

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENT, W B F

WBF President Gianariggo Rona. CREDIT: PETER HASENSON

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President of the World Bridge Federation (WBF) since 2009, Gianariggo Rona is one of the most influential and visible people in the bridge world. On a sunny February morning in the Gold Coast, I sit down with President Rona to hear his thoughts on topics ranging from the Olympic movement and the cheating scandal through to youth bridge and the future of the game.

This is not Rona's first visit to Australia. This time, Rona has come at the invitation of the organiser of the 5th Commonwealth Nations Bridge Competition. While in Australia, he will also be continuing negotiations with Bruce Neill, President of the Australian Bridge Federation, about Australia potentially hosting a future WBF world championship.

Recently, the WBF has come under fire for various reasons. These have included accusations of being slow to investigate and act against cheats, allowing Poland to contest (and win) the 2015 Bermuda Bowl despite two of its players having their invitations to play withdrawn, as well as the scoring scandal of 2016 where the World Bridge Games Open Pairs and Women's Pairs **gold medals** were each awarded to the 'wrong pair' before scoring errors were discovered. As well as discussing with Rona his vision for bridge, I also wanted to find out his opinions on some of the controversial moments of his leadership.

Bridge's Olympic Dream

Since 1995 bridge has been recognised as part of the Olympic movement and its inclusion has been the subject of much discussion. One of the downsides of the Olympic movement is that bridge has become beholden to an external court of appeal - the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne. In response to the recent successful appeals of previously convicted cheating pairs to the CAS, Boye Brogeland wrote, "We have to stop chasing an Olympic dream which weakens the integrity of the game." I ask Rona what his views are regarding the Olympic movement.

Rona is adamant that the Olympic movement has benefited bridge and will continue to improve the game. He goes so far as to say that if bridge leaves the Olympic movement, in half of the world's National Bridge Organisations (NBOs) "bridge will disappear". Why? In short - because of the money and recognition that being part of the Olympic movement provides.

Rona tells me that Olympic recognition means that bridge clubs often do not have to pay taxes. In addition, many Federations receive subsidies from their national Olympic Committee. Moreover, the Olympic movement provides some sort of legitimacy: "We were able to get the game into schools because we are a member of the Olympic movement. Before that, bridge was considered gambling."

Bridge has been **accepted** for the first time into the Asian Games (August 2018) which Rona believes will mean further government support and subsidies for bridge in this region. Rona points out that aside from bridge, many other activities still strive to be accepted by the International Olympic Committee. Surely this must mean it is worth something to be part of the Olympic movement, otherwise why would they be trying to get in? He also claims that the benefits go beyond financial matters as many of the sports striving to be admitted have plenty of money already. For Rona, the fact that it took so long for bridge to be accepted by the IOC means that it would be a huge step backwards to leave now. "The idea of leaving the IOC is, in my opinion, catastrophic."

It is clear to me that Rona truly believes that inclusion in the Olympic movement has been and will continue to be good for bridge. But what of the CAS decision in January invalidating the European Bridge League ban against Fantoni-Nunes?

Cheats, Justice, and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS)

In 2015, a few weeks before the Bermuda Bowl commenced in Chennai, evidence emerged which alleged that Fulvio Fantoni and Claudio Nunes (originally from Italy but representing Monaco) were using the orientation of their opening leads to convey hidden information to their partner. Shortly after, Monaco withdrew from the Bermuda Bowl, and in mid-2016 Fantoni-Nunes were **expelled by the ACBL** and banned from playing by the Italian Federation (FIGB) and the EBL. However,

a **decision** this year by the IOC-mandated CAS invalidated the EBL ban, disappointing many in the bridge community.

Rona seems fatalistic about the January ruling. “Sometimes, the CAS will give us a decision which we don’t agree with.” He isn’t happy about what happened, but he is steadfast in maintaining that Fantoni-Nunes will not be able to play despite the decision. Their ban in Italy still stands and, by the principle of ‘reciprocity’, the pair cannot play in any other bridge jurisdiction - a principle the EBL was **quick to remind its member NBOs of** after Fantoni competed in a tournament in Barcelona.

Rona is careful to point out that Fantoni and Nunes are not off the hook simply because the CAS ruling was favourable to them: “The CAS did not declare them innocent. The CAS reversed the decision of the EBL because there was not enough evidence. They are, for sure, not innocent!” He also tells me that Fantoni-Nunes appealed a separate ban from the Italian Federation to the Italian Olympic Committee tribunal but the tribunal **confirmed** the ban, an event which received less press than the controversial CAS decision.

While we are on the topic of the CAS, Rona mentions the case of the Russian athletes who were accused of doping at the Winter Olympics. 28 of these athletes successfully appealed to the CAS, which overturned the sanctions against them. At the time, the IOC said, “the result of the CAS decision does not mean that athletes from the group of 28 will be invited to the Games. Not being sanctioned does not automatically confer the privilege of an invitation.” It seems that the WBF’s position is the same – Fantoni-Nunes’ partial victory at the CAS does not mean that they are free to play where they want to. (In the case of the Russian athletes, there was a further appeal to the CAS in an attempt to secure an invitation to compete in the 2018 Winter Games, but this appeal was **dismissed**, confirming that the ‘invitation-only’ principle is alive and well in the Olympics.)

For Rona, having decisions sent down from the CAS is a necessary part of following the Olympic dream. He seems hopeful that lessons can be learnt from the decision and that next time such a case arises, the evidence against the cheats can be presented in a clearer, more convincing manner to the (non-bridge playing) judges. He also argues that quitting the IOC and removing bridge from the jurisdiction of the CAS would not necessarily solve the problem. “If you don’t stay in the Olympic Committee, and you bar some cheaters, they will go to the ordinary tribunal. The ordinary tribunal, usually, is worse than the Olympic Committee tribunal! Generally, the Olympic Committee tribunal is more or less involved with sport; the ordinary judge doesn’t care.

The Wider Issue of Cheating in Bridge

The revelation that several of bridge’s top competitions had been tainted by collusive cheating continues to be one of the main concerns for those passionate about our game. About half of my discussion with Rona is on the topic of cheating in top-level bridge.

In general, Rona believes that the problem of cheating is on the decline since the 2015 scandal broke. He points to new counter-measures, such as video recording of competitions and the ‘express line’ created for players to report potential cases of cheating. He tells me that “from Chennai onwards, we haven’t had any complaints in WBF events about any apparent problems. I am convinced, unfortunately, that there are still some people who want to cheat. But what we can do is this: we can try to prevent cheating, and we can apply all of the tools that can help us to control things.” As a case in point, at this year’s World Bridge Series being held in Orlando around 70 tables will be monitored by video cameras.

What is the long-term solution for cheating? Rona believes that the mentality of the game is changing for the better, particularly as younger players move into international competition. Although there will always be criminals and cheats, Rona insists that the WBF is committed to applying all of the tools at its disposal to catch and convict those who don’t play fair.

Rona is firm, however, that the bridge world must do things in an ordered way when dealing with cheats rather than locking them up and throwing away the key: “We have to follow procedure. Without rules, it is a jungle”. He speaks of notions of justice and giving accused players a chance to defend themselves, something for which the WBF has previously copped flak. One of the major problems, in his view, is that it is much harder to prove collusive cheating compared to other forms of cheating (for example, doping).

As the President of the WBF, Rona reminds me that the WBF still has control over its own events. He brings up the case of the ‘German Doctors’ who were banned for playing in any WBF event for 10 years, but then won an appeal in German courts. “For us, we continue to believe they are

suspended. They cannot play in our events for 10 years. Finish.” He bangs his fist on the table with each word.

How does the WBF accomplish this in practice? All world events are by invitation only, and the WBF chooses who to invite – so if there are issues or suspicion, there is always the option not to invite a player. Although Rona believes that we should give someone a second chance after their ban finishes, they are not given carte blanche to do what they like: “When someone finishes the sanction, and they start to play, they are ‘under control’. If they are clean, if we are sure and we believe they are clean – OK. If we still have some ‘not clear’ situation, the Credentials Committee can say no.” He concludes by saying, “I believe that in any case we have the tools to block the participation of people who are ‘non grata’.”

The Future of the World Championships

One of the reasons why President Rona is visiting the Gold Coast is to investigate the possibility of holding a future world championship in Australia and to negotiate with the Australian Bridge Federation (ABF) on this topic. There have also been separate but related discussions in the bridge world about the 2019 World Bridge Teams Championships (WBTC) at first being decided to be held in Amsterdam before being cancelled in favour of Sanya in China. I asked Rona about the process of selecting a world championship venue.

In most sports and disciplines, money talks, and bridge is no different. In our discussion, Rona repeatedly emphasises the importance of finances in arranging a WBF championship event. In his words, “bridge is a financially poor discipline” compared to other games and sports. To accommodate a world championship is not a cheap thing to do for the host country; Rona estimates the upfront cost to the Fédération Française de Bridge of hosting the [2017 WBTC in Lyon](#) at around one million euros. Many federations are unable or unwilling to stump up this sort of cash.

However, Rona is quick to point out that host countries and cities also benefit from hosting WBF events. The influx of overseas players brings with it an influx of cash spent at hotels, restaurants and shops – Rona estimates that the host city of Lyon benefited to the tune of eight to ten million euros in tourism revenue from the 2017 WBTC. Playing host can also be beneficial to the NBO as the WBF is willing to share profits from entry fees, especially in the Transnational events which always attract big interest from players in the host country. Rona thinks that host NBOs can more or less break even, but it requires a certain level of commitment: “The revenue is possible. The costs are certain!”.

I ask what would make hosting world championship events more viable. Rona compares bridge to chess, which seems to have fewer problems on the financial side. He believes that although there used to be more of a market for sponsorship of bridge, these days sponsors are harder and harder to find: “Now it is more challenging, but we continue to fight on enthusiastically, because we love this game.” Compared to the past, more money comes out of the pockets of NBOs and their members – for example, the French Federation increased its membership dues by 2.50€ for three years to help defray the costs of hosting Lyon. And of course, having many enthusiastic volunteers helps a lot.

Since our discussion in February, the ABF has decided not to proceed with negotiations to host a WBF event in 2021 because of the “substantial costs that this would impose on the ABF”, so the search for a host NBO continues.

Youth and the Future of Bridge

When I ask Rona about his views on youth bridge, his eyes light up with enthusiasm. Many have discussed bringing bridge into schools, and Rona is passionate about the topic. Attracting “kids” – those under 15 – has been a missing element of the promotion of bridge, but Rona tells me that the WBF has had some success, especially in his country (Italy) and China. In Italy, he tells me that the key to success was to get the Minister of Education onside, “but one issue is trying to avoid removing kids from school-time.” This is one of the main objections that schools have to bridge – the interference with regular classes. However, Rona believes that once schools embrace bridge, they often find that the game has unexpected benefits: “[The kids] have to work with a partner and communicate, develop, grow and acquire different behaviours and skills, and it socialises them.”

o Rona, it is not as important to have a million kids playing competitive bridge as having a million kids playing the game at any level. He believes that young people will be the key to spreading the game by talking about bridge and introducing their friends, parents and relatives to bridge. He also

speaks of the social aspect of bridge being one of the best parts of the game, and he tells me that having young mix with old to share the joy of the game is evidence of the “universal element” of the game.

Rona emphasises that bringing down the average age of people playing bridge is one of the WBF’s main challenges. “We want to invest in youth as much as we can.” He hopes that the recent creation of a WBF Youth Fund will help address some of the financial difficulties of the task, and he thinks that the rising popularity of Youth World Championships (such as in the Kids category) is evidence that NBOs are on board. “NBOs seem to be realising that kids are the future of the game.”

Has the WBF made any real headway on this front? Rona certainly believes so. Yet the evidence is patchy as to whether the WBF has attracted many new young people to the game, and it may be too soon to tell.

Rona’s Legacy

I conclude our chat by asking Rona about his Presidency of the WBF. Having been President for almost a decade, what does he think his legacy will be when he departs, and what does the future of the WBF look like? He laughs. “This is a more difficult question!” But Rona gets a serious look on his face as he talks about what he believes he will be remembered for.

Foremost in his mind is the increased involvement of youth in bridge. Rona believes that, under his leadership, youth bridge has been cemented as an integral part of the game. A particular focus of his has been improving the arrangements for Youth World Championships, as well as creating new championships for Girls and Kids (Under 15). He also tells me that the WBF has pushed in recent years for NBOs to acknowledge that they must try to get bridge into schools and is ready to provide support for this goal.

And what does Rona dream of for the future of bridge? “My dream is to have a youth event where everything is completely cost-free to the players, which would really help the poorer nations.” He concedes this will be very expensive but he is optimistic that the money can one day be found from sponsorship.

Finally, despite the controversy of bridge’s involvement in the Olympic movement Rona hopes that one day our best players can compete for a gold medal in the Olympic Games. Increasing the popularity, image and visibility of bridge is crucial for the WBF and being part of the Olympic Games might once again make bridge a household topic. With bridge’s involvement in the World Mind Sport Games, SportAccord championships and now the 2018 Asian Games, Rona is optimistic that one day this goal will come true.

The President of the WBF is far from a universally loved figure, and it is still uncertain how he will be remembered in years to come. Certainly, Rona has presided over a difficult period that featured the biggest scandal in bridge’s history, yet he seems aware that he will be the one to ultimately take credit, and criticism, for bridge’s trajectory in years to come. Only time will tell what the future has in store for Gianarrigo Rona, the WBF, and the great game of bridge. He finishes our interview in characteristic fashion. “We continue to try to do our best, and we hope to have the chance to continue to fight for bridge and have the same enthusiasm and love for bridge”.