

## **TEACHING YOUNG PEOPLE BRIDGE AND SPORTS**

### **Experiences of the Italian Bridge Game Federation (FIGB)**

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The spread of a sports activity is as large as the number of young people interested in it is.

The FIGM therefore prepared a project (*'Bridge at School'*) about 15 years ago, and it is aimed at raising students' awareness of the special nature of our discipline.

The project commences with the assumption of being able to hold level one Bridge courses at schools.

In order to be able to do this, it was necessary to come to agreements with the Italian bodies that regulate school education (the Ministry of Education) and sports activities (C.O.N.I.).

This first step was taken by holding a conference in Rome in November 1993, with the sponsorship of both bodies: The Minister of Education, the Honourable Rosa Russo Iervolino; and C.O.N.I. President Mario Pescante.

After having presented the project and after all of the positive features of our sports discipline were acknowledged, the next steps needed in order to attain the goals were the creation of a specific teaching methodology (technically simplified) and teacher training.

Since Italian schools are somewhat distrustful of outsiders, training was above all offered to those teachers who already were familiar with Bridge, however not neglecting to acculturate their colleagues interested in the discipline starting from zero.

Even though Bridge is recognised as a sport, its teaching in the schools was made possible also for teachers of non-physical education classes according to direct agreements signed with the Ministry on several occasions, especially in consideration of it being characterised a 'Mind Sport'.

The first generation of 'tutors' (as those teachers qualified for teaching Bridge at the schools are called) started its activity in 1996 and with ups and downs, depending on the years, about 500 schools hosted Bridge courses for students, even if in many cases in a non-continuative manner. The top result was reached with more than 160 courses during the 2000-2001 academic year.

To hold a school course, it is necessary to present a project to the school administration, which is discussed with the School Board. If approved, also the financing terms are defined. The recent 'cuts' have entailed sacrifices for the teachers with regard to carrying out the activity, even if included amongst the sports activities, and in some cases European funds have been sought.

In any case, this is numerically translated into having introduced more than 25,000 students to our sport over the years.

The spread of the activity was patchy, and consequently the greatest benefits for the subsequent participation of young people in the federal youth activity were gained where there was a higher concentration of active schools, above all in the big cities, where the more forward-thinking sports clubs

hosted the students (who in the meantime moved forward to more demanding school studies) at the 'Sport Starter Centres (CAS)' that were started up.

During the years that Bridge was taught in the schools, the Federation in any case organised sports events, even far-reaching. It above all involved schools, tutor teachers and students in taking part in the Student Sports Games.

However, since the number of schools able to take part in the Games (competition with free teams, by necessity representing the school, with bidding) is fairly limited, the F.I.G.B. asked the school authorities for the chance to directly organise the regional and interregional qualification phases, which normally take place under the control of the regional offices of the Ministry, to then be present at the national finals on the days and at the places it determines.

In fact, the Bridge courses held by the tutor teachers for the most part are limited to studying the game, marginally broaching the declaratory problems. The courses are held where the tutor is also a valid Bridge player and/or can count on the collaboration of an outside expert ('youth instructor').

In any case, during the school year three tournaments in pairs are organised as preparation for the ministerial competition. Three sectors (game without trumps, complete game and game with bidding) are contemplated and the students, advised by their teachers, join according to their technical knowledge. These tournaments are usually held at the schools, and are conducted by the in-house tutor. Neighbouring schools can join, just as the regional F.I.G.B. committees (and/or sports clubs) can organise and host these tournaments between all of the area schools at one single venue.

The event that more than any was popular was the summer campus, which was initially organised at different time periods according to the level of the supporting school: in June, the secondary schools; in July, the middle schools; and of late, only one edition in July.

The summer campuses are set up in holiday villages and combine studying and playing Bridge with recreation and holidays, but they especially allow people of the same age coming from different places having a common interest to meet and talk about their experiences. On this occasion technical educational refresher courses for the teachers are held.

After leaving the secondary (or middle) schools, the more enthusiastic young people interested in the sports discipline and its playing go to the CASs.

As of today, more than 600 young people have passed through these facilities. Many have taken part in the Under 26 Championship (in pairs and in teams) that the Federation organises during the Easter holiday period, when the schools are closed.

The Championship is split up into two sections: the athletes (young athletes, repository for the national youth teams) and those who attend the CASs (this group is further broken down into novices and non-novices, depending on their technical experience and 'seniority').

It may seem a small number if compared to the large number of those who were introduced to it. Most of the students considered taking part in the school Bridge activity a 'game'. When analysis of the movement of the cards and studying the declaration replaces the easy 'game', it seems too demanding to most, and these notions are noted down only superficially.

But there were some. And it is believed that after having learned the characteristics of the game and having had fun and socialised, they will go back to the circle later in their lives to complete their education

with courses held at the clubs to improve their technical knowledge and take part in club activities, and even the championship.

Experience has also presented us with another problem: the first generation of tutors is becoming depleted. Many have retired, some have lost interest and, owing also to our own lack of attention to ongoing training (finding other teachers and arousing their interest), the number of active tutors has diminished.

Now we will add to the ranks by organising new training courses for teachers, also with the collaboration of the school authorities. But the time necessary for replacement will not be short.

It should also be stressed that the activity of the young people during the academic year is necessarily subordinate to the authorisations of the school authorities and the families for all sports activities outside of the school attended. Only when he reaches legal age does the young person acquire greater decision-taking autonomy.

The authorisations are usually had after entering CONI, above all with respect to agreements entered into between FIGB and the Ministry. In the case of the Student Sports Games, it is a student's right in his regular course of studies where Bridge has been included amongst the school's sports activities.

School organisation is fairly similar in the various countries of the European Union. Therefore, an approach with the schools can and must be broached only with agreements with the established Authorities earlier in the process: with the various Ministries of Education and with the Sports authorities (C.O.N.I. is an Italian peculiarity).

The mathematical value of our discipline is one of our strong suits. Perhaps in today's world it is the most important, together with socialization.

The possibility of playing the game, even using computer technology, has made it possible to present it as a valid game complement for studying the subject.

And in fact, mathematics is one of the subjects of the tutor teachers that recurs the most.

It was announced only recently that a session with the topic 'Mathematics and Bridge' has been included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the '*International Mathematics Festival*' (19-22 March in Rome at the Auditorium Parco della Musica).

This recognition makes us happy and fills us with pride.

Ours is not a 'card game'. The cards are the tools for playing the sport, just as is a tennis racket or a football.

The spread of programs allowing fans all over the world to play Bridge on the web is making use of the cards increasingly obsolete.

And this fact as well has fostered development of the project and has allowed schools to receive permission from the school administrations to join '*Bridge at School*'.