

British taxman declares contract bridge not a sport

*** by: Patrick Kidd *** From: The Times *** February 25, 2014 9:56AM ***

IT'S a game that requires stamina, concentration, teamwork and ruthlessness - as well as years of practice - to acquire any real proficiency. As far as the taxman is concerned, however, letting a mere card game be considered as a sport would be a bridge too far. How can something be a sport when you can hold a glass of whisky while playing it?

A tax tribunal yesterday dealt a losing hand to the English Bridge Union, which had wanted to be recognised as a sport so that members would not have to pay VAT on their competition entry fees, which amounted to pounds 631,000 in 2012-13.

Although it is seen as a sport - a contract sport, as the joke goes - by other countries, the Charity Commission, the sector's watchdog, and even the International Olympic Committee, the Tax Chamber of the First-Tier Tribunal ruled that bridge does not involve enough physical activity to make it so.

Not even the fact that Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King, the former Wimbledon tennis champions, are keen bridge players, swapping one sort of grand slam for another, would sway the panel.

The English Bridge Union (EBU) had argued that bridge is a healthy pursuit, pointing to studies showing that regular contests may benefit the immune system and reduce the risk of dementia. It also insisted that if activities such as croquet, darts and billiards qualify as sports, then the 50,000 members of the union should also be seen as sportsmen. The EBU's barrister, David Ewart, QC, asked whether it was "really possible to draw a distinction between the mental skill needed in planning a snooker shot, or a croquet stroke, and the physical skill used in executing it". Alas, he was trumped. Dismissing the EBU's appeal, Judge Charles Hellier explained: "To our minds, sport normally connotes a game with an athletic element, rather than simply a game.

"Contract bridge involves some physical activity, but not a significant amount. The physical activity is not the aim of participation and physical skill is not particularly important to the outcome."

The tribunal decided that the interpretation of the tax exemption was clear and refused to refer the dispute to the European Court of Justice.

In passing judgment, Judge Hellier admitted qualms that failing to recognize bridge as a sport might discriminate against older people, who form the majority of players.

British ambivalence on bridge goes back to the Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937, devised to produce a physically fit nation. Richard Caborn, the former Minister for Sport, once said that it needed updating to put the same onus on mental agility, although he warned that differentiation was still needed between "mind sports", such as bridge and chess, and "parlour board games". Otherwise Monopoly and Cluedo could be considered sports. Many countries, including France, Canada and China, regard bridge as a sport. It was recognized by the International Olympic Committee in 1995 and a grand prix competition was held at the Olympic museum in Lausanne, Switzerland, three years later. Juan Antonio Samaranch, the IOC president at the time, declared: "Bridge is a sport and its place is here." It appeared as an exhibition event at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City and there were hopes that bridge could be considered for the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, presumably because it is best played indoors on a cold day by the fireplace.

However, the IOC was reported to be having doubts later that year after an American player refused to take a drug test and was stripped of the silver medal she had won at the World Championships. She said that she was taking medication for a back condition.

If bridge were ever adopted as an Olympic sport, some of the wealthiest men on the planet may be attracted by the lure of gold. Warren Buffett once said that he wouldn't mind jail if he had three cell mates who were decent bridge players. On hearing this, Bill Gates said: "I may have to volunteer to go in with him."

Omar Sharif, the suave Egyptian actor who was in such films as Doctor Zhivago and Lawrence of Arabia, led his own Bridge Circus team of crack players in the 1960s and captained his country in the World Bridge Olympiad, a now defunct tournament.