

# Free Play Policy, Revision 2

A couple weeks ago, I published a first attempt at revising the club's Free Play policy, and invited your comments. I received a variety of responses, a few angry at any change to the traditional plan, but many supportive, and several very useful suggestions. I am incorporating some of those suggestions into this second pass.

Before describing the details of the new policy, I think it best to provide some background information and data to let you understand my motivations. I know of at least two clubs that stopped giving free plays altogether. One director told me that he put it to a vote and most of his players preferred that he keep the price 50 cents lower and stop awarding free plays, since only a few players win all the time and the rest of us need not pay extra when we never win. A couple of the responses that I received to my initial proposal echoed this view, and I am sympathetic to this complaint. But I *like* to award Free Play tickets in recognition of good performance, and hope I can devise a solution that gives all players a more equal chance.

Wanting to investigate the extent to which the current policy has concentrated the awarding of free plays, I extracted data from the spreadsheet that I use to monitor my Free Play tickets. This data covers an eight month period from July 2005 through February 2006, during which time I awarded something over 700 Free Play tickets, most for winning first in a section, but a few for other purposes such as newcomers or thanks for help with scoring, etc. One of my respondents suggested that although we use three strata for our games, we really have four classes of players and I should consider the Super-A players as a separate group. I have drawn the AA boundary at about 2500 MP, or inclusion in the top 100 of EMBA's Nifty 150 list as published in the January Quick Trick. Here is the data:

<b>Free Play Data for July 2005 to Feb 2006</b>				
<b>Strata</b>	<b>MP boundary</b>	<b>Total different winners</b>	<b>Total Free Plays awarded</b>	<b>Free Plays won by most frequent winners</b>
<b>Super A</b>	<b>&gt;2500</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>242</b>	51, 20, 19, 16, 15, 14, 14, 11, 8
<b>A</b>	<b>1500-2500</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>119</b>	9, 8, 7, 7, 6, 5, 5, 5, 4, 4...
<b>B</b>	<b>500-1500</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>222</b>	13, 9, 8, 8, 7, 6, 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, 4...
<b>C</b>	<b>&lt;500</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>120</b>	5, 3, 3, 3, 3, 3, 2, 2...
<b>Totals</b>		<b>235</b>	<b>703</b>	

**Notes:** The top 8 players won 160 Free Plays. Some of the C winners were playing with Flight A partners. This period included six Swiss Team games, so 24 of the Flight C awards were from those games. I did not include any shared Free Plays (awarded in the case of ties). A few of the Flight C may instead be Newcomer Free Plays. My attendance data shows roughly equal numbers of A, B, and C players in a typical game.

I have one other observation about awarding Free Plays—those who win infrequently are *much* more appreciative. Alas, some of those who win most often have come to treat Free Plays as something they are *entitled* to. Sorry, but **there are no entitlements**, and the club owner is free to choose any policy that he thinks best serves to promote his club and the best interests of the ACBL. My view is that giving all players a better chance at these rewards is in everyone's best interests.

Probably the best suggestion I received was that my initial proposal was too complex and that I need to keep it simple. I also received a lot of negative feedback about any handicap methodology. Since it is intrinsically complex, unpopular, and confusing, I have abandoned that idea. Some people were under the false impression that I want to run handicap games. Nothing could be further from the truth. I think the masterpoint awards in stratified games give up-and-coming players good opportunities to accumulate MPs, with generous awards for overall finishes in Flights B and C. *My intent is to continue running every game as a stratified game.* The MP awards are mandated by the ACBL, but I am free to award Free Plays by a different scheme. Since some tournaments award "Section Top" prizes, winning a section seemed a natural criterion for awarding Free Plays, *but it does not have to be that way.* Section tops are skewed in favor of the best players not only due to superior ability, but also because we seed the field to spread the Super-A players among the sections so they do not compete directly against each other. The seeding makes sense for making the MP competition fair, but not for Free Play awards.

The gist of my new plan is very simple: I will usually award Free Plays for:

- 1> First overall, no matter what Flight
- 2> Best Flight C performance
- 3> Best Flight B performance, and
- 4> Best Flight A performance.

There are some caveats and fine print but that is the basic scheme.

In fact, I wish to continue awarding essentially the same number of Free Plays, so this scheme is for the usual two-section game. With fewer than nine tables (snowstorm mode), we will typically run a single winner game, and there will be only one Free Play. When I have only one section (with nine to sixteen or seventeen tables), I will revert to the old scheme and award one Free Play N-S and one E-W. I will no longer award shared free plays. In the event of a tie, the pair with the lower number of total MP gets the Free Play. I will also insist on some minimal level of performance since I hate to give awards for games under 50%. The winning Flight C pair must have at least 52%, Flight B 55%, Flight A 58%, and Super-A 62%. I will not award a Flight C or Flight B award unless at least 20% of the field is in that flight – this is seldom a problem. If the overall winner comes from Flight C, B, or A, then awards may also go to the second best pair in that Flight. If there is no qualifying performance in some flight, or if we have three sections (26 or more tables), then two further awards are possible:

5>Best Super-A performance

6>Second best section top

There is no limitation on the number of Free Plays a player can win for finishing first overall, but the awards for Flights C, B, and A are limited to no more than three per month.

The monthly and annual contests for most MP won remain in effect, but in 2007 I expect to change the annual contest to three separate contests with lesser awards for B and C.

So far, this policy clearly deals with specifying the conditions for awarding Free Plays for outstanding performance. But I view Free Plays as a basic marketing tool, and award them for several other reasons: Newcomers are often given free plays in hopes of getting them to return for a second time. When someone gives me extraordinary help to keep the game going smoothly (e.g., scoring when I am playing), I may give them a free play. I got a suggestion that I should perhaps have a special category to award Senior citizens who do well. I recently was glad to award Free Plays to Milton and Harriet Binder when they chose to include our club in her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. I'll make it a general policy to award a Free Play for any 75<sup>th</sup>, 80<sup>th</sup>, 85<sup>th</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup>, or 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, if you are willing to admit reaching that age and willing to have us sing Happy Birthday to you. Players reaching age 100, play free for the entire next year -- may we be so lucky as to have someone take me up on that promise! I'm also glad to host parties for new Life Masters and can award them a Free Play.

To win a Free Play for outstanding performance, one has to have a good game that day, but I have some regular customers who will simply not qualify for one of these awards. I will also make some attendance awards at the end of the year to those players who attended the most games without winning any Free Play. I expect to give 20-25 such awards, and the cut off point will likely involve attending more than 30-35 sessions per year. These regular customers are the backbone of my club, and they should not go away empty-handed.

Another important goal is for the ACBL to attract and retain new players. I will gladly award a free play if you recruit a new player and bring him or her to the club. [This does NOT apply to people who play regularly at other clubs!] Typically, we are seeking out people who have played social bridge or rubber bridge, often recently retired people, who can be persuaded to give duplicate a try. When such a player first comes to the club, I expect your help in introducing him or her to the other players, and I need everyone to be sensitive to the new player's fumbblings and be supportive of their learning. I have been contemplating a new category of **negative free plays** to be assessed against experienced players for any action which serves to intimidate or alienate a new player. These people are the future of our game, and we all need to join in nurturing them.

**This policy takes effect on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.** It is not cast in concrete. We will try it for at least six months, and I am always open to suggestions to improve upon it.

Thanks. -- Alan