

Is Bridge a Sport? The High Court Will Decide

By VICTOR MATHERSEPT. 22, 2015



Bridge, the trick-taking card game beloved by your great-aunt Maude, has complex rules, prestigious international tournaments and a century of history.

But is it a sport?

Now Her Majesty's High Court of Justice in London will decide once and for all.

The question of whether certain activities are sports can transcend the semantic. Adherents of the pastimes crave the credibility that being considered a "sport" might bestow. Traditionalists recoil

at what they see as a cheapening of the definition. It is not hard to find vigorous Internet debates on whether cheerleading, poker, video gaming or competitive eating are really sports.

Sport England, which promotes and finances sports in the country, has ruled that activities like bridge and chess are not sports because they lack the required element of physical activity. The English Bridge Union took exception and sued. In a two-day hearing that began Tuesday, the High Court is weighing the matter.

On the line is the potential government financing — as well as tax benefits — that are available to sports but not to games.

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In ruling last April that the case could proceed, Judge Nicholas Mostyn, who The Press Association reported was a bridge player himself, said, “You are doing more physical activity playing bridge with all that dealing and playing than in rifle shooting.” He did not choose to compare bridge with still more vigorously demanding competitions like, say, shuffleboard.

At the hearing on Tuesday, the bridge union’s lawyer Richard Clayton argued that “sport” was a broad term encompassing events like bridge, the BBC reported. The lawyer for Britain’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Ben Jaffey, contended that “the sports councils are entitled to separate mind games from physical activities when deciding who to recognize.”

Though perhaps most associated with “Mad Men”-era gatherings in suburban living rooms, bridge has a well-organized competitive side, with worldwide events, notably the Bermuda Bowl, which opens in Chennai, India, later this week.

The recently deceased actor Omar Sharif was an aficionado, and wrote a newspaper column and books on bridge. There have been efforts to bring bridge to

schoolchildren, both to challenge their minds and to sustain the game for future generations.

At least one major multinational organization already officially classifies bridge as a sport. The International Olympic Committee recognizes a long and eccentric list of sports, including Frisbee, competitive lifesaving and tug of war, though most are not actually contested at the Games. Bridge did not make the shortlist to be added to the 2020 Summer Games, losing out to the likes of sport climbing, bowling and the martial art wushu.

In an interview on Radio Five Live in Britain, Phil Smith, the director of Sport England, invoked the slippery-slope argument, saying that the recognition of bridge would pave the way for claims from activities like Scrabble.

“It is Sport England’s job to get the nation fitter,” Smith said. “And although bridge is a fantastic pursuit, and we think it probably gives pleasure to a lot of people, it certainly isn’t getting the nation any fitter.”

Smith also suggested that an avalanche of newly recognized sports might sap the British government’s coffers, which support a wide range of sports. For example, over a four-year period, U.K. Sport is cutting checks for more than \$8 million. For curling.

The issue for bridge is that it lacks the required element of physical activity, according to Sport England. Credit Tim Ireland/Associated Press