The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers

Education Committee

Network for Ringing Training (NRT) summary Feb 2003

Welcome to the 17th summary of NRT postings. Peter Wenham sent in a piece for discussion written to help some mature learners with bell control.

Thoughts on Bell Control

Each time we pull a bell over the balance and set it in motion we are imparting energy to the bell and its fittings to overcome friction and air resistance; if we don't pull hard enough (insufficient energy) the bell falls back at the end of its swing - effectively we've lost control and lost our place. If we pull too hard, we have to 'kill' the excess energy before the next pull or we break a stay. Thus pulling too hard wastes energy twice; first from the excess pull, and again in stopping the bell at the end of its swing. This makes ringing tiring. Some ringers 'make it look so easy' and, in general, they are the ones to copy. When ringing, one should be relaxed. Not an easy thing for learners because in any strange situation it is natural to tense up. This must be overcome, because tense arms take energy from the swinging bell - energy that you have to replace by pulling harder. Let the rope lift your relaxed arms so that you can feel what is happening, only using muscle power to stop the bell at the top of its swing. This takes practice and confidence. If you have judged the pull correctly only a little effort is needed to hold the bell balanced. If you have to use a lot of effort to stop the bell, try pulling less. The more you can relax your arms, the less you have to pull, and the easier it becomes to control the bell, to control its 'terminal energy'. Of course, if the bell falls back on you, pull a little harder next time. If you are ringing a light bell in a tower with long ropes you may need to pull noticeably harder on handstroke than on backstroke, due to the weight of the rope. Pulling handstroke, the rope is lifted through several feet as the bell rotates to backstroke. This absorbs energy, extra energy that you have to put into your pull. When you pull from backstroke the weight of the rope is working with you, thus less pull is needed. Different techniques are needed for ringing light bells or heavy bells, due largely to the difference in their swing times. Large bells swing slower than small bells. So, ringing at the front end, it is necessary to hold your bell balanced for a moment on each stroke to keep in time with the back bells. But, when you ring at the back end, unless the ringing is very slow, you do not have to balance your bell. When a heavier bell is swung up near to the balance there is a noticeable pause before it swings back, and this 'pause point' is where you can best control a heavy bell. The closer the bell is to the balance, the longer the pause. When the previous pull is just right you can feel the bell pause just at the moment you want to make the next pull. At the back end, trying to balance the bell often makes for late striking and wasted energy. If you find that you are fighting the bell to keep in time, pull less. If you are clipping the bell in front, pull slightly more, to lift the bell a little closer to the balance - this slows its swing fractionally. But - ringing heavier bells below the balance, when 'Stand' is called, pull the last backstroke a little harder to restore the bell to the balance! In summary: Keep relaxed - it makes for easier ringing. Experiment with your pulls to ring with the least effort. Vary your ringing technique for light or heavy bells. Something to consider: Each time you pull, not only are you endeavouring to strike your bell correctly for that blow; the strength of pull is also positioning the bell for the next pull. That's something for next time, developing this theme into change ringing.

Peter Trotman replied, I like your thoughts! Two additional points which I find helpful to make, and which perhaps you're planning to include later in the series anyway: 1. When pulling a bell off it is very helpful to think of this as a two-stage process: first to lift the bell to the balance and second to make the normal pull which is required to impart just enough energy to overcome friction, air resistance and to lift the weight of the rope. Otherwise the natural tendency is to pull hard enough to raise the bell to the balance and then continue to pull with the same effort. As this is far greater than necessary for the second stage, the bell will have to be checked before the backstroke, and a cycle of over-pulling has been initiated. 2. I like to demonstrate how gently the backstroke needs to be pulled by setting the bell at backstroke, raising it carefully to the balance, pulling it off with the absolute minimum of effort between thumb and forefinger and not catching the sally. Depending on the weight of the bell and the length of the rope, the bell will either rise almost to the balance and start the handstroke on its own, or it may set itself or bounce back. (Obviously this could be dangerous if the bell is very light, the rope very long and the bell is

deep set - it's a good idea to check it out in advance!)
Peter Humphrey wrote, re the section “But when you ring at the back end… ”It might be worth pointing out why this happens - namely, that the extra weight causes the swing to take longer yet it must fit in with the general rhythm. Your next para shows that ‘you’ know this (there was never any doubt :-) but making it explicit at the beginning of the previous para, the one I've quoted above, would probably help. (In passing, the pause effect presumably happens with every bell if it's rung to the same height, to a degree depending on its weight. That's probably a needless complication here, though.)
Re Peter Trotman, Here's an opportunity for another specific practice: lifting the bell off the stay just to the balance and holding it there, then ringing an ordinary stroke. This could be done at both hand and back strokes, though preferably not mixing them in the same session. I can't think of a better way to instil a feeling for the bell and how it works. The Learner should also be encouraged to start lifting the bell before "she's gone!", which I don't think I've ever heard being done.
John Preston replied, I try to instil the message that "Look to, Treble's going, she's gone" isn't just a mantra to be chanted by the treble ringer, but is actually a set of instructions: "Look to" - stop nattering, pick up your rope, grab hold of tail end and sally ready to ring and pay attention. "Treble's going" - I've brought my bell up to balance and please will you do the same.
"She's gone" - my bell's off the balance and you'd better follow me pronto.
(Or as one old Lancashire character used to say. "Are you ready? Are you ringing? You’re too late now!) Only if folks treat the instructions properly, in particular not going onto the second until everyone is ready, is there any chance of the first round sounding decent - or am I just being pedantic?
Christine Richardson replied, When a learner gets to the stage of "following" an experienced ringer, I always teach them to lift the bell to balance when "Look To" or "Treble's Going" is called, and to hold it there awaiting "She's gone". Likewise, when teaching a learner to lead, the 3 specific instructions (Look To; Treble's Going; She's Gone) are totally separate and require different skills, both in handling your own bell and checking what the rest of the band are doing.
Gail Cater replied, When teaching bell handling, my pupils learn the difference between 'set' and 'balance' on the first lesson. Ever after that they are never allowed to pull off a bell from 'set', they must always hold for a moment on the balance before pulling off. I apply this rule at backstoke as well as handstroke. It is excellent practice in developing a 'feel' for the balance. This way it becomes second nature to them, they will have balanced a bell hundreds of times before they get up to rounds, they know exactly what to do when 'treble's going' is called. And it is one thing less to worry about when they start ringing with others.
Peter Humphrey wrote, drawing only from my own experiences, It seems to me that the method Peter Trotman describes, along with many other teachers including Tail End, is perfectly sound in theory but overlooks a practical objection. The traditional advice, if I may call it that, is to pull the current stroke harder or less so to achieve a longer or shorter gap between it and the succeeding stroke. This is fine if the learner is ringing the tenor of a ring of reasonable weight, and therefore mostly below the balance, but surely this is an exceptional case? I've only ever seen a learner-of-hunting ringing the second or third of a six, or perhaps the fourth or fifth of an eight. These bells will reach the balance on every stroke, and telling the ringer to vary the pull will cause a change only in the degree to which it goes over the balance. Perhaps the advice will lead to the desired effect, but only by confusing the learner about what's really going on and making him or her rely on different amounts of muscle stretch to control the bell behind the balance. This way lies the instability we've all grappled with. I think we ought to modify the advice so as to induce a better style of control. Instead of pulling more or less hard, the learner should pause at the balance for longer or shorter moments, and then pull with a standard force. Besides leading to a more elegant style and less fatigue from over-worked arm and finger muscles, this method may well reduce the incidence of dropped bells, because the pull is always strong enough to get the bell to the balance. Of course, as experience grows and the learner progresses to heavier bells, he or she will need to be guided back towards the traditional advice, since it will become more important to avoid over-pulling these comparative leviathans (that is what gave me the most difficulty, which took years to overcome). The practice leading to this control method would consist of subtly different exercises, with the teacher bringing out a constancy of effort which would lead, I think, to a more easily developed sense of rhythm. If every pull has the same strength, it's easier to get the muscles into the required groove and keep them there. There would still be the initial problem of developing the right feel of the bell, to know how hard to pull, but at least the goal posts wouldn't keep on shifting.
John Harrison wrote, I find it better to think not so much of a pause point, but that the 'top of the curve' is very flat. One of the commonest problems I see with inexperienced people ringing bells heavier than they are used to, is that they unknowingly kill off this very slow moving top of the stroke by being so eager to

pull that they never feel that the bell would go a little further and give them that valuable extra time. Several people have commented about lifting the bell between the stay and the balance point. That is the first thing I do with a student, and like Gail, I make them repeat it time after time. Helping them to develop a feel for what happens near the balance is probably the most valuable thing we can do for them. In reply to P Humphrey, I wouldn't put it like that. I would say that you need to prepare the bell for what you want it to do at the following stroke. The harder (or softer) pull will have relatively little effect in the immediate stroke. I would also emphasise that on a light bell, we are talking about variations in what should anyway be a small force. The case for preparing still holds good. At this stage, the learner's precision at pausing the bell over the balance might not be fully developed, nor will the delicate touch needed to control accurate switching between pulling and checking. In short they are usually a bit heavy handed. In that situation, pulling the bell a little harder will make sure it goes over the balance firmly enough to be held without prematurely pulling it back, and pulling a little less will ensure it can be brought back quickly without a huge delay to absorb the excess energy.

The reason for monitoring and advising on moderate levels of force across the board, as Peter W's article originally hinted we should, encourages economy of effort because it produces better control as well as less exhaustion. I agree that the focus should (for this sort of bell) be on the need to dwell longer near the balance, but would still advocate a slight variation in the preceding pull to ensure that the bell arrives in a state that makes this easier to do.

Lynda Coles wrote, I always equate early steps in bell control with a novice steering a boat on a river. As soon as you realise that you've deviated from the course, there is a tendency to over-correct, then over-correct the opposite way, and it all gets very scary very quickly. I'm totally unsure that this observation adds anything to the debate.

John Harrison wrote, a common pattern I have observed can be summed up as doing the pulling at backstroke and the controlling at handstroke. It never seems to be the other way round, so there must be some fundamental factors driving it. Have other people observed this, and what do you think are the causes?

Alison Barnett replied, when teaching initial handling, I always find the learners find it easier to learn the backstroke, and as there is no panic involved as it rarely can bump the stay (if the tutor has given them the right length!) The handstroke has to have much more control so has more 'panic' associated with it, consequentially, the learner applies a lot more braking and is so relieved to get it over and done with, the pull is forgotten in the knowledge of the easy backstroke just about to happen.

John Preston replied, surely because the backstroke provides a longer pull, there will invariably be more effect (=strength of pull x length of pull) than on a handstroke. Whereas the provision of a nice soft sally makes it much easier to provide a checking effect as the bell rises towards balance. On lighter bells the weight of the rope supplements the backstroke pull too. Even experienced ringers find it harder to set at backstroke than at hand.

John Harrison replied, that is all true, but I meant something slightly different. The effect I was trying to describe was that the backstroke is mainly used as a power stroke (for the reasons above no doubt) with little awareness of its timing, whereas there is an obvious (even if unsuccessful) attempt to control the timing of the handstroke, but with limited useful power applied. I suspect there are several factors at work.

Edward Mould wrote, as regards the setting of a bell being easier at handstroke than at backstroke, surely this is due purely to practice. Bells are normally set at handstroke after each touch. In a lot of towers, where the bells are usually left down for most of the week, the ringers get more practice in lowering than they do in setting their bell at backstroke. Where there are no clock chimes and no interference from insurers, the bells are usually left up at backstroke for safety reasons. Hence the ringers get at least two chances/"practices" per week in setting their bell at backstroke. In these latter towers the ringers can set their bell at backstroke just as easy as they can at handstroke, in my humble opinion.

Ringing up in Peal

Phil Dunn wrote, I have recently encountered ringers who have a great deal of difficulty in ringing up (and to a lesser extent down) in peal. There appear to be two problems: 1) they are concentrating so hard on their own bell that they are unable to relate what their bell is doing relative to the rest of the band.

2) When told that they are too low and instructed to pull harder, the response is to check the bell, and expend a lot of energy getting no where! Any suggestions?

Catherine Lewis replied, learners definitely often have the problems described, particularly problem 2 to simplify, they need to learn the difference between pulling (thus causing the bell to go up higher next time and thus probably getting the next stroke slower) and checking (stopping it going up so far this time and thus getting this stroke quicker). If they are checking when they don't want to, they probably need to let the rope out at back - I reckon that, when in a hurry to get up, it's best to get arms right up and then let the bell take the rope through the hands until it stops going (obviously the inexperienced need to beware

of going on doing this until they go straight through the stay. They can get practice at this by getting them to raise any single bells that may need raising on occasions, but ask them to do it as quickly as possible. This, of course, can be done when teaching bell handling initially too. Problem 1 is more general. I like to run mini silenced training sessions before people try raising and lowering in peal properly. You need one helper per learner plus an extra and a silenced bell for each helper. After suitable explanation about how you keep right, one helper raises/lowers a bell at a steady speed as if they were raising/lowering in peal, but strictly without looking at anyone else. All the learners try to follow that person (independently of each other), with a helper each behind them for advice. Offering this kind of advice is in itself quite a skill - a useful skill - most people get better at it with practice. You just keep going up and down like this, allowing time for discussion of what went wrong. This way, learners get the bellhandling skills required for the task sorted out without making a nasty noise.
John Harrison wrote, re P Dunn. That suggests that they have not fully mastered the techniques of getting their own bell up and down efficiently. It is worth working on that before trying to do it in peal. Many of the problems that you spot in such sessions are magnified versions of fairly common handling problems that can be worked on. Re C Lewis, they need to learn the difference between pulling and checking, when the bell is up, especially with light bells, they can get away with using a bit of brute force, but when raising and lowering they have to do it properly or it won't work. Have you pointed them at the book on the subject, which has a lot of useful advice? I can commend it ☺. I regularly run a 'raising and lowering techniques' module which complements the 'raising and lowering in peal' modules at the Easthampstead course. Many of the problems that students regularly have are indeed variants of 'standard' bell handling problems, magnified by some aspect of the changed conditions below the comfort zone of ringing to balance at every stroke, for example: - throwing the rope - not being sensitive to rope length - pulling before the top of the stroke - not differentiating between pull and check - ineffective use of one arm. There are of course 'pure' R&L problems as well, e.g. to do with coils.

Increased Speakers for Abel
Don Jones wrote, we have installed sensors to our 8 bells at Eckington and are using the bottom dead centre method to sense the bells. We are using two serial ports for input to the PC. At the moment the PC has just two standard PC speakers connected to the in built sound card. We want to improve the sound in the ringing chamber. I am considering installing a Creative Labs 4.1 or 5.1 sound card to allow 4 or 5 speakers advertised for surround sound. Does anyone know if this will work with Abel? If not what do you suggest I do to increase the sound in the ringing chamber and or the number of speakers?
Alison Barnett replied, using an amplifier and putting the speakers in the ceiling would give a more natural sound. There would not be any point in paying out for a Dolby surround system unless the sound files for Abel are to be re-recorded using five microphones. It would involve a lot of recording and cost!!
Robert Lynch replied, we found the same thing. The problem with computer speakers is that they aren't very powerful. Also, when they're fixed at one side of the room, ringers near the speakers are deafened and those further away can't hear the sound so well. Ideally you want the same sound level at each rope. The easiest way to achieve this is to have an omni directional speaker in the middle of the room: either on the floor or ceiling. However, the speaker also needs an amplifier to drive it. We looked at combination amplifiers used by guitarists and found a tiny ten watt combo which does the job nicely (Yamaha - about 50, try also the Marshall MG10CD http://www.soundslive.co.uk/common/moreinfo.asp?ID=1695). The back of the Yamaha's box is open so the sound spreads quite evenly round the room (otherwise you could lie the box on its back). Ours sits on the floor under a table in the middle of the room. We run the leads carrying the mains power and audio signal to the speaker under a strip of cable protector made of heavy rubber. The audio cable is a cheap mono guitar lead with 6.3mm jack plugs, with an adaptor at the computer end to connect to the mini jack socket on the back of the computer's sound card. Abel had problems with running mono sound, by the way. We could hardly hear the tenor. This was fixed by an update from the Abel web site (the fix was in version 3.3.1).
Raymond Kefford wrote, we found a pair of small 'powered' stereo speakers in Dixons. They run on batteries; one speaker has a built-in amplifier and contains the batteries, the other is fed from it. They are not as good as the expensive mains systems but are an enormous improvement and cost us just £7 in the New Year sale!
Peter Wenham wrote, our mini speakers, powered by a plug transformer are entirely adequate at about 50% volume, in a fair-sized ringing chamber. I think they cost about £10.

Teaching Ropesight.
Peter Giles wrote, recent threads have concentrated on the problem of teaching ropesight in methods; however at one of the

towers I ring at we are faced with a slightly more difficult problem of "just" teaching ropesight.
We have a more senior learner who just can't seem to get the concept of ropesight. Even with somebody stood behind telling the bells to follow, he still doesn't seem to see what we are trying to point out attempting to work more by rhythm than anything else "1.2.3.4.5.me", this works for a bit until he gets out of pace and then can't get back. We made a slight breakthrough the other week when we worked through the problem of him trying to follow the movement of the ropes instead of hands. But having tried over the last six months to improve things we just don't seem to be getting anywhere.
Does anybody have any experience of this problem, or can they suggest anything we can to do try and work through this problem. Everybody I have spoken to is stumped.
Peter Wenham replied, I have much the same difficulty with 'mature' learners and would say that most of them have difficulty in grasping the basic idea. While I have no instant panacea the following notes have helped in some cases. (But you will see that I teach 'hands'!) *If you would like a copy of Peter's notes please ask.*
John Norris replied, Peter replied that he favours the 'you follow the bell that followed you' approach. I guess this works for many people and if you haven't tried it, it must be worth giving it a go. However, as an alternative approach I recommend counting places. i.e. (very briefly) for the treble: Look around for the first bell to pull off and follow it. Count 2nds place. Look around for two bells to pull off and follow the second. 3rds place. Look around for three bells to pull off and follow the third. 4ths place and so on. Point out that in fact once one has followed a bell one can ignore it at the next change, (one is actually looking for the first of the remaining bells) and so on. I learned ropesight this way myself forty something years ago and it's the method I have used to teach others ever since. (Of course I agree with Peter's advice about rhythm and writing out changes. Nor am I disagreeing with his rule, merely suggesting an alternative which I personally prefer) I know that your request was particularly about teaching 'senior' learners but for younger ringers there are two computer programs, !Methods and Beltower, where the simulated ringing animation is so good that it may be possible to practise ropesight at home. !Methods worked very well with one 20 year old learner at Hurst who was able to count her places and see where she was going within quarter of an hour or so and quickly translate it into action in the tower. To be fair, of the two older ringers who tried the program one gained something and one did not.
Phil Dunn remarked, I suspect that a major problem with many "mature" learners is that they are concentrating too much on watching their own rope and sally to see much of what is going on around them!
David Pope replied, you make a very valid point which highlights the tendency we have to allow learners to preceed too quickly, especially mature people. I rather think we should not be attempting plain hunt until they are more confident with their bell handling, i.e. NOT looking at their own sally and rope much of the time, this is what rounds and call changes are for.
Harry Nicholls wrote, I suggest the best place to start teaching ropesight is with the learner standing out and just looking - gazing through the centre of the ringing circle, not focussed on any bell, simply developing awareness of peripheral vision. There is usually ample opportunity (often completely wasted!) and great benefit for learners in constructive "guided watching". It works well right from the start of teaching bell handling. The new learner (hopefully) finds it interesting, gains a little insight into an otherwise meaningless jumble of rope movements and becomes cultivated in watching others ring - rather than simply hanging around, bored. If ropesight is developed in this way, it is already in place by the time the learner has acquired the bell-handling skills needed to use it. I currently have a learner who, two weeks into learning handling, is also starting to watch the plain-hunting treble to doubles methods and trying to pick out the dodging bells in Stedman. Not suitable for all, I admit, but worth encouraging where appropriate.
Mike Winterbourne wrote, great care must be taken not to turn ropesight into the ultimate goal. Recent experience has shown me that, making sure the learner puts the correct effort into moving up/down is more important, (so as to end up in the right place) and will, in the long term make ropesight of great benefit. It appears that we have turned ropesight into a panacea to solve all, and ropesight has no value unless your bell is in the right place.
Heather Peachey wrote, the value of ringing the tenor behind is often overlooked. In some areas it seems to be seen as a dead end activity - the goal of those not destined to be inside ringers! In other towers where the emphasis is on even bell ringing whenever possible it's a rare event anyway. I see it as an opportunity to contribute to the development of ropesight. The learner practises ringing at a steady pace while not worrying about their place in the row, and if ringing behind to Plain Bob, gets a double shot at finding each new bell.
John Preston replied, we have a 12cwt tenor to six, not very easy going, and consequently our stronger, male, learners get significant practice ringing tenor behind, while our less strong, female, learners find it a bit beyond them. (All are "mature")The effect has been quite marked

in their respective progress once they've moved beyond plain hunt and plain courses of bob doubles, i.e. the levels where they can learn the order of bells to follow. In touches of bob doubles, those who have had experience of ringing tenor behind, say to a quarter peal, have managed far better than those who hadn't that experience.
I'd certainly commend giving as much practice as possible on tenor behind if you have suitable bells, It is also one of the best listening exercises that I know of.
John Harrison wrote, I don't know how difficult your bells are, but weight itself ought not to be so much of a barrier, if you can get people to adopt the right style. We have an 18cwt 8, and our young girls (early teens) ring it behind regularly. We use the front 6 (10cwt) for practice quite a lot and they ring this very early. So do our more fragile less young women. Whether or not it works as a means of hunting one might debate, but one thing it cannot do is 'teach ropesight'. If you can see who is following you, you are already using ropesight! You could just as easily look for the bell in front of you and follow it, which would avoid trying to do one thing (follow A) while doing another thing (look for B). In reply to Mike, We use the term to mean things that are not ropesight! Phil Gay used to say 'how would the world be different if Jasper Snowdon had called his book 'Bell hear' or something else? The Tower Handbook defines ropesight as: 'The skill of deducing one's position and the position of other bells, by looking at the other ropes while ringing. Hence the ability to see what work different bells are doing.' To help people develop it, we therefore need to expose people to appropriate visual stimuli, giving them advice about suitable visual strategies (e.g. look at all the bells, not at individual bells) and ask them questions to maintain their attention and interest. I assume what Mike meant by "Ropesight has no value unless your bell is in the right place" is, that knowing which rope to follow is of no use if your bell is not there, because you can't instantly move it. That is true, but that's not what he said. Ropesight is very useful if your bell is not in the right place, because it enables you to see where you are - a pretty important ingredient in working out which way to go next. I have often stood next to people doggedly counting '...4, 5, 6 ...' and wildly looking around, completely oblivious to the fact that they are actually hovering around 2nds place. I maintain that not knowing where you should be is forgivable, but there is no excuse for not knowing where you are.
Caroline Birdsell replied I would have thought that not knowing where you should be unforgivable & inexcusable - as knowing where you are when you are in the wrong place doesn't really help! Knowing where you should be going even when you are in the wrong place is still more important.
John Harrison replied, so you have never made a method mistake, even when learning a new method? My point about that was that if (when) you do make a mistake, you should concentrate on sorting things out, rather than feeling guilty and worried, which only makes things worse. It is easy for those of us who are experienced to underestimate the feelings of guilt when something goes wrong that screws up the performance of our less experienced pupils, none of which helps very much We all make mistakes and it is better to focus on getting right than agonising over having gone wrong. If you don't know where you are, how do you know which way to go to get to where you should be? Someone tells you to dodge 3-4 when you are lost - if you don't even know where you actually are, do you hold up or pull in to get to 3-4? Knowing where you should be going even when you are in the wrong place is still important, but if you don't know where you are, it is not a lot of use, because you still don't know what correction is needed.
Heather Peachey wrote, re woman & heavy bells, this is a partly cultural issue in my opinion. Many years ago, in Hampshire I went to a Ladies Guild meeting in Hampshire, I believe it was at Milford on Sea (12cwt 8). At the time I was a member of the Winchester Cathedral band, and was known to be happy to ring round the back. The comment made on my arrival was that it would be nice to have a lady ringing the tenor for a change because "we usually ask our gentlemen to ring the back bells for us". I imagine that the Ladies' Guild today manage just fine. At Barrow (16cwt 8), we encourage everyone, when they're ready, to gradually move round the tower. We too use the front 6 quite a lot on practice night, so most ringers can learn to cover and indeed ring the 5th for plain hunt to develop the skill of ringing round the back earlier than they'd be able to on the back 6. Sometimes I introduce someone to the 7th or tenor by getting them to ring it down on their own, if we've rung the front 6 down in peal. This used to be a popular introduction to Winchester's tenor - no worries about whether or not you could keep it up and indeed set it! I tell female learners that it's really important to get their technique right so that they're happy to ring heavier bells adding that men's style is important too, but their additional strength means they can sometimes get away with a poorer style. Ask Stephanie Pattenden, Alison Regan or Julia Cater, all slightly built lady back-enders, if it's sheer strength!

Striking Competition for Novices
Heather Peachey wrote, I was recently told of a very interesting idea for a competition designed to encourage novices without them worrying about letting their band down. It was known as 'rabbits' I believe and works on a lucky dip principle. Each band is drawn out of

2 hats; one or perhaps two ringers are from the 'experienced' hat and the rest from the 'novices' hat. I wondered if anyone had tried it or something similar, or indeed had comments. So often you hear people say there's no point in entering a contest you've no chance of winning, or that the older learners aren't interested because of the stress of such an occasion, fearing they'll mess it up. I certainly thought this idea had potential for putting an element of fun into it for everyone. I suppose there could be trivial prizes, but no trophy really.

Christine Richardson replied, this has been used to great effect in the D&N, usually on Association AGM day. It's held in the morning, each team ring exactly the same set of call changes and the results are announced at tea. There are small boxes of sweets for the winning team. Initially it was to encourage the millennium learners to come out and take part, but now it's becoming an institution!

Lindy Ellis wrote, The Western District of the Hertfordshire Assoc. has a similar 'Improvers' striking competition'. Two learners (or 'improvers') are in each team and the other 4 are more experienced ringers. There is a set series of changes to be rung, and each band has a set time for practising (the bells may well be new to the learners). When everyone has had their practice time, the competition starts. This is a well established event and it is well supported each year, showing that the learners gain from it and everyone enjoys it.
Certificates are awarded to all the learners who enter.

John Harrison wrote, I'm sure it could be fun, and a good mixer, in the right context, and therefore worth considering to help enliven Branch life. Being a somewhat serious soul though, I went a little deeper and thought about what a striking competition is (supposed to be) for, and how it (ideally) would work.
The aim is to be a spur that encourages everyone (including those battling it out for not being last) to care about, and strive to improve their striking. In that sense the competition is only the tip of the iceberg. The base of the iceberg is (we hope) lots of solid effort on the part of bands throughout the year, trying to improve, even if only a little. The middle bit is more interesting. A team entering a competition often practises together a few times before the event to hone their performance. The cynics will say that proves it has nothing to do with regular ringing, but I think such exercises are very good for the participants (and potentially for the bands of which they are part). A mixed team drawn from a hat is unlikely to benefit from this process, because there is not time. It would be a bit like sitting an exam without bothering to study on the course. If there were time, and the members drawn from the experienced hat saw it as part of their role to help coach the others, then there might indeed be considerable benefit. It occurs to me that the bands who are themselves able to get a lot out of intensive pre-competition practice are the good ones. The lesser ones might have a few experienced ringers who could act as coaches, but probably don't. So here is a training opportunity. Intensive sessions on striking improvement are being missed. Could we do anything in this area? Would bands (or the enthusiastic members of several bands) be interested in such sessions? Would the experienced ringers be prepared to coach the less experienced teams, and ring with them in some sort of end of course competition? Could we all overcome the usual inhibitions about such things?

John Loveless replied, I'd endorse Heather's comments. We judged one of these contests several years ago - billed as an 'Open' striking contest, I think. I must admit to being a little sceptical beforehand but it was very well attended and very successful. Everyone participated, most teams rang call changes, everyone had fun (but of course, BFP!), we had an enormous ringers tea and I'm sure the less experienced ringers present really gained from the experience. This type of contest is full of positives. Perhaps most important, it enables relatively inexperienced ringers to participate who perhaps wouldn't make it into their own tower team, as well as those whose tower perhaps wouldn't enter through lack of numbers or lack of interest. And all of this in a supportive atmosphere. It's also easy to organise because all you need to know is the approximate number of people coming. You identify your key, 'experienced' people who lead the teams and then (in our case, anyway) you mix everyone else up by drawing the names out of a hat. Each band then rings what it is best equipped to ring. If you get asked to judge one of these contests think about it carefully, though! We had twelve teams to judge, many performing at a relatively uniform standard. Although we always try to make comments which are positive and helpful this uniformity really tests one's powers of descriptive ingenuity! All in all, a great idea which is well worth trying.

Lynda Coles wrote, I've been following all this with deep feelings of longing. I really would be keen to turn up to an event of this type. As it stands in my district, I have a choice to make soon. The band from my tower entering our sc will comprise 4 multi peal ringers, a very competent ringer and (or not) yours truly. If we come anywhere other than first there will only be one person to blame! So I either risk letting them down by entering, or let them down by not entering. Great. Not being the sort of person to miss out on the opportunity for a decent tea, they'll have to put up with me. But if I were the sensitive type, I imagine that I would rather book a holiday in Benidorm than

be there. I've put that very flippantly, but it really does take a particular type of character to be willing to be the only weak link in a team. I have been aware over the last months of several people commenting that millennium learners striking is not as good as it should be, and one person added that this could well be because they have never yet heard striking of the sort of standard which they should be aiming for. I think there is a lot of truth in this, it was certainly the case with me until fairly recently. If they are not hearing good striking in their own tower because of the lack of expertise, they need to mix more with expert ringers to experience it. As a generalisation they will not wish to turn up to standard type sc's if they are not in a team. They will not wish to be in their own team if they know that they will weaken that team considerably. The tower will not wish to enter their team at all if they know that they will give a poor performance. The type of competition which has been discussed recently holds none of these negatives, and offers the added positive of mixing with other ringers from the district, thus making it more likely that they will visit other towers during the year, and turn up at next year's sc and... If the experts present were to start and finish the afternoon with a 'demonstration performance' it would give them some satisfaction, and show the newcomers what they are aiming for.
Caroline Stevens wrote, multi peal ringers are not necessarily good strikers. I find it quite annoying that this assumption is made so frequently. There are many very good strikers who don't ring peals, (equally there are many that do), and there are people who ring peal after peal and don't care what the striking is like as long as they get it. Get out there and ring with them Lynda, be grateful of the opportunity! I can remember moving and joining a band and being the "weaker link" and suddenly found I could hear my bell amongst the others, who were in the right place, rather than being in the middle of one big jumble and not knowing which sound was which bell. It brought my striking and method learning on much more rapidly than previously. I always tell the bands I enter SCs with that it's a great chance to meet other ringers, the judges' comments may/should be helpful to your future ringing, there's usually an excellent tea, and the only people who come last are those who couldn't be bothered to enter or those who didn't enter 'cos they thought they wouldn't win.
Lynda Coles replied, that is the group of people for whom the atmosphere needs to be changed to encourage them out though surely? In fact, wild horses would have a job to stop me taking part in the local sc, (and, in response to John Harrison, I cannot repeat often enough and loud enough how appreciative we are as a band that a couple of brilliant ringers/teachers support our practices every week). But the fact remains that if we don't win, I shall feel very despondent that I have let the rest of the band down. This is only human nature. It seems to me that sc's in their traditional form have a valuable role among ringers with the ability/potential to get to Simon Linford's black or red zones, or at least the top of blue. But locally to me a fair proportion of active ringers are middle aged millennium learners. Only a very small percentage of us will graduate above blue, but probably most of us would like to get better at striking, but do not feel competitive about it. In our case we have a teenage daughter at home, and certainly for myself I feel no necessity for additional stress! Please don't respond to this by telling me that the point of sc's is the taking part, not the winning. You would be preaching to the converted. But I still think that it takes a particular type of temperament to enter a COMPETITION knowing that there is no chance of winning, as opposed to turning up to a FESTIVAL or some such name, where experts mingle with, rather than compete against, novices (this on the assumption that expert and novice bands tend to polarise at different towers). Whenever I come across a social quiz event, it's always quiz evening, not quiz competition. What's in a name? It would be intriguing to be able to run both in parallel, and see the difference in attendance.
Harry Nicholls wrote, a few years ago our District decided to try changing the categories of our sc, to stop one band winning everything. Instead of Rounds, Call Changes and Method we chose Expert, Middling and Novice/Struggling.
Each band would nominate their own level, ring whatever they liked (Rounds, Call Changes or any Method) and be judged only on the quality of their striking. Great scope for argument but it was agreed that no expert band would opt for a lower category. Equally novices and strugglers would know their place. Only the middlers would have a difficult choice. Good idea? (Unfortunately we never got to try it out - for purely local reasons.)

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

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