Bridge Club									Toronto ON										3,075														
14.	The Bridge Connection									Ottawa ON										2,967														
15.	Club Pelican Bay									Naples FL										2,886														
																																		1
9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0			
	40				30			20			15					10									5					4	2	1		
50																														3				

Top Bridge Clubs

(in **Tens** of Thousands)

1.	The Villages DBC	The Villages FL	10,064
2.	Temple Sinai DBC	Delray Beach CA	9,010
3.	Naples Bridge Center	Naples FL	6,900
4.	Duncan Bridge Center	Palm Desert CA	6,860
5.	Vero Beach Bridge Center	Vero Beach CA	5,925
10.	St. Louis Bridge Center	St. Louis MO	4,982
15.	South Orange County Unit 538	San Juan Capistrano CA	4,001
20.	Louisiana Bridge Association	Metairie LA	3,753
30.	Birmingham DBC	Birmingham AL	3,497
40.	Fun and Games DBC	Oklahoma City OK	3,137
50.	Omaha Bridge Studio	Omaha NE	2,922

⁴ ACBL Bridge Bulletin, May, 2025, p. 37.