

Bridge may be a sport but the brain definitely isn't a muscle

April 30 2015, by Angus Hunter



A judge has claimed bridge exercises the "brain muscle". Credit: European Bridge League/flickr, CC BY-SA

<u>This week</u> a High Court judge opened the way for the card game bridge to be classified as a sport under English law. Recalling his own bridge-



playing experience, Justice Mostyn recognised claims that the game could be recognised as a "mind sport" that exercises the "brain muscle". He also stated that the game involves more physical activity than rifle shooting.

The <u>case</u> was brought by the English Bridge Union, which wants bridge to be classified as a sport in the hope the group would qualify for Sport England lottery funding, and a full judicial review has been awarded.

Given that chess is <u>recognised</u> by the International Olympic Committee as a sport, the union's claim may not be as unlikely as it appears. But the judge's views were misguided.

The brain is not a muscle, it is an organ. It does not contain any muscle cells (which can be smooth, striated or cardiac) and it is incapable of contraction and dilation from central nervous system signals.

Increased cerebral activity will elevate glucose metabolism in the brain, but this will have negligible affects on the body's overall energy balance or consequential physical health benefits. Any benefits of this kind are often negated by the typical consumption of snacks and beverages during the activity.

Brain plasticity <u>research</u> has demonstrated the capacity of the brain to develop new neurons throughout life when exposed to mentally challenging tasks. This means improvement of cognition is possible at any age. This activity can even reverse cognitive decline and delay the onset of dementia. In other words, the idea that you should "use it or lose it" is true.

In its defence, Sport England referred to the Council of Europe's <u>definition</u> of sport: "Sport means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving



physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships obtaining results in competition at all levels".

It is not difficult to see that bridge fails to tick the boxes referring to physical activity and fitness. Yet the judge insisted that the dealing and playing of bridge requires greater physical activity than that of rifle shooting. From this I assume he meant the dynamic arm movement of selecting and placing cards onto a table (and possibly toilet breaks?), versus the static contraction of holding a rifle to take the desired shots.

Maybe Justice Mostyn has a point, but as yet there is no evidence to prove the physical benefits of bridge, unlike rifle shooting, which has <u>demonstrated</u> increased skeletal muscle activity. Critically, the <u>physical</u> <u>activity</u> required to take the rifle shot will determine its accuracy, whereas the speed and accuracy of placing cards on a table bears no relationship to the performance outcome.

However, we are now into the pedantic world of legal definitions. Jaffa Cakes <u>succeeded in being classified</u> as a cake as opposed to a biscuit for the sake of lower taxation, so maybe bridge could be classified as a sport.

One thing is for certain: this topic will always make for an interesting debate at the bar, even during the sport of darts. I've heard an alternative definition: "A sport should only be considered such when it necessitates the changing of shoes." Maybe the Council of Europe should adopt this instead.

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