

Establishing a National VuGraph Unit

**A proposal for the
Australian Bridge Federation**

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Introduction

Since the 2003 Spring National Championships, the finals of selected major bridge events in Australia have been webcast over the internet using the Bridge Base Online (BBO) software. Typically these operations have been organised and staffed by a few dedicated BBO enthusiasts. The Australian Bridge Federation (ABF) has expressed an interest in establishing a National VuGraph Unit that would systematically organise and run VuGraph webcasts from major Australian bridge events. This National VuGraph Unit should fall under the management of the ABF Tournament Unit.

BBO is a free on-line bridge playing internet site established in January 2000. It is wholly owned by Bridge Base Inc, an American company owned by Fred Gitelman, Sheri Winestock and Uday Ivatury. As an additional service, BBO provides its internet site free of charge to tournament organisers who wish to webcast their events.

As at 1 November, 2006, BBO estimated it had 150,000 active users. In the three months August to October 2006, 2577 unique users claimed to be from Australia (by displaying an Australian flag), however it is likely there are more Australian users than that.

Webcasting major bridge events provides the ABF the opportunity to showcase its top players and would also be an invaluable medium to market these premier championships to a potential audience of thousands of bridge players across the world.

It is imperative however, that the ad hoc approach previously employed to webcasting bridge events from Australia be structured and regulated into a smooth framework, with ideally a National VuGraph Coordinator, State VuGraph Organisers and a well-maintained pool of trained and available Operators across the country.

This document will outline how the National VuGraph Unit should be organised to operate efficiently and properly.

How to Webcast a Bridge Event

Essentially, a webcast via BBO requires just an Operator and a computer with internet access. The software required to run a VuGraph webcast is the same required to play bridge on the BBO site and is available as a free download from the BBO website (<http://www.bridgebase.com>).

Electronic hand records in .dup format are loaded prior to play, event configurations (eg Event name, Team names, scoring format) are input and the Operator keys bidding and card play, much as a recorder has done in the past. If two tables from the same match are webcast, the match is scored automatically; otherwise the Operator may input the scores from the other table.

This presumes, of course, that there are fully trained people on site to operate the webcast. It is estimated there are probably fewer than ten people in Australia who have ever managed a BBO webcast, and perhaps fewer than twenty experienced Operators.

National VuGraph Unit

It is recommended that the ABF appoint a National VuGraph Coordinator whose role would be to oversee the operations of bridge webcasts from major ABF bridge events. It is also recommended that the National VuGraph Coordinator appoints State VuGraph Organisers who would be responsible for the day-to-day operations of BBO webcasts whenever an event is held in their state or territory.

National VuGraph Coordinator

The National VuGraph Coordinator will initially seek and appoint one person in each of the states and territories to serve as the State VuGraph Organiser. The National VuGraph Coordinator would train the State VuGraph Organiser on all aspects of BBO operations and oversee the first webcast run in each state.

State VuGraph Organiser

The State VuGraph Organiser would seek, appoint and train VuGraph Operators in their state.

Rather than have the National VuGraph Coordinator attend each bridge event, a State VuGraph Organiser would manage the VuGraph webcasts within their state. As well as having a good working knowledge of PCs, networks, modems, etc the State VuGraph Organiser should be able to trouble shoot and fix problems confidently. An advantage of state-based Organisers is a minimisation of Event Supervisor travel and accommodation costs for each event.

The State VuGraph Organiser should become competent in all aspects of BBO VuGraph webcast management, being loading of hands and setting up of webcasts, supervising Operators and maintaining, training and rostering a pool of trained Operators.

VuGraph Operators

The role of the VuGraph Operator is to input bidding and cardplay at the table during a BBO webcast. In the case where only a single table is shown from a teams match, the VuGraph Operator would also be required to input the scores from the other table, ideally supplied by a runner, caddy or tournament director. This is a minor, albeit important task required after every 1-2 boards played.

VuGraph Operators would work when required on a rostered basis.

Staff Training

Once the State VuGraph Organisers and Operators are appointed, it is recommended that the National VuGraph Coordinator travel to each state and conduct a BBO training session. From experience, a half day would be sufficient. These training sessions would cover all aspects of BBO webcast operations and would ideally be supplemented with a hands-on live practice during a club duplicate.

All required training documents and VuGraph Operator manuals have already been prepared on behalf of BBO by Nick Fahrer.

Which events to webcast

The National VuGraph Unit should aim to maximise the exposure of the ABF's premier championships and webcast as many events as budget allows. Criteria for selecting an event to webcast should include the event's importance, popularity, compatibility and timeliness of ABF on-line services. The relevance of scoring services is important because a BBO webcast is immensely enhanced and more relevant if viewers can see up-to-date scores on the internet. Of course, this mainly applies when concurrent matches (like another semi-final or round robin matches) are being played.

At a minimum, Finals should be webcast. However, preliminary finals and Swiss or round-robin matches are an ideal training ground for novice Operators. In cases like the National Open Teams, the preliminary finals are usually of a sufficiently strong standard (and often include overseas based players) to be appealing as well.

The National VuGraph Unit should initially aim to webcast the following events:

- National Women's Teams - Semi-Finals and Final
- National Seniors Teams - Stage 2 and Final
- National Open Teams - Rnd 8, Semi-Finals and Final
- Gold Coast Open Teams - Semi-Finals and Final
- Open Australian Team Playoffs - Semi-Finals and Final
- Women's Team Playoffs - Semi-Finals and Final
- Seniors Australian Team Playoffs - Semi-Finals and Final
- Autumn National Open Teams - Final
- Victor Champion Cup - last 3 rounds of Swiss Qualifying
- ANC Interstate Open Teams - Last day of Round Robin Qualifying and Final
- ANC Interstate Women's teams - Final
- ANC Interstate Seniors teams - Final
- ANC Interstate Youth Teams - Final
- Spring National Open Teams - Semi-Finals and Final
- Spring National Women's Teams - Final
- Spring National Seniors Teams - Final
- Grand National Open Teams - Semi-Finals and Final

Team matches are better suited for VuGraph webcasts where a comparative board result is immediately or almost immediately available. Nonetheless, Pairs events such as the ANC Butler Pairs and Gold Coast Pairs could be webcast but would be more relevant if barometered results on the ABF website were updated promptly.

Budget

There would be set-up, fixed and variable costs associated with the operation of the National VuGraph Unit. It is recommended that the ABF budget for the VuGraph Unit as a marketing expense, rather than an operations costs borne by each event.

Set Up costs *(estimated)*

In the past, whenever a bridge event has been webcast, the ABF has relied on the event's convenor to supply the necessary hardware. It is recommended that the ABF compile a VuGraph kit, being a small suite of equipment suitable for running BBO VuGraph webcasts.

Appendix 1 outlines the composition and estimated cost (\$3685) of this kit.

This VuGraph kit would be supplied to each State VuGraph Organiser on an event by event basis, together with instructions tailored for each event. The only other equipment required would be Operator lecterns, ten of which have already been built and are housed in Sydney (4), Melbourne (4) and Canberra (2). These are easily constructed from hardware costing no more than \$10 per lectern.

Fixed Costs *(estimated)*

It is recommended that the National VuGraph Coordinator be remunerated on an annual basis of \$7500.

Variable Costs – Year 1 only *(estimated)*

Travel and accommodation costs for the National VuGraph Coordinator to meet and train the State VuGraph Organisers and run Operator training sessions. Appendix 2 outlines these estimated costs (\$1850)

Travel and accommodation costs for the National VuGraph Coordinator to attend one event in each state and oversee initial operations. Appendix 3 outlines these estimated costs (\$3850)

Event Costs *(estimated)*

Appendix 4 outlines a recommended annual schedule and estimated costs of webcasts.

State VuGraph Organiser \$ 1,600.00

Estimated at \$80 per day.

Operators \$ 7,544.00

Because matches vary in board length, it is recommended to pay Operators on a per-board rate of \$2.00, which would equate to about \$16 per hour. It is worth noting that operating, while a simple task, requires focus and attention for quite a long time.

Construction of additional lecterns \$ 100.00

Internet Access Ideally provided free of charge by each event's venue.

Although dial-up internet access is usually reliable for single table coverage, it can and has been plagued by connection drop-outs in the past, particularly for multi-table coverage. Accordingly, it recommended that ABF venue specifications stipulate free or nominally charged broadband internet connections in the playing area as a condition of venue hire.

Shipping and return of VuGraph kit for all events \$ 400.00

Other Issues

Data Security

There may be two data security areas which could concern the ABF. Firstly, hand file data is made available to Operators and supervisors prior to play commencing. It is recommended that data be supplied on a USB data key to the National VuGraph Coordinator or State VuGraph Organiser just prior to each session. However, it is anticipated that all National VuGraph Unit staff will be carefully screened to minimise any risk of the distribution of data.

Secondly, some hands will be webcast prior to being played at all tables and sensitive data could be transmitted to players by, for example, mobile phone. However, current ABF policy regarding mobile phones appears sufficient to dispel any concerns in this regard.

System cards

A necessary aid for commentators who quite often are not familiar with the participants is access to system cards. It is recommended that, where possible, the ABF upload copies of players' systems cards to the event website.

ABF Tournament Committee VuGraph Guidelines

It is also recommended that ABF Tournament Unit review its current VuGraph guidelines which specify a right to teams of less than 1000 Masterpoints to decide which of the two tables in a match will be shown on VuGraph. This has the potential to be problematic when two-table coverage of one match is being undertaken via a BBO webcast. If players have reached the final stages in the event they should be able to cope with the additional scrutiny.

Immediate Update of Website Results

When a bridge event is webcast, up-to-date event results on the ABF website enhance the viewer experience, particularly in the case of other matches not webcast. It is recommended that the ABF directs its employees who provide scoring services to update results on the ABF website as quickly as possible.

Summary

Bridge Base Online has become the market leader in on-line bridge services, both in terms of player numbers and VuGraph webcasts. Thousands of people from all over the world play on BBO each day and almost 2500 sessions of VuGraph have been webcast from hundreds of events during the past 12 months.

Establishing a National VuGraph Unit represents an outstanding opportunity for the ABF to showcase Australia's leading bridge events and players. As a marketing tool, BBO webcasts will be a cost effective vehicle for promoting Australian bridge to a wide audience both in Australia and overseas.

Estimations of set-up and training costs for the first year total \$9,650 and annual costs are estimated at \$16,644. It is recommended that the ABF consider all costs associated with the establishment and operations of the National VuGraph Unit as marketing expenses.

Finally, it is recommended that the ABF appoint Nick Fahrer to the position of National VuGraph Coordinator with a brief to establish the National VuGraph Unit in the first quarter of 2007. Nick was in charge of VuGraph operations for the 2005 World Youth Teams Championships in Sydney, which to date was the largest and most successful VuGraph webcast undertaken in Australia. His knowledge of the BBO software and VuGraph webcast operations is comprehensive.

Appendix 1 Estimated cost of VuGraph Kit

3 x basic laptop computers	\$ 3,000
3 x laptop cable locks	\$ 150
3 x optical mice	\$ 90
1 x USB data-key	\$ 75
3 x mouse pads	\$ 15
1 x 8-port switch	\$ 200
3 x long (~30 metres) Ethernet cables	\$ 30
2 x short (~2 metres) Ethernet cables	\$ 20
1 x long (~15 metres) telephone cable	\$ 5
2 x 4-socket power-boards	\$ 20
3 x long (~10 metre) extension cables	\$ 30
1 x padded aluminium hard-case	\$ 50
Total	\$ 3,685

Appendix 2 Estimated cost of Travel and Accommodation for National VuGraph Coordinator in Year 1 for initial training

Travel – Brisbane	\$ 260
Travel – Melbourne	\$ 350
Travel – Adelaide	\$ 290
Travel, accommodation – Perth	\$ 700
Travel – Canberra	\$ 250
Total	\$ 1850

Appendix 3 Estimated cost of Travel and Accommodation for National VuGraph Coordinator in Year 1 for presence at events

Travel, accommodation - Brisbane	\$ 660
Travel, accommodation – Melbourne	\$ 550
Travel, accommodation – Adelaide	\$ 490
Travel, accommodation – Perth	\$ 1100
Travel, accommodation - Canberra	\$ 1050
Total	\$ 3850

Appendix 4 Estimated Annual State Vugraph Organiser and Operator Pay

Event	Webcast Days	Supervisor Days	Supervisor Pay	Boards / Session	# Sessions	# Operators	Operator Pay
National Women's Teams Semi-Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
National Women's Teams Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
National Seniors Teams Stage 2	1			16	5	2	\$320
National Seniors Teams Final	1			16	4	2	\$256
National Open Teams Rnd 8	1	1	\$100	16	4	4	\$512
National Open Teams Semi-Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	4	\$512
National Open Teams Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Gold Coast Open Teams Semi-Final	1	1	\$100	10	8	2	\$320
Gold Coast Open Teams Final	1	1	\$100	10	4	2	\$160
Open Australian Team Playoffs Semi-Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Open Australian Team Playoffs Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Women's Australian Team Playoffs Semi-Final	1			16	4	2	\$256
Women's Australian Team Playoffs Final	1			16	4	2	\$256
Seniors Australian Team Playoffs Semi-Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Seniors Australian Team Playoffs Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Autumn National Open Teams Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Victor Champion Cup Last 3 rnds of Swiss	1	1	\$100	16	3	2	\$192
Interstate Open Teams Last 3 rnds of R/R	1	1	\$100	24	3	2	\$288
Interstate Open Teams Final	1	1	\$100	10	6	1	\$120
Interstate Women's Teams Final	1			10	6	1	\$120
Interstate Seniors Teams Final	1			10	6	1	\$120
Interstate Youth Teams Final	1			10	4	1	\$80
Grand National Open Teams Semi-Final	1	1	\$100	16	3	2	\$192
Grand National Open Teams Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Spring National Women's Teams Final	1	1	\$100	16	4	2	\$256
Spring National Seniors Teams Final	1			16	4	2	\$256
Spring National Open Teams Semi-Final	1	1	\$100	16	8	4	\$1,024
Spring National Open Teams Final	1	1	\$100	16	8	2	\$512
Total			\$1,600				\$7,544