



# The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers Education Committee

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## *Network for Ringing Training (NRT) summary April 2003*

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Welcome to the 19<sup>th</sup> Summary of NRT postings. Lynda Coles started the month with an activity idea.

*Lynda Coles* wrote, let me tell you about a scheme running in Chertsey District, now in its second year, called the Buddy Week. I divided 14 towers (omitting 1) into 2 groups, A & B. I paired them all up, as far as possible 6 bell with 8 bell towers, and with different practice evenings. On a designated week in the spring (this week as it happens) I asked that as many people as possible from group A, visit their opposite number in B, and in the autumn a return visit. Mostly 2 or 3 people per pairing have made the effort; as it happened last night the one I visited had 7 visitors complementing the home band of 5! Numbers are generally fairly small as I say, but there is general agreement that quality over-rides the lack of quantity. Obviously it could be said that anyone can visit other towers at any time, it's just a small added incentive.

### **This 'n' That (Plain Hunt)**

*Peter Wenham* wrote, I have tried a different ploy in teaching plain hunt - 'Ring four pulls slowly, and then four pulls quickly, then lead twice'. The purists will say that's not accurate for 'getting round the bend' at the back, but it's a fair approximation and simpler for learners to grasp. The 'fine tuning' can come later. Any comment?

*Lyn Barnett* replied, one thing I know for sure from my brief sojourn (less than 3 yrs) of trying to learn and trying to teach others to ring tower bells: every learner hears and responds differently to the very same words, same instructions, same explanation. I don't think we can have too many options in our training repertoires. I like your new \*ploy\*, and I may have to borrow it at some point -- but I'm happy to give you complete credit!

*David Pope* wrote, I have taken several courses of Plain hunt at Gwennap Ringing Centre in the past 2 years and have come to the conclusion that the first most important step is to get the students ringing at the right speed, i.e. 4 slow, 1 steady, 4 quick, and 1 steady. It is a very big step from ringing call changes with a change of speed for only 1 handstroke every 4 blows or so, to ringing 4 successive blows (hand and back) either slow or fast; until they can get a grasp of this rhythm, understand it and be able to ring it, it is counter productive to proceed further. At this early stage talking of ropesight is too much to take in, it is better to tell them which bells they are going to follow and point to them as you go along; count the

places as you go and as soon as they can get them to count the places aloud. For these reasons I am now convinced it is best to start them on the treble and not move them from there until they have got the speed changes and rhythm right. Later on the ropesight falls into place without a lot of trouble. I always tell them 'ropesight' is a misnomer anyway - often you KNOW which bell to follow.

*John Harrison* replied, Hear hear. They can look at bells until they are blue in the face, but unless they learn to change speed, they will never be where they should be. I don't follow the logic of starting them on the treble though. OK all the bells are on the same side, but so they are if on a light ring you put them at the back. Some Trebles are very flighty. You can of course start much earlier, e.g. by ringing tied bells to the plain hunt rhythm. It is not accurate of course, but if they can learn to switch between fast and slow, that is a huge step from where they would start otherwise. Another useful ploy is to hunt on 4. Not only is the ropesight simpler, but the speed changes are bigger, so it is impossible to get near the right place without some pre-emptive speed change.

*David Pope* wrote, the reasons I favour the treble for starting plain hunt may be partly due to the ringing circle at Gwennap where the other 4 bells are clearly in a semicircular in front of them and partly because it is often easier to get more practice ringing treble to others ringing a method.

*John Preston* wrote, following on David Pope's ideas about mastering the speed of ringing required for plain hunt. I hope I haven't aired this before - if so apologies - but one technique we have used successfully is what I call 'pseudo plain hunt'. Just two of you ring - and this can be on silenced bells. The instructor rings at the speed required for plain hunting, up and down, on however many. He should also say out loud the position he is pretending to be in at each blow so the pupil associates the required speed with his position. The pupil rings the next bell, i.e. if instructor is on treble, then pupil rings 2. The pupil's task is simply to follow closely his instructor, just as he does in rounds, and varying his speed exactly as the instructor does. I don't like to move on to plain hunt proper until the pupil has achieved bell control in this exercise, and has understood the relationship between his position and the speed required. When I've helped pupils at other towers who were having problems with plain hunt, it has often transpired that they didn't

appreciate how great the speed difference is between hunting up and hunting down. I've never tried it, but I'd guess this trick could also be used for teaching methods. Someone like to try and report back?

*Martin Mansley* added, Interested to read your suggestions for teaching plain hunt. I always rather labour the time spent on a single bell at initial stages so look for exercises to keep the interest. I always get the learner plain hunting by speed in the manner suggested at this point. Although it is a long time before they do it in practice it is a good exercise and from the very start they do not think that you always change at handstroke as in the case of call change ringing. This habit often takes a lot of "un-learning". Living in an area where Call Change ringing is predominant it is very clear how difficult this is. When teaching younger learners who were a little short on physical strength I started plain hunt and Bob Doubles on handbells from the first lesson. They started off with a much clearer grasp of the subject than anyone else I have taught who has done the usual route of bell handling- rounds - call changes - plain hunt. They have also remarked that they feel method ringing is much less complicated to them now than it appears to be to other colleagues who have trodden the traditional route.

*Joan Kemp* replied, isn't this kind of 'blind'? Isn't it more effective to have a helper standing by the learner whispering 'Lead now. 4 takes you from lead. 3rd place after the 5 etc'?

*Phil Gay* wrote, there are two ways I have tried for introducing students to the speed/bell handling requirements for plain hunt and methods: 1) With a simulator. I ring the live bell, and the student rings another (silent) bell. I ring the method, and the student shadows me. 2) This is suggested by David Parsons, in *The Tower Captain's Handbook*. On a ring of eight, silence the treble. Steady band rings rounds on back six. Student rings treble, pulling with bells of back six in sequence of places for what is being rung - pull with treble = first place, pull with 2nd = 2nd place, etc.

*Doug Nichols* replied, I have done it the other way around as well. I ring the silent bell as close to exactly where the student's bell should be sounding (so our ropes should rise and fall together). Then, if the hunting is going well I can stand and let the student run alone for a while. If the ringing starts to go off track, I can resume ringing. For beginners still trying to keep their rhythm steady enough to manage rounds, I have found a system of pointing can help. The learner is on the third of our eight and is ringing the third to rounds on six on the simulator. I stand somewhere in front and, if she is out of place, point at her actual position in the rope circle that is around her (so I'd point in between the second and third if she is striking a little early; point at the sixth if she is badly late). I have found that this helps people get started with a simulator because they sometimes cannot tell, when a long way out of place, whether they are too high or too low (sometimes going onto the wrong stroke and

thinking all is well again). Directing by pointing keeps the ears focused on the bells.

*Frank Lewis* wrote, what I often do is to explain that the learner passes each bell only once. Then, as he passes each bell, say something like, "seconds place over the two" followed by " thirds place over the first of the remaining three, fourths place over the first of the remaining two, fifths place over the only one left" (together with pointing.) This seems to work OK, and it avoids having to mention bell numbers so much - but you do have to speak quite fast!

*Alys Helm* replied, I think I have used just about all the methods given in this discussion at some time. I try to adapt to the learner rather than the other way around. If a particular system isn't working try another until it clicks eventually you will strike gold!

*David Pope* added, I think Frank Lewis's submission says it all: if you have to speak quickly to say '2nds over 3 3rds over 5 etc' the student cannot possibly take it all in, especially as at this stage they are still worrying to some extent about handling the bell at different speeds. I think if the student gets a long way out of place it is much better to stand and start again rather than try to sort it out - by that time probably some of your helpers are getting a bit out of order and it can lead to a feeling of panic which particularly with older students does not help at all.

*Chris Maslen* wrote, I've only just joined NRT so this may be covering old ground. However, as a relatively recent (older) learner, I still fall back on two basics that simplified my life (in fact became the lights at the end of a very dark tunnel). The first was learning the coursing order i.e.

2,4,6,8,7,5,3,1,2, etc. Suddenly it allowed me to ring not only plain hunt but also plain bob because it meant that whichever bell I was on, I could work out who took me off lead and the order of the bells which I should ring over. No-one showed me this, I worked it out for myself and, moreover, I haven't heard anyone teach it to beginners since, even though it is absolutely basic. The second was that odd bells go out, even bells go in. This advice I have heard being given, but usually to people past the initial stages of learning. Probably, there is a view (and perhaps with good reason) why basics such as this shouldn't be taught at the early stages, but if someone had pointed out these two facts to me, it would have made life so much easier.

*Peter Humphrey* replied, indeed, it's so basic that most learners find it for themselves, at least in part. By far the majority of teachers, however, vigorously discourage it, disparaging what they call "learning the numbers". I think they're absolutely wrong. Not only is it impossible to stop anyone from noticing what you have, I'm convinced it's an essential learning point.

Certain subscribers to this list will jump straight down my throat for saying that. They do the same with every suggestion that isn't part of the orthodoxy. It seems that, having become experts, they're now unwilling to recognise that there may be any value in other ways of seeing things.

*Peter Wenham* replied, perhaps, but many more will support you. We should ALL be looking for ways to make a learner's life easier. And, IME, learners will soon find the numbers for PH5 for themselves, so why make a mystery of it?

*Rebecca George* wrote, I may be stating the obvious here, but the point with "not learning by the numbers" is that teaching the numbers is a very easy way for the teacher who is not so bothered, inexperienced or ignorant to teach plain hunt, and leaves it at that and not telling the learner that you must change speed, and that other than in plain hunt the numbers change. I recently found out that a learner I know has been ringing plain hunt for at least 2 years and didn't know that you have to ring two blows in the same place at the back, and had no idea what counting places was, consequently he could ring plain hunt perfectly (by the numbers) but could not treble to Grandsire.

I think what I just wanted to point out was that teaching the numbers, or making them known is good, as long as it is backed up by all the other methods of teaching plain hunt. I don't want to encourage bad teachers by suggesting that a lot of experienced teachers mainly teach plain hunt by the numbers, thus giving it credibility.

*Richard Thomas* wrote, I remember being taught which bells to follow when I started ringing Plain Hunt with a band, and also I worked out that in some methods which included seconds for the working bells, I could simply put the last bell at the front of the coursing order and, bingo, I had my new security blanket of the new coursing order. Now that I teach, I do use the "following bells" approach to help new learners join the regular ringing and feel part of the team at an earlier stage. Prior to this, they have had to successfully follow me ringing at "normal" speed and also at a "fast" and a "slow" speed (and changing between the speeds). I believe this gives them the "toolbox of ringing skills" to join in, provided they have a clear understanding of the concepts (=some theory and documents in the pub), and gives them the security of knowing who to follow. However I do explain to them that this security blanket will turn from their primary signpost into a secondary one, because what we are using the "following bells" process for is to get them consciously and later unconsciously to be ringing at the right speed to be in the right place, and you can test their dependence on "who I'm following" vs. "what place am I in" by making small incremental changes to what I put them in and seeing how they deal with the new situation. You need to be aware of how different people pick up new skills at differing rates and use your judgement as to what they are ready for. People then slowly migrate away from the need to know who to follow and pick up the blue line, deducing the speed changes, but I do still find that particularly ensuring that they know to look for when they are passing the treble gives them their secondary checkpoint. This may mean a learning path (in our tower, anyway) something like: 1. Basic Handling 2a. Ability to ring in rounds (in parallel with) 2b. Ringing tenor behind a method (and spotting bells they are following) 3a. Ability to

change ringing speed in timely and accurate fashion. (in parallel with) 3b. Ringing in Plain Hunt (not always on same bell) to root the above within a real ringing scenario

4a. Treble to Plain Hunt (tend to put learners inside in step 3b not on treble) 4b. Treble to Plain Bob (or other methods ) 4c. Treble to Grandsire 4d. Treble to St. Simons (or other method without order out = order back working bells) 5a. Inside to Plain Bob plain course 5b. Preannounce touches of Plain Bob 5c. Unannounced touches 6. (By now up to 2 years later in many cases) Other tower methods as ability dictates. OK, this is rather oversimplified and I've never tried to write it down or think it out quite so clearly before, but I think you can get the gist. In summary, I think that we need to use all the available help to get the learner to the right level of skill and enthusiasm, using some methods as catalysts to more advanced ringing skills and then dropping them later. Also as one size never fits all, be prepared to change the approach if someone is struggling with your first approach and try something different.

*Greg Russell* agrees, I'm not an expert, and just started ringing about two years ago. I read all about the pros and cons of learning the numbers, and tried to avoid it for a while, in hopes of acquiring rope sight. In the long run, I managed to learn to hunt on 5 or 6 without the numbers, but in retrospect, I don't think it helped at all. One needs to learn the bell handling and striking first, and knowing the order of bells to ring over makes this a little easier. It won't help much when you start ringing touches, but there is a lot of time in between the first time one tries hunting, and the first touch, to learn some rope sight, ringing by rhythm, and ringing by ear, all of which will help as one advances. One needs to be careful not to use it as a long term crutch and thereby miss learning the other aspects of ringing (rhythm, ear, and ropesight). "Carry on"

*John Harrison* wrote, obviously when people try plain hunting with other ringers for the first time, anything that makes the ropesight easier is beneficial. You can choose a bell with narrow angle of view or with all ropes on one side as a starter. Also having some idea of the pattern in which you will meet the bells can help, for example if you are on the Treble, knowing that you will pass alternate bells and then work your way back round the circle can help. If you are on the 3rd, knowing that you will meet bells on one side of you and than bells on the other side of you. What is much more questionable is encouraging the learner to fill his or her mind by mentally chanting a sequence of bell numbers, when we ought to be encouraging place awareness. If you don't know when you get to the back and the front, then you will make a mess of turning round to hunt the other way. The obvious compromise between the two poles of the debate is to encourage place counting and also encourage familiarity with the visual pattern. Doing that fits with pointing to direct the ringer's visual attention and using speech for things like 'quicker' 'lead' 'at the back', etc. The other advantage of this approach is that if people

learn visually the order to expect to meet the ropes, they are more likely to spot that something is wrong if one of them is not there and therefore more likely to keep going. If 'who to follow' dominates in the mind, losing one of them is likely to be much more disruptive.

### **Pointing V Talking**

*David Pope* wrote, I find that pointing is much better than using the voice - when a student is ringing the less that is said the better.

*Matt Nixon* replied the only downside with pointing is that you have to make sure you are a good pointer and that the learner can see exactly the direction that your finger is going (some ringing circles can also make this problematic). When other people in my tower have tried to show a learner where they should be, the learner has complained about the difficulty of discerning between couples of bells that are being pointed towards. I agree that sometimes using your voice can confuse, especially if you have an inexperienced band surrounding you, but a good way of showing the learner ropesight is to say, for example, "seconds place over the two, thirds place over the four" etc. This can help the learner to count the number of ropes that are preceding them.

*Peter Wenham* replied yes - I point rather than speak during ringing but I wanted a rock-bottom explanation of what to do, something simple learners can keep in mind while ringing, I think that 'Mantra' is the current in-word!

*John Harrison* agreed, I use a simpler system of gestures. Palm up, lifting gesture means ring a bit wider. Palm down pressing gesture = ring a bit closer. If the bell is a long way out, I do tend to speak, on the grounds that the listening is not giving a lot of useful information, and getting back in place is likely to take several blows, so the interruption is small in comparison. I think we need to differentiate between pointing to get the learner to look in the right direction and what one might call 'visual dictation'. The main need for pointing is when the learner looks in the wrong direction. If pointed in the right (broad) direction, with only a couple of ropes to choose from, their ropesight ought to kick in if they are in anywhere near the right place. (If they are a long way out, then they need telling to ring a lot closer or wider.)

### **Plain Hunt – By the Numbers**

*Martin Mansley* wrote, back to basics. The concerns about ringing by numbers or not seems to have clouded the original discussion. This was the suggestion of teaching the required rhythm needed on a single bell. It seems to me that more problems are caused by the learner not being able to control the bell or even realising the sort of bell control required. They become so obsessed by looking for a bell to follow that they do not concentrate enough on the speed of the bell. The original idea was to address this point. The concern about ringing by numbers is historical. Many bands in the past have struggled to progress

because no-one could help them past the numbers only stage. I know of several bands that got stuck on plain hunting and never progressed at all. The importance of understanding places cannot be over emphasised as many ringers can learn to ring the treble to Plain Bob perfectly well by transposing numbers but do not understand places. Places are also important to be able to learn how to listen to your own bell.

*Alison Barnett* wrote, I always start with numbers as a way of explaining what happens. Surely the art of teaching is to teach to the level of your learner. Try both approaches and see which has the best results. We are lucky that we don't have a 'you must do it this way' approach so that different people can arrive at the same goal by different routes. The key word is arriving at the same goal. A flight of stairs whilst doing this is a useful tool to bring both ways together! (and some large numbers up to 6 or 8) not having to worry about a bell but going up or down 1 place with a helper changing the numbers to the bell you are following, sometimes helps it to become a little clearer and hopefully little less panic sets in when 'going live'.

*Catherine Lewis* wrote, on the hunting by numbers issue I'm entirely with John Harrison. The clues he suggests are fine. It is a question of what you fill your mind with. With ringing there's a lot to think about - however advanced you (think you) get there always will be. There's catching the sally, getting your hands down, watching the bell you're following, listening to the rhythm, knowing your place, picking out your bell in the sound, correcting your striking, remembering the blue line, working out how to get your bell to stay on the line, working out what to do at a bob or change of method, remembering when the next call is, working out the coursing order, remembering it so you can put people right, finding the words to give advice, remembering what method you're ringing, etc, etc - and that's without working out what you're having for supper! As you advance, more and more of these things will become automatic, but even then (for all but the really brilliant perhaps) there's still too much. So, returning to the beginner, there simply isn't the brain space to count places (which is fairly simple and helps you know how to regulate your speed) and also to remember bell numbers for whom to follow. I believe that if you work on thinking of places you will begin to "see" them in the ropes - which is ropesight. This works a lot better if you do lots of other exercises between call changes and trebling Bob Doubles though.

*Peter Wenham* added, this, to my mind is the greatest hurdle of all in teaching any practical skill and I suggest to learners that 'In time, X becomes automatic and then you can think of something else'. My favourite examples of this are riding a bicycle or walking, much more complex than handling a bell, but we just DO them. One can also mention changing gear whilst driving. - do we actually THINK every movement? Unfortunately, unlike computers, we can't add to our personal RAM and ROM as needed! Regarding helpful

exercises, I prefer to teach plain hunt on (single) handbells at first. It helps in counting places and learners can see the mechanism of PH without the distraction of controlling a tower bell.

*Peter Robson* wrote, I have read with interest the discussions on teaching plain hunt. As a recent user of NRT I am extremely pleased that we now have an adequate forum for such discussions. Following bell handling I have always found that there is a period of time when a tailored approach needs to be taken. Some learners quickly grasp the concepts and can easily visualize what is happening, whilst others remain so focussed on their ringing that any further progress is very slow. The analogy with learning to drive is a good one in that eventually our cerebellum takes over and we can start to concentrate on other things. One of the most important things is to reappraise where you are with a beginner and add in extra useful information (such as coursing bells, passing trebles etc. as the ability to take this in arises). I often find it helpful to simply ask how they are coping and what they understand/don't understand about what is going on. One by-product of these conversations is that other established members of the band are much more likely to ask questions as there is an opportunity to do so without feeling foolish. It also allows others who perhaps have never understood certain aspects of ringing to listen to an explanation of why. We recently discovered that a long-term ringer who could not get past plain course did not know that the treble led at the dodges in plain bob! She now has a much greater insight into what is going on. I use numbers to start with and then introduce a concept of rhythm with fast & slow pulls, during this we tend to switch to places as the learner is ready. Once they are happy I then look at moving them around and discussing how the method is the same on other bells. We then look at the structure of plain hunt and so on. We are unfortunately limited in that we cannot yet cover easily (5 bells - the sixth having maintenance) however after the work this will be an intermediate step.

*Ray Taylor* wrote, in our enthusiasm to "help" it is often all too easy to provide more information than is required. I like the ideas put forward which break the learning process down into manageable chunks and make the learner feel a sense of understanding and achievement, albeit through tiny steps, rather than feel overwhelmed by ropes, numbers, directions, speed, striking, etc. I can't help thinking that more explanation of places could happen while ringing rounds and call changes, there's a lot less to take up brain space at that point. Then place-making with only 2 middle bells changing. Ringing speed, places and striking can all be worked on here. Pushing people into plain hunt too soon might be part of the problem?

*Martin Mansley* added, on courses or at any time where there are plenty of bodies I like to set out a number of chairs with numbers on them e.g. 1-6 and get the students and helpers to walk plain hunt round them (possibly carrying the number of their bell with them) but counting out loud the position they are in. This can be used to

demonstrate many of the various points needed to understand what is happening. I've often found that this can cause a break-through with someone who is having problems getting to grips with the concepts. It is also fun and can be done on any number - Have caused great hilarity by plain hunting on 16 chairs at a 6 bell tower. Also find the use of steps very beneficial.

*Ray Taylor* replied, Martin, thank you for mentioning FUN. Please can we have more of these spectacularly helpful (and simple) exercises which allow people to ENJOY learning to ring? Four of us had fun in the pub trying to tap out plain hunt on 4 on the table for a few minutes. So before anyone comments that elderly learners can't cope with musical chairs, please let's be a bit more creative!

*Frank Lewis* wrote, as soon as I get people into call changes I start asking silly questions like, "who's following you now?", "who is the bell in front of you following?" etc. This prepares learners for what is to come when they get into plain hunt. You need to explain what it's all about, and why the questions are important. Another thing we find very useful is to get learners to stand behind the tenor when it's covering. There is quite a lot of merit in getting people used to the idea of seeing bells coming up to the back - it helps the overall picture of what's going on. Also, the tenor ringer probably has more brainpower spare when covering and can tell the learner quite a lot of useful bits and pieces. Following on from watching is actually ringing the tenor behind. There used to be a worry that tenor bashers would become just that, and never learn to ring inside, but this doesn't seem to be a problem these days - though I'm sure someone will prove me wrong! And yes, pushing people into plain hunting too soon is all too often part of the problem.

*Richard Pargeter* wrote, one answer to this is to visualise the pattern of ropes, rather than to remember a set of numbers (which then have to be translated into rope positions). 24653 from the treble becomes the one on my left, miss one to get to the middle, miss another to get to the bell on my right, now one to the left, then two to the left for the only bell remaining. Visually, that's a very simple pattern, and doesn't get in the way of counting places. Taking this a little further, one of my favourite exercises to begin to develop ropesight is plain bob with three bobs in a row. The third, who has inevitably learnt to follow 12465, whether by 'numbers' or visually, and whether taught that way, or just through familiarity from repetition, now has to find the order of 45&6 afresh each time round. Yes, that can be done by some sort of transposition, but providing 45&6 are all clearly visible from 3, then the whole exercise is 'visual' rather than 'numbers'. Starting from leading, climb up over the two bells on your right, going clockwise, then look left, and climb up over the bell that's following you\*, and again, and again (only one left now). Look right 1 & 2 (clockwise) again, then look left, follow 456 as a group of three, all but the actual bell you just followed as a group of two,

the only one left, and lead. Cumbersome when put into words like this, but not in practice.

\* Yes, this was one of the most useful clues I was ever given too!

*John Harrison* replied, all this looking left and right bothers me - partly because it is more to remember, and partly because one of the commoner problems I observe is people looking the wrong way. There is a much simpler way. Firstly, look at all of the ropes, not just one or two - the field of vision is much wider than you might think. That means you are never looking the wrong way, you never get seduced into looking at the same bell for too long.

Secondly, imagine a horizontal line across your field of view, with the other ropes moving up and down across it. The line is tied to where your bell is. At lead, the other bells are all above you. As you hunt up, you progressively let one, then another go below the line. There is no need to remember numbers, or left and right. At each stage, you pass the 'next' one, using the same visual skills you would deploy to work out the order of runners in a race. As your own bell pauses near the balance, only two other ropes will be moving slowly the ones in front and behind you. The others will be moving more rapidly at different phases of the cycle. This makes it easier to see when a bell is 'missing', rather than just panicking.

#### **Learners and Simulators**

*Peter Wenham* wrote, I am not claiming originality for this; I am sure that John H has made some mention of a similar scheme. However, the results (IMO) are worth mentioning. The learners are three lads aged 12 - 14. I was asked to teach them initially as the bells in their home tower are not particularly learner-friendly. When they could handle a bell I had them ring the 3rd (of 5) in rounds against the simulator. They were not awed by ringing against a computer and it didn't take long for them to keep a bell swinging reasonably in time by counting and listening. There was no other guide so they MUST now be able to count and listen. (Point 1.) Two of the three have now been introduced to following a rope. I ring 2 they ring 3, the simulator rings 1, 4 and 5. By this means they can come and have an hour's practice at rounds after school, without having to raise a full band, only the obligatory 'second adult'. (Point 2.) This was done as an experiment; the results suggest that, where a simulator is available, the results justify the method, though I am aware that some adult learners might not take so readily to the computer. In this instance five bells have been used for teaching so as to match the learners' home tower. Comments welcome.

*John Harrison* replied, I can't think why some adults may not take to the pc. I've never met any reluctance (other than 'experienced' ringers who can't imagine ringing with their ropesight crutch kicked away). Hide it out of sight if it makes a difference. Pretend there are some other ringers upstairs - that's what we did back in the '60s before simulators were invented.

*Mike Worthington* wrote, I'm currently doing exactly that with 2 adult learners.

They might not soak it up quite as fast but they still get there. It's an amazing confidence booster for both the teacher and learner that the first time they ring with the band on practise night they can get it right first time. First public appearance is a high stress occasion for any learner and getting it right gives a tremendous buzz.

#### **Rising Standards through Striking Competitions**

*John Walton* wrote, I ring in a branch with in excess of 30 towers, ranging from almost silent (just one or two local ringers) to 12 bell competition standard. There are two striking competitions - the first, open to all, feeds into the Guild six bell competition, and tends to be closely contested by a small number of very good bands. The same teams battle it out each year and the winner usually does pretty well at Guild level too. The second competition is designed to improve standards throughout the branch. It is a little more informal and more relaxed and is organised on a knockout basis. All towers are drawn out of a hat (winners of the main competition being excluded) and compete head to head to go through to the next round. Rounds continue until 4-6 towers remain and a regular style final competition is held at a branch meeting. Despite the good intentions of the second competition and its opt-out (Rather than opt-in) nature, relatively few towers take part leading to a large number of byes. Some towers reach the final without having played in any of the previous rounds. The reasons for not competing are many and varied: "Too far to our opponent's tower", "We won't win", "Don't have a band", "Don't see the point"... The first objection has been addressed this year by regionalising the branch for the purpose of the draw, but the other issues remain. As I indicated, the aim of the second competition is to raise standards, something which every ringer surely must subscribe to.

So, if the current format is only partially achieving that aim then what would go further? I don't want to rule any suggestion in or out of the debate, so:- is a striking competition a good way to improve standards? - What format of competition would best achieve that aim? - How can towers be encouraged to see participation as being worthwhile? - What causes the mismatch between the aims and the perception of the competition? I have my own views, but I would be interested to hear from anyone (on or off list) who has practical experience of such situations. I'm sure there are many factors at work here which might lead into other areas of discussion...

*John Preston* replied, raising standards reveals at least the problem, if not the answer. I suspect all of us who are interested in ringing training, and many others too, would indeed subscribe to the aim that John states. But the reality of life is that there are many ringers for whom raising their own personal ringing standards is very low down on their list of priorities. I suspect there as many reasons why people ring as there are ringers, but certainly there

are many who will only ring at their own church (for Sunday service needs), who will just make up numbers when short for a wedding, who come to practice because they like the company of certain other ringers, who are happy never to move beyond ringing tenor behind, etc, etc. These people are valuable to us, if only because they keep things going, albeit low key, when otherwise a tower would fall silent. I suspect they may even be the majority in some areas. We will only motivate such people to a point where they want to improve their own ringing, and thus inclined to take part in striking contests. If we can make ringing fun, enjoyable, etc, all the things that move ringing further up their personal order of priorities. I think this leads to the conclusion that tower leadership has many more strands than the ability to train people well. There is a lot to do with motivation - and I'm not sure that I want to get into the debate about whether great leaders are born or made! I'd certainly like to hear other people's ideas on how they have motivated trainee ringers to the point of enthusiasm - particularly the kind of ringers I referred to above. What is it that makes some tower practices magnets over a wide area, while others barely tick over? How do we generate enthusiasm?

*Patricia Newton* wrote, I have been a member of the same branch as John for many years, and have seen the branch rise and fall in terms of standards, number of members and success. He says the aim of the knock-out contest is to raise standards of ringing - which I quite agree with, and for many years I entered a "B" and "C" team from my tower (our "A" band being ineligible) and saw great improvement from the concentrated practices that the ringers experienced. However, another major benefit from these competitions is socialising. It gives bands from two towers the opportunity to ring and drink together in a smaller group than would meet at branch practices. The striking competition to which John refers has been very successful in the past, attracting in excess of 30 bands, but the numbers were well below 20 last year. I am not sure of the cause of the problem - probably many reasons - lack of ringers at some towers, lack of interest by some ringers in venturing beyond their own church, or lack of interest by the tower captains in bothering to motivate and organise their ringers. I think the latter may be a significant factor in our case since many tower captains have been in position for a long time. Perhaps new ideas are needed to inspire these tower captains and their tower members to take part in competitions and other branch events. Any ideas would be welcome. John Preston asked "what is it that makes some tower practices magnets over a wide area while others barely tick over?" and "how do we generate enthusiasm?" I put it down to the example of the tower captain. If the TC is enthusiastic and dedicated, this will rub off onto other tower members. We all grow tired of doing the same job for a long period and run out of new ideas, so perhaps frequent change over of leadership is a good.

*Peter Wenham* replied, re rising standards... I think not, despite good intentions. Ground work is necessary first. Our Branch, about half the size of John's, has recently carried out survey, tower by tower, of training requirements and has scheduled a series of training afternoons, each one for a designated subject, using our simulator. This allows a full two-hour session (more if required!) without causing annoyance. IMO this is the way to raise standards, and then the striking competitions might become more interesting! *Stuart Palin* agrees, as they are occasions when the participants concentrate very specifically on their ringing and get 'some' independent feedback/measure of how well they have done. Some people do not enjoy the prospect of competition and pushing them in that direction will only reduce their enjoyment of ringing. A possible problem of organizing a striking competition on a 'tower' basis is that a tower may not be able to get sufficient 'volunteers' to take part. Perhaps a different way of organizing the competition should be considered (more anon). But People are different, they have different learning styles, different aims, different reactions to being moved out of their comfort zone, different priorities etc. How many ringers from your District/Branch/Guild area regularly attend any District/Branch/Guild event? Some people just do not make their ringing their top priority in life, but are happy enough to support their local tower at practices and services where they also enjoy the familiar company of friends they have made through ringing. A recent idea I have floated at my local District level is a differently formatted striking competition. It received some positive reaction and hopefully we may be able to organize a competition on this basis in the future. I sought to address 5 issues:

- 1) Competitions can be difficult to organize because people are reluctant to act as judges
- 2) We did not have a competition format that addressed 8 bell ringing
- 3) Forming a band can be difficult at a tower level (even more so for 8 bell ringing)
- 4) It is not unknown for quite capable bands to ring methods well below their capability.
- 5) Considerable benefit can be obtained through critical listening - giving people the opportunity to listen and mark ringing, then able to compare their judgement with other ringers would be good.

(Some will argue that it is a striking competition not a method ringing competition; my view is that the objective is to improve the standard of ringing, this includes methods.) To address the first issues I suggested that the entering bands would be responsible for getting their band and at least one other person who would join a panel of judges. Other ringers would also be able to volunteer for the judging panel (addressing point 5), and the scoring system to be used would be 'standardized' so that 'churchyard' judges could 'pit their skills' against the judging panel. Some form of filtering might be needed for volunteers. All scores from the judging panel would be submitted anonymously and either a straight average or some form of weighted average (e.g. excluding highest and lowest scores) taken. The final

results would simply be announced so people (including judges) can compare how their opinion of the ringing matched others. If the teams want more detailed commentary on their ringing then they can consult their own member of the judging panel - avoiding any embarrassing public criticism (either having to be given by a judge or received by a ringer). Addressing issues 2 and 4 I proposed that the competition be an 8 bell competition with a range of methods to choose from (say Grandsire, Stedman and Cambridge). Each team would specify which methods they would be willing to compete at. The highest ranked method that got a quorum of applications (say 5 teams) would become the competition piece. Bands that had not wanted to ring that level of method would still have the opportunity to join in the competition if they were willing to go for the selected method (i.e. they may not have been willing to volunteer for the method - but might be prepared to have their collective arms twisted). For issue 3, I proposed that entries could come from any collection of District ringers (though it would be nice if ringers from a local grouping of towers could form bands - I suppose you could even have a 'District Officers' team). There were a few other frills included in my proposal (such as the possibility of running a 'churchyard competition' as to who get a personal scoring that best matched the final result - to encourage critical listening).

Whether you agree with the above proposal or not, I think there are 2 important points: 1) there is more than one way to organize a striking competition. 2) You need to clearly identify objectives & problematic issues - then ensure the way you organize your competition addresses these points.

[BTW if anyone was wondering what I proposed as the competition prize it was simply the title 'Winner' - the objective is not about winning, it is about taking part and improving your ringing].

*John Walton* replied, thank you for your many and varied responses. A mine of information and opinion already! Whilst I would hope that, particularly with regard to striking, no-one would actively object to raising their own personal standards as an aim, many people may be, at best, neutral. As long as their current standard is acceptable, these ringers are, as you say, valuable. I took on the role of trainer and, officially, Ringing Master, of my tower nearly two years ago. With the exception of myself we are very inexperienced as a band and therefore people naturally looked towards me for leadership and motivation, something I feel I have struggled to deliver, although I feel reasonably happy with my performance as Ringing Master. There is a world of difference between a trainer and a leader! The Tower Captain does often mould the ringing of a tower, consciously or otherwise. Do people allow situations where there is no motivation to improve to persist because they are happy with the status quo, because they know no different, or because they feel they'd be worse off as the result of change? A tricky question is to what extent should Branches become involved in the goings on of

individual towers where the Tower Captain in particular is resistant to such assistance? Another topic I feel! Re what sort of people.. The aim is one of improving striking in, well, everyone! Maybe this is too wide. Some expert towers already think it not worth their while, whilst some less able ones are daunted by the prospect. Dividing the competition into classes and ringing standard competition pieces, might be one way to achieve to dispel those thoughts. I like the judging panel concept too - not one I have come across before. Being a very large Branch means about 10% i.e. 30-40 people attend events and we have a very full Branch calendar, with usually two events per month, plus Guild occasions on top, although these can be quite distant. It is true that not everyone places the same level of emphasis on ringing, but if everyone placed it just a little higher, it would make a significant difference to attendance at Branch events and participation in striking competitions. We're back to motivation again...Peter Wenham said: "John asks, are striking competitions the best way to raise standards?" Actually, I didn't, because I knew the answer to that one! I asked if they were a 'good' way to improve standards. I agree with you wholeheartedly that striking competitions can only ever succeed in that aim as part of a broader package of training tailored to meet the needs of individual towers and ringers - but in that environment they can succeed. So where does this leave me? Well, it leaves me with more questions than answers, as these things often do. It makes me think that the striking competition itself is just a symptom, and the root cause is a mixture of perception, attitude, priority, motivation, leadership, etc... I look forward to seeing where the debate leads me next!

*Doug Nichols* wrote, a striking competition is a very good way to \*measure\* your level as a band in comparison to others, but as for actually \*improving\*, I find it hard to see how a striking competition can do this. Yes, it provides a few minutes of ringing where you focus on quality of striking above everything else, and further minutes where you can listen to the efforts of others. These things help, but you need more than those few pressured minutes to get the feel of the rhythm of ringing. Making the effort to attend special practises, getting involved with good bands of ringers, ringing quarter peals, using a simulator, ... these are the ways to bring about improvements. *John Harrison* replied, maybe this is why there is disagreement. It's a bit like asking whether organising a marathon make people able to run faster. Just turning up and ringing for 10 minutes won't do much for anyone's striking if that is all it is. The competition is (or should be) a focus. Ideally the band will practise the touch together beforehand. Ideally whether they do well or not (in their own terms, not just in rank with the other teams) will affect their attitude to their striking in subsequent weeks and months. Ideally, they will get into the habit of listening critically to their own and others' ringing.

There is a lot of 'ideally' in all this, and the sad reality is that many people only turn up out of a sense of loyalty, and increasingly these days, many don't turn up - things are far from ideal. Maybe a better question would be: 'what role can striking competitions play in efforts to improve striking?' That puts it in the proper context, and might prompt more fundamental questions about how we train and motivate ringers. It also opens up the ground for some of the innovative ideas about striking competition posted so far.

*Giles Blundell* wrote, can I suggest that striking competitions as normally constituted have one extra benefit? Most competitions that I've come across (including the Lorna Newton competition which first started this thread) are in basic terms for a band from a tower. Quite often, joint bands are allowed, in my current branch, we have allowed entry from a youth band, and allowing one or two guest ringers is not unusual. But the basic point remains that a striking competition gets a towers band to practise their striking together, and can serve as a way of getting the more home loving ringers to visit other towers and widen their experience. Doug's alternatives tend to work for the more enthusiastic individual ringer and while having a strong ringer in a band should help the whole tower, surely it's even better to get every ringer in a tower to strengthen their performance? I can't think of anything else organised at a branch level that has the same potential to reach out to whole bands. There must be other activities that bring the benefits of a striking competition without the drawbacks. But what are they?

#### **The Value of a Camcorder in the Tower**

*Aston Clinton* asked, Feedback please: Appropriate use of a camcorder as an aid to improving ringing style and bell control. Is there a camcorder specification within a reasonable price range that should be considered prior to purchase? e.g. Still playback. Comments to someone who needs to purchase a camcorder but without much knowledge and even less experience.

*David Pope* replied, we would suggest getting a camera that has a frame by frame playback facility and use a TV that has suitable sockets into which you can plug the camera leads. We find it better to not connect the audio lead; the chit chat that is inevitably present does not help. We have a TV/video which has suitable sockets and can also be used to play instruction videos.

*Tim King* replied, I have recommended a Sony DCRTRV140 for the centre we are setting up. Basically I bought one about a year ago and was impressed. It's a camcorder in Digital8 format, is easy to use, has a rock steady freeze frame, good slow motion and Jessops are doing them for £349.90! Thinking about it the ability to advance frame by frame would be a very useful feature. Fortunately the above camera has that feature. I expect other cameras have the same features but at the moment this one is the cheapest digital.

*Cyril Crouch* replied, we were going to buy a DCRTRV140 for Shiplake, but found on

[www.unbeatable.co.uk](http://www.unbeatable.co.uk) a better unit for the same price. Might be worth a look at the site.

*Heather Peachey* agrees with Tim, its steady slow motion playback is the most valuable thing in analysing handling issues. Analogue camcorders do not have a steady slowmo facility. Another benefit is that Digital 8 works with standard 8mm tapes at virtually the same picture quality, and these are now inexpensive. It can be nice to keep old tapes and show people how far they've come when they're feeling as if their progress has slowed/stopped! We bought a 14" (normal portable size) TV-Video (£130) as a playback monitor which also plays ordinary VHS tapes such as the central council ones. The camcorder does have a small monitor of its own, but it is useful to see it on a larger screen. Additionally we have a Micromark home security camera in the bell chamber which attaches to the same TV and allows the bells to be seen from the ringing chamber whilst ringing - it can be quite hypnotic! *Don Jones* replied, we use a Panasonic NV-DS29B digital camcorder at the Gordon Halls Centre. It has slow motion, freeze frame, and split frame display showing nine stills taken over 1,2,or 3 seconds of time. One second about covers a half pull at 3 hrs peal pace. We use this connected to a TV monitor and have had good reaction from everyone filmed. Remember to get someone to film you to show you have faults as well! The camera cost us just over £400 but I have seen it on the web for less. If buying on the web ensure they include all the accessories.

This is a brief summary of April's postings. If you would like any greater details on any of the points raised, please contact me.

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