

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S TEAM SELECTION

The aim of this paper is to explore options for choosing the Australian women's team.

WHY?

The women's international team is chosen in the same way as the senior's and open teams, though some states have different selection methods for their women's ANC team compared with the open because of the smaller pool of players. For international selection, for three out of four years, the team is chosen via a teams knockout event which is seeded based on the total playoff qualifying points (PQPs) for the team. There is an advantage in having a high seeding as it allows for easier matches earlier in the tournament and the team is likely to be less tired for the finals. Hence, the current format encourages women to play in women's events where they are more likely to earn PQPs than the open events. This is a problem because when a player has a limited number of bridge events she can play in each year, someone trying to make the Australian women's team has an incentive to play in the women's rather than open events. As with any event which restricts who can enter, the women's events are of lower quality, and this limits the player's ability to improve and limits the Australian team's ability to succeed at an international level.

There are other issues in a team-based selection system that are magnified when choosing from a pool of players that is much smaller than the pool for the open team. Firstly, it can be hard for new and improving players to break into good teams. This is partially managed in the current system as there is a pairs event every four years and pairs that succeed in that event are likely to be invited onto better teams in the future. However, a pairs event tends to be more random and less likely to produce the best team. Secondly, it is rare for all the positions in the team trials to be filled, giving the top seed or seeds a bye in the first match. This is a significant advantage with the bye both guaranteeing that team progression to the next round and allowing the team to be more rested when it comes to the finals. This could be managed by a different format, though there are advantages to training teams to play long matches and long matches are more likely to lead to the best team winning international selection. Finally, there is a low number of teams who are of a quality to genuinely have a chance of winning the trials. This means early matches of seeds 1 vs 8 and 2 vs 7 are often not very competitive. While the non-competitive matches may not provide advantages to the best players, it is a good opportunity for developing players to experience a long and tough match which can only lead to improvement.

The goal of team selection should be to:

- Choose the best team for international events; and
- Provide an environment that facilitates player and pair improvement and learning.

The current format does not succeed in both at the same time.

This paper reviews alternatives and proposes changes to the selection process for the Australian Women's team that better meets these goals.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Selection committee

Many successful women's teams are chosen via selection committees, including UK and Sweden. Australia has selected teams in various categories in the past as well. While there is evidence in Australia that some selected international teams have performed better than teams chosen by trials, there is an argument that the reason is not due to the selection process itself but due to other factors such as the quality of players at the time.

The risks are potential bias of a committee, the choice of selectors and their knowledge of the women's field. Many of those who have knowledge of the women's field but are not contending will have conflicts of interests such as spouses, family members or friends. While spouses and family members would be excluded from any panel because of the conflict of interest, it would be difficult to exclude everyone who was friends with one of the team contenders as there would be few people with the skills remaining in the bridge community. If the selection panel is not robust, it could lead to bias in favour of reputations over current performance and fail to recognise new talent. Overall, the risk is that the selection panel lacks the skills to identify the best pairs. A well-run panel however, would be able to look at a variety of measures, such as consistency and results at women's and open events, and analyse these results to identify where luck rather than skill has led to either good or poor results. This process is likely to result in a better team.

Some financial support would be needed for this option which would likely be in line with the costs for other ABF committees, such as the cost of meeting room hire and travel costs of the committee members.

This option would allow women to choose to play in only open events at the national level and not be disadvantaged. The ability to choose the best team is dependent on the selectors' skills and knowledge and avoidance of bias.

2. Squad

A squad is a small number of pairs who are selected either via a committee or through a yet-to-be-determined but fair and consistent process, then supported to improve their skills and build team harmony. Pairs on the squad would either be candidates for team selection or would be identified as future contenders.

It is likely that an explicit commitment, including time and an agreement to participate in training would be required. The time commitment may be a barrier to some especially young players who are the future of the Australian team due to study, work and family commitments. These issues would need to be considered when designing the program.

The ABF would likely be required to provide some financial support. The level of this support would depend on the design.

A well-run squad provides an environment that facilitates improvement though if poorly organised will be a waste of time and money.

The team selection may or may not be linked to the squad. A squad could support selected pairs, followed by a trial event. Alternatively, the team could be selected from the squad. This has an advantage over the selection committee as there are limited pairs for the committee to consider and hence it would be easier to observe their results and skills.

3. Minimal PQP requirement for playoff entry with alternative, semi-random or no seeding

In this option, players would qualify for a trial event with a minimal number of PQPs and PQPs are not used for seeding. This would allow players to qualify by only playing in open events and earning PQPs through datum results. The playoff itself could be a team or pairs event.

The seeding could then be decided by in a variety of ways. For example:

- A committee or the directors may seed and be given some directions e.g., use results in open events first.
- There may be semi-random seeding. Here teams are seeded from 1-8 by a committee or the directors. However, the seeding is then randomized so 1-4 are seeded in any order as are seeds 5-8. This is done in tennis.
- There may be no seeding.

4. Current system with increased PQPs for open events

At present open PQPs are transferred to women's PQPs at a rate of 1:2. From 2019, women pairs will be able to earn PQPs if their datum scores are high enough in a restricted number of events. At this stage it is unlikely that the proposed changes to open PQPs will be large enough to allow women to only play in open events and avoid women's events completely. Increasing the number of PQPs earned may change the balance, encouraging women's pairs to play in open events. There would be no advantage to playing in women's events if the PQPs earned from open events are high enough to allow good players to earn enough to seed well.

5. Pairs

A pairs selection event tends to be a more random or unpredictable event than a teams trial and is less likely to produce the best team. However, as there is no seeding it doesn't discourage playing in open national events rather than women's events. It helps those new or improving players as they don't have to find teammates. Using this option intermittently (as is done at present) helps new and up and coming players be recognised.

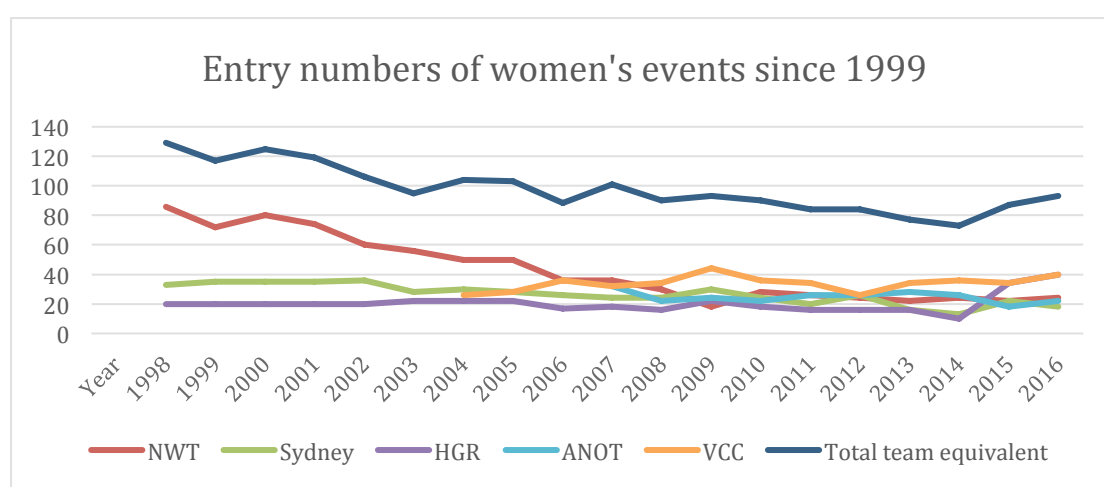
6. Wildcard entry

Options 3, 4 and 5 could allow a wildcard entry option. This could allow developing players such as members of the girls team to enter the playoff

without sufficient PQPs. It would give young players who are already playing youth events an incentive to enter open rather than women's events to improve their skills as they still have a chance enter the women's trials. If introducing this system, a process would need to be developed to ensure fairness and consistency.

IMPACT ON WOMEN'S EVENTS

Changes that result in some women playing in open instead of women's events may reduce numbers entering the women's events. It is unlikely to change entry numbers overall as those unable to play all events may choose open instead of women's events but may put pressure on some women's events affecting the viability of the event. ABF Management Committee should be aware of the risk and plan accordingly before proceeding with changes.



CONCLUSION

There are a number of alternative team selection options available that do not disadvantage women playing only in open events at a national level. All options would need more work before implementation, especially options 1 (selection committee) and 2 (squad). If these options are acceptable and there is in-principle support, then the options will be developed further. If so, the work will be presented for feedback at a later date. Options 3 (minimal PQP requirement) and 4 (current system with increased PQPs) are likely to be the least controversial and do not require financial support from the ABF.

This paper will be posted on the ABF website and

- Feedback will be sought at the Summer Festival of Bridge
- Written feedback will be accepted until 2nd March 2018. Please email feedback to womensplayoffdiscussion@abf.com.au.
- Feedback will be incorporated into the document and the document provided to ABF management committee for a decision.

Please consider these changes with a view to discussion at the Summer Festival of Bridge.