

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2011

Mitchell versus Howell discrimination in tournament bridge

Why is Mr. Mitchell so much favored on this side of the Atlantic over Mr. Howell? Is this a case of reverse xenophobia? Perhaps that would be xenophilia. In fact, John Templeton Mitchell was born in Glasgow*, Scotland in 1854 while Edwin Cull Howell was born on Nantucket, MA in 1860. Both were fine whist players and devised the movements which bear their names for whist tournaments. For more details on the Howell movement, see my earlier blogs: [Howell movement](#) and [Howell some more](#).

There really does seem to be a horror of Howell movements on this side of the Atlantic. I've never understood why, although I do realize that if you have a high proportion of infirm players, then you might run out of stationary tables.

The advantage of a Howell movement is that it produces one winner. It is also the best way to run a small event. But the single-winner advantage can be especially compelling. When Kim and I visited a bridge club in England a few years back (in Tenterden, Kent), they happened to be having their Ladies' and Gentlemen's championship. Yes, they were two separate events. They were very gracious and assured us that we would be able to play. The ladies event had about sixteen and a half tables so we were drafted in there. For me, it was the only time that I've played bridge where every other player in the event was of the opposite sex. But my point is that they used some sort of Howell movement, even though they had a large number of tables. Why? Because it produces one winner - very satisfactory for a championship. [We were sufficiently polite not to spoil things by winning of course].

Even at our current regional in Mansfield a few days ago, we were in a 5 table Mitchell for a side game. We played five rounds of five boards each. But that means there were four pairs (40%) we didn't play directly. A nine-round Howell would have worked perfectly.

But I do feel that a smallish two-session event should be done as a Howell in the second session. That's because randomness just doesn't mix the pairs up well for the second session. Take yesterday's Open pairs, for instance, with 10 tables. The first session was reasonably well mixed up, judging from the recap. But when the crossover occurred for the second session most of the contenders (in my subjective judgment) were sitting E/W. In fact the three top-placed pairs after one session all sat E/W in the second session. In the second session the N/S winners, who clearly played very well indeed, were able to score over 70% while the other scores ranged from 40% to 57%, but mainly towards the lower end of this range.

Regardless of the issues of seeding, etc. all these problems could have been solved by running the second session as an interleaved Howell movement, that's to say a Howell where the "phantom" pairs are actually flesh-and-blood creatures that sat in the *other* direction for the first session.

Thus, every pair would play every other pair in the event. It works perfectly for a 10-table event (or for 4, 7 or 14 tables). Admittedly, the first session would have to be 10 rounds long - and in practice one round (and therefore one opponent from a different strat) would have to be missed, but that would be only 5% missed. As it was, we played 13 different pairs, thus not directly meeting 35% of the pairs).

But this seems to me to be the fairest, and most enjoyable way of running a 10-table two-session event. Is it the ACBL that discriminates so? Or District 25? Or is it just that the directors are too busy to print out the movement slips? I don't know.

While I'm on the subject of directors, I find it annoying that they don't take note of who the slow players are. It would be especially good if they were proactive and requested the slow players to speed up when it was appropriate. As it is, when a table gets behind both pairs suffer equally from "speed up" cautions and the possible loss of a board. This is especially annoying if the pair in question is a less experienced pair that might easily have given a good result on the unplayed board.