



EUROPEAN BRIDGE LEAGUE

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President

The world of Bridge has been dealt a hard blow by the allegations of cheating made against some of the world's top bridge players. The allegations began during the Summer ACBL Nationals of Chicago in August 2015.

I won't go through a complete history and you have been able to follow it on the different Internet Websites.

Allegations of cheating in Bridge are not new. In your own countries, I am sure you regularly receive some cases and you decide on sanctions.

On the international level, the WBF had to face the German Doctors' (Elinescu/Wladow) case in 2013 which is unfortunately not finished yet.

At the EBL level, the only case, since the adoption of the EBL Code of Discipline in 2001, occurred during the EBL Open Championships in Tenerife in 2005 and concerned the pair Buratti/Lanzarotti. But, in fact, even though the EBL excluded them from the championship immediately, the FIGB afterwards took the disciplinary sanctions of suspension (minor).

The EBL is nowadays at the heart of this issue because the allegations against the players are supported by the videos taken during the last European Championships held in Opatija in 2014.

For the last 4 years, the EBL increased the video broadcastings of the matches of its championships and since 2013 all the records are available to the public on YouTube. In Opatija in 2014, 5 matches, that is to say 10 tables, were recorded for each match - totalling around 250 videos.

The main purpose of these videos was to communicate live on Internet, but with these records, the EBL had some material in case of any litigation.

In Opatija, during the championship, no player made any claims of suspected cheating by his opponents and no tournament director recorded any litigious action at the table.

It was only after the allegations of cheating were raised in August and September 2015 that some persons started to actively review these records.

The EBL, a pioneer of live communications, now finds itself in the centre of the debate on the allegations of cheating, even being accused for having not seen or done anything.



The allegations have been straight concentrated on 3 pairs:

- Fisher/Schwartz : Israel
- Fantoni/Nunes: Monaco
- Piekarek/Smirnov: Germany

The last pair very quickly admitted some ethical infractions and were immediately suspended by the German Federation and by the EBL.

The Israeli Federation nominated an IBF Special Ethics Committee that is still investigating today.

The German Federation submitted the case to its Disciplinary Committee and the Monegasque Federation asked the EBL to proceed with the investigations.

These 3 countries withdrew from the Bermuda Bowl. The EBL had to react immediately and on the 13th September, two weeks before the Chennai World Championships, I appointed an EBL Investigating Committee composed of Eric Laurant (Chairman) Jan Kamras and Jean-Paul Meyer (Members). Their mission is:

- Collect all evidence
- Present the evidence to those accused, giving them the opportunity to respond and present their own exculpatory evidence
- Form a panel to include world-class players, to evaluate all such evidence to arrive at an opinion on culpability
- And to present those findings to the Executive Committee and if necessary to the Disciplinary Committee.

Why an Investigating Committee?

The amount of work involved in the first step was enormous. So many articles had been published on Internet!

We needed 3 persons whose integrity was recognised and who were able to request and convince experts to be part of the panel; who had knowledge of the international high level bridge world and who were experienced in managing the Internet tool.

The work was difficult. It had to disentangle the rumours and the non-founded accusations from actual evidence. The various elements had to be analysed by the members of the expert panel but also be correlated with mathematical studies. Of course, they had to watch hours and hours of records.

And of course to arrive at serious and convincing conclusions.

On the other side, I have insisted from the beginning on the basic condition that the defendants' rights are to be respected. This is a fundamental condition in arriving at a fair hearing in front of the disciplinary procedures of the EBL.

In the name of the EBL, I communicated on the EBL Website with short statements without making comment on the culpability of the accused players.

I am convinced that the President of the EBL must stand back from the investigation and disciplinary procedures and I will stick to that.



But the President of the EBL is responsible for the establishment of the investigation procedure, for the transfer of any cases to the disciplinary commission, for the respect of law both on the EBL side or on the accused players.

The President of the EBL must do everything possible to ensure that everything is organised in the best possible way in content, in format, in reasonable time with adequate communication and with the help of professional jurists.

- On content:

Cheating is the worst infraction that a bridge player can commit, particularly when it comes to professional players who collude in cheating with various codes or systems. An international sport organisation such as the EBL has to undertake any possible action to pursue all individuals involved in cheating and take every possible measure to ensure it does not happen again.

- On format:

I have already mentioned the respect of the rights of the defence. But on the EBL side, we also have duty not to make errors and to be very professional.

The EBL realised that our Disciplinary Code (which had never been used!) was in contradiction with the EBL Statutes in a few points. We could not change the EBL Statutes without an Extraordinary General Assembly and this would have been inappropriate.

The EBL Executive Committee harmonised the EBL Code of Discipline with the Statutes during its last meeting in Milton Keynes last November.

The Chairman of the Disciplinary Commission had been David Harris. In 2014, he became General Counsel to the WBF and could not continue as Chairman. The EBL Executive Committee named Jurica Carić to replace David Harris.

We needed members for the Disciplinary Commission and the EBL proceeded with two new nominations. I asked all members of the Investigation Committee and the Disciplinary Commission to have the maintain confidentiality, not to give personal opinions and not to publicise any material on the Internet. We needed a reference to CAS (Court of Arbitration in Sport) and we added it.

- On timing:

I have the real conviction that justice has to be done fairly, without undue speed but also within a reasonable timescale.

In the event that some issues need to be sent to the Disciplinary Commission, no one would understand, and you would be the first, that any disciplinary decision could not be taken before the start of the next European Championships in Budapest.

No one would understand if the investigations last for months, if the Disciplinary Commission takes months before an eventual hearing, or the eventually accused players ask for postponement after postponement.

That is not just a political reason (I will have to justify myself in front of you during the General Assembly in Budapest) but also a sensible and sporting reason.



All the players against whom cheating allegations have been levelled are high level players who have played on their national team. None of them (except the Germans who have confessed) has been suspended either by his NBO or by the EBL.

Is it possible for us to prevent them from playing in Budapest if the disciplinary procedure has not begun?

Could they react against the EBL?

What difficult decisions will face the EBL Credentials Committee?

So, I asked the Investigating Committee to send me its conclusions by the end of December. Unfortunately, they could not meet this target but they did send me reports on the 3 pairs. (I repeat that the work was enormous).

I have already asked to the President of the Disciplinary Commission to act without any delay if a case is transferred to him.

- Professional jurists:

Of course, the EBL has been in contact with our Swiss lawyers in Lausanne and in particular one lawyer who is a specialist in international sport rights and who is involved regularly with CAS. He advises the EBL and will continue to do so if any disciplinary decisions are made.

We cannot forget that the accused players have their lawyers and professionally the EBL has to operate on an equal footing.

Our Code of Discipline, as I already stated before, is quite vague. This is not ideal but it turns out to be an opportunity for our Disciplinary Commission to have a free hand. Rules of procedure have been settled to ensure that everything is done legally, providing for rebuttal, and with a reasonable timescale. But as you know with lawyers everything can happen!

- On Communications:

The official communication made on the EBL Website was brief and I have received some criticism for this. I still think that it was enough and that any additional comments would have eventually shown a lack of impartiality which could have been exploited at the expense of the EBL.

As I said it before, at the beginning of these cases, the EBL has also been accused of inactivity, as have the WBF and the ACBL. My strategy, before those who make accusations against players, the NBOs and the journalists, has been simple. No long speeches but acts.

I thank you for your support because apart from one President of a European NBO, you have all supported the Executive Committee of the EBL.

The accused players have understood that they are able to produce a defence; their accusers, mainly met with during the Champions' Cup in Milton Keynes, understand the position of the EBL and have wished me good luck.

In Chennai, I had good contacts with the President and the CEO of the ACBL. This cooperation was confirmed during the stay of Eric Laurant in Denver last November with Robert Hartman and the Task Force created by the ACBL. The accusations against the EBL have nearly ceased on the Bridgewinner Website and positive opinions have even



been expressed. Several times I also met some Bridge journalists during my trips around Europe and my messages have quite well been received.

But now, everybody (and also you all) is impatient to see some progress in these cases (always the problem of good timing!).

I am completely in favour of transparency but don't expect me today to give you either the reports of the Investigating Committee or a date of a possible hearing in front of the Disciplinary Commission. The cases are progressing and you will be the first to be informed on the next step. You will even not have a chance to obtain some information from other Executive Committee members, from the Investigating Committee and certainly not from our lawyers.

The Bridge world certainly does not expect more or less confused technical answers from International organisations such as the EBL but rather a political willingness and actions for which I will be the carrier and the backing of all the members of the EBL Executive Committee here present behind me.

Another point on which I have been questioned:

If some players are convicted, how long will their ruspension last?

My answer is precise and clear: I don't know

It will be the task of the Disciplinary Commission to decide on a sanction. In fact only one is not recommended; this is a suspension for life because as being a first sanction, the CAS in appeal would certainly over rule such a decision.

This will certainly not satisfy those who were looking for this punishment on the Internet, accompanied by some years in jail or even a firing squad following torture!

I have of course personal ideas that I will not express!

Bridge has no precedent to refer to - the German doctors' affaire is not even yet finished. The ACBL has a scale of penalties which they expect to be changing; the WBF also tries to set guidelines. Finally, only a decision in appeal taken to CAS would give guidelines for the future.

The CAS: there is some regret that the court of last resort will be CAS – as it will highlight how different Bridge is, compared to other sports. This is a fight which is lost in advance. Bridge is recognised as a sport by the Olympic Movement and like anti-doping, we have the same rules and we depend on the final decision of the CAS.

Chess has also been struck by High Tech cheating and a recent case with a Georgian Great Master could be brought to CAS. Perhaps we have some common elements?

Unfortunately, to this point, it has been easy but we still have a lot of work in front of us:

- The Investigating Committee will continue its work on the other cases;
- Players who will eventually be pursued by the EBL could also be pursued for other actions in their own country, by the ACBL, by the WBF. Of course, they cannot be condemned twice for the same acts but when one cheats; it does not just happen with the EBL.



- Reciprocity agreements, co-operation between the zones similar to that initiated by the EBL and the ACBL, and, I hope with the WBF, will become indispensable and must be properly formulated.
- The EBL has to re-write its Code of Discipline. For example, it is appropriate that its President does not have to be a member of the EBL EC and that no appeal is possible except to CAS.
The WBF has recently adopted a new Code of Discipline. The EBL will certainly not copy it; it is too long, some articles are open to dispute, it is too close to the Anglo-Saxon rights. With the support of our Swiss lawyers, we have discussed a shorter text, better adapted, closer to Swiss and sport rights.
- Prevention with the aim that it never happens again:
 - o The WBF is mainly counting on the HLPC (High Level Player Commission)
 - o The ACBL has created a Task Force which will make proposals to the President and to the CEO
 - o The EBL has also to take preventative measures. Technical measures are easy and we will increase the number of cameras in Budapest. But in agreement with the NBOs and the high level players, the EBL has also to find a way so that this never happens again.
- The questioning of the rankings of the Championships in Opatija in 2014: there has been much debate
- The research of other unethical behaviour by the same players in other EBL championships before or after. Possible or not possible!

I will finish with the financial aspect.

Of course, all of this has a certain cost.

The Investigating Committee has had reasonable expenses and has been mainly working by email exchanges.

The Panel of experts and the mathematicians have not yet claimed fees but if the task turns out to be very important, some will not hesitate to ask for.

The (eventual) meetings of the Disciplinary Commission and the hearings will cost money. Our Swiss lawyers will cost a lot of money!

Rest assured, the EBL will not be claiming an increase in its membership dues.

The EBL has some reserves and a fortune that some of you during the General Assembly feel is too much!! This was a reserve for some hard blows in case of some losses at championships.

The hard blow which has just occurred is these cases of cheating and the corresponding expenses will be taken from a specific budget within the reserves of the EBL.

And in displaying the transparency of the EBL, the Treasurer will present to you a specific budget in Budapest during the next General Assembly.

Cheating has no place in Bridge.

We must maintain the highest integrity in our sport.

The EBL will be active both in prosecution and in prevention.