Issue 8 - BridgeHands Newsletter

The Street Smart Bridge Player – Part II **February 2007**

Dear Bridge Friend,

Welcome back to part two of the Street Smart Bridge Player. We hope you had an enjoyable winter - we took a holiday hiatus ourselves and are eager to resume our newsletters. In part one we focused on the technical side of the game, highlighting bidding and play gymnastics and touched on the psychological side of the game.

The results from the Honolulu Fall Summer 2006 NABC tourney are in, and ***BridgeHands*** has posted the tourney results, bulletins, and appeals.

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The Street Smart Bridge Player – Part II

More on the Psychological Side of Bridge

Recall in our last issue we highlighted a few early Bridge books that delved into the psychology of Bridge. Ely Culbertson's "The New Gold Book of Bidding and Play," and his "Contract Bridge Red Book on Play" got into psyches, bluffs, false carding and other ploys. Easley Blackwood's "Bridge Humanics" helped us get inside the mind of our partner, advocating understandable bids – ditto on play. And many acknowledge S. J. Simon's excellent "Why You Lose at Bridge," advising the mortal Bridge player to keep bidding simple by following the direct route whenever possible. Better yet, do not instruct your partner and avoid becoming the proverbial unlucky expert. The unlucky expert loses his shirt because he always tries for the best result possible, where the true professional accepts the best ***possible*** result.

In the mid-1990s, Marty Bergen penned his outstanding "Points Schmoints," underscoring 21 rules to becoming a good partner. He begins with: do not give lessons, unless you are being paid to do so. And following his predecessors, Marty concludes his pearls advocating a player learn partner's style, trying to picture problems

from partner's point of view, and sympathize with partner if he makes a mistake. In fact before you begin, what do you visualize before playing a game? Top professionals always begin by visualizing themselves and partner as winners. Do you believe in yourself, partner, and your collective abilities vis-à-vis fellow competitors? Do you maintain your esprit de corps during the play? Okay, let's dive into new material.

Before you sit down for a duplicate game, do you consider whether to sit North-South or East-West? In a matchpoint game, the stronger players often sit North-South (or those with a limited mobility). Consider whether you'll have a better game playing in the same direction as one set of players or another (in tournaments, the Director will "seed" the top competitors at table 3 and 9 sitting North-South). On the other hand, with the typical Mitchell player movement, the East-West pair movement may be fast-paced; if you or your partner have difficulty getting settled during a quick two board round too snappy for your taste, consider sitting North-South.

Always be watchful for a swing hand, appreciating that the bidding and play may be pivotal for the match. Carefully judge the risk-reward relationship for a given bid or play; here's a situation where the environmental factors are especially important. And if you're playing against weak or strong opponents, the swing may be predicated more on the quality of the opponents than the cards you hold. Of course, in the long run, consistency pays handsome dividends.

As the saying goes, the problem with communication is the illusion that it actually happened! When it comes to bidding and defensive carding, how's your communication with your partner? Are you a "busy bidder" or tend to bid only when necessary? How does this complement your partner's style? Hopefully, you don't bid a second suit "just because" without a good reason. The slogan, "it pays to advertise" isn't necessarily a useful mantra in Bridge without a specific purpose.

Let's say on the current hand you have unfavorable vulnerability – with an opening hand would you make a takeout double after the responder has made a 2 level call? Doing so is doubtful to help provide lead direction and competing for the contract is highly unlikely. So when the opponents are both showing opening hands, it seldom makes sense to show that you have the balance of points. Doing so is akin to putting the proverbial "kick me" sign on your back, surely leading the astute declarer to make all finesses through you.

Certainly if you're not in a competitive auction and don't have game interest, avoid excessive bidding that gives the defenders a

roadmap to your hand. Ditto on defense – carefully consider the consequence of signals that provide more information to opponents than partner. Let's say your partner's hand is deemed to be a bust based on bidding, dummy and your holding – avoid signaling if partner's hand is irrelevant, knowing partner will not get on lead. From the converse, hopefully partner's carding won't expose a lack of points that would lead declarer to finesse the stronger hand.

On that note, let's consider the *tempo* of play. The stronger the opponents, the more attentive they are to detect telltale pauses, hesitations, hitches, twitches, mannerisms, body and facial gestures, etc. And while the Laws prohibit defenders from acting on such behavior from our defending *partner* (or dummy), we may certainly take notice of the opponents' "tells." So a wise defender carefully plays each card thoughtfully in tempo, regardless of one's holding – loaded or a bust hand. And how about playing a singleton? Should it be played right away? This is a tricky subject! While a player is never required to play a "stiff" immediately, Law 73.D.2 states: "A player may not attempt to mislead an opponent by means of remark or gesture, through the haste or hesitancy of a call or play (as in hesitating before playing a singleton), or by the manner in which the call or play is made."

Regarding advertising, you should always "chest your cards," especially against *better* players. Some players hold their cards beneath the table so opponents cannot see the card faces nor the location pulled during play. If you use this technique, ensure your cards are *way* beneath the table. Taller opponents can "enjoy the view" for those with angled cards not truly hidden. Most of us rest our cards above the table, keeping the cards oriented vertically which prevents innocent or not so innocent peeks. If you have problems remembering to do this, make a habit of holding your cards with your little "pinky" finger in front of the cards away from the other fingers. Held in this manner, your wrist cannot bend forward far enough to expose your cards. Finally, be a fair player, reminding both your partner and opponents to chest their cards.

Incidentally, there is a slight problem holding your cards above the table surface. What happens if the card drops out of your hand and bounces face up? If the card happened to be an honor card, the offender's partner must Pass at their next turn to call!

Next let's turn our attention to team games. In a three-way round robin of a Knockout match, after the first round your new opponents may ask your score for the first session against the other opponents. An innocent question? Hardly – based on your answer, they'll make an assessment if they are "up or down" to make appropriate adjustments playing against you! In a regular team game after the first half, only the side that is behind has the option of changing opponents (North-South, East-West); if a switch

is called for by either side, it's a good idea to share with your teammates useful information about the opponents' bidding and playing style.

Have you noticed how timing over a session plays an important part of the outcome? First off, we should beware of the "first hand syndrome" and the "last hand syndrome." On the first hand, it's easy to get distracted, still be thinking of what previously happened before sitting at the table, get side-tracked fiddling with something that distracts you (including annoying conversations). How about the last hand? We've all fallen trap to getting in a hurry or losing our concentration with other players talking and moving about. Even worse is the player who unilaterally decides to make an extra-ordinary bid or play to somehow catch-up and be a real hero. This not only has a poor track record of success, but it can both erode partnership trust, confidence, and appear resigned that the partnership cannot compete using skill.

By the way, have you heard of the "Seven Deadly Sins" (see page 6 associated with the link) as it pertains to Bridge? The Dallas Aces went so far as to enumerate the worst transgressions in the game: no-win declarer play, no-win defense, unilateral bidding (as discussed above), overbidding, technical errors, system violations, and impulse bidding.

Our Street Smart Bridge player always tries to maintain a positive emotional attitude and visualizes winning bids and lines of play. So when the dummy comes down, rather than letting negative thoughts about being in the wrong contract, the Street-Smart player turns attention to the opening lead and focuses on finding a way to get the best result given the current circumstance. At that point, nothing else matters. Our Street Smart player has expansive thinking, not simply settling for a binary "either-or" scenario, instead using a spark of creativity and considering a host of possible scenarios and logically working to derive the best solution. And how about the Street Smart dummy? Most importantly, maintain your composure in a manner to help your partner get a great result – this may vary from player to player (know thy partner).

Do you recall the 2004 Bermuda Bowl where Lorenzo Laurie's partner left the table on the last hand of a grueling match? The result was that declarer Lorenzo mistakenly pulled the wrong card from the dummy himself, resulting a crushing one point loss to the Americans. Incidentally, when the dummy leaves the table, it's unwise to pull the declarer's cards. You might pull the wrong card, making a mess of the defender's rights; further, you might also loose your concentration and focus. Tending to the dummy is the declarer's responsibility, not yours.

All top players are aggressively observant, but never to the casual observer. We all have "tells", gestures, remarks, eye movement, breathing, changes in tempo that can give the observant opponent hints about what's going on inside our head. Perhaps it's no more than an occasional "flicker." Of course, the observant player must exercise a modicum of discernment – the tic might be either a true or false tell. So if we take the sign on its face, we must be aware that using the sign may be at our own peril. However, when we use tells in collaboration with inferences learned during bidding, opening lead, play, and attendant hesitations and tempo breaks, a more complete picture is formed. Or perhaps there is a negative inference – the bid or play the opponent should have made but for some reason did not. And if you are lucky, an opponent's ego will provide unambiguous tells.

The most successful Bridge professional of all time, Ely Culbertson, could easily tell when his rival Hal Sims held a poor hand. Hal would take an extraordinary long time to bid a bust hand, perhaps hoping others would figure he had values. The problem here was that the normally outgoing six foot four inch 300 pound southerner was typically quite outgoing, but surprisingly became silent holding a bad hand. It didn't take Ely long to put the two tells together and read Hal's hand based on his "reverse tell."

Incidentally, tells aren't restricted to a player's actions in the heat of battle. Look at yourself, for instance. How do you dress, carry yourself, present your demeanor, use gestures and body language away from the table? What is your disposition before the match? Do you exude confidence or ask questions? Have an attitude? Whatever the case, we leave impressions about ourselves. Astute players don't wait for the first bid to gain insights on the field. For instance, if you are playing in a tournament and your opponent has difficulty making a board correctly or is exceeding slow dealing, you can probably draw some parallels on what to expect during play. The same is true of overly assertive detail-oriented opponents, insisting on quickly obtaining your team number without volunteering their own, or asking unnecessary questions about your convention card. We would generally assume opponents of this ilk would take a similar view of bidding and play; be prepared for active and perhaps aggressive bidding here with lighter preempts, competing over 2 level contracts, and using a rich arsenal of conventional bids. Perhaps these opponents will also be overly stringent enforcing Bridge Laws, looking to call the Director at every opportunity.

Speaking of Bridge Laws, our Street Smart Bridge player has a strong understanding of the rules of the game – not simply to whack the opponents wherever possible. More importantly, the astute player ensures the opponents' actions promote a level playing field through fair play. This way a player's skill and ability

become the primary determinant that distinguishes to winning player. In our next newsletter, we will dive into many of the ins and outs of the Laws from the perspective of the Street Smart Bridge Player. Once we're grounded on the Laws, we will be prepared to look into the "dark side of the force," shenanigans and skullduggery at the table.

Honolulu Fall 2006 NABC

While fewer cases were heard, the Appeals cases at the recent Honolulu NABC followed the traditional trend – unauthorized information due to a break in tempo and misinformation. Fortunately, we are treated to one interesting case so let's review the incident lest this scenario come up at your table.

Non-NABC Case 3 – The declarer is playing in a 4 Spade game contract. The opening leader begins playing a Diamond King, won by declarer's Ace. The declarer returns a Spade to the Left Hand Opponent's Ace. The LHO continues with the Diamond Queen with all players following to the trick. The LHO continues with the Diamond Jack, the declarer quickly ruffs the trick and claims the contract was made. However, the defenders believe the declarer misplayed a Club instead of a trump Spade and call the Director to the table. By the time the Director arrived at the table, the declarer had mixed her cards. How do you think the Director (or Appeals Committee should rule?)

The Appeal: Declarer claimed that she followed to trick three with a diamond, and, after the diamond continuation at trick four, ruffed in Dummy and played the Club 5 from hand. Dummy was unable to corroborate the Declarer's sequence of play. Declarer's cards had been mixed by the time the director was called to the table. West was certain that North hand played the Club 5 to trick four and agreed that partner led a fourth diamond at trick five. West was asked what declarer had done. He said that Declarer had ruffed in dummy with the Spade King and claimed. East was not present at the hearing, but when asked later, he confirmed this information.

The Decision: Under laws 65D and 66D, when a player disturbs the order of his played cards, if the director is unable to ascertain the facts, he shall rule in favor of the other side. Therefore, the table director's decision was upheld resulting in one trick to the defenders, 4 Spades down one, N/S minus 100.

BridgeHands Archive

If you missed a back issue of a ***BridgeHands*** Intermediate-Advanced eMag newsletter, here are the links:

Issue 0 - Finesses
Issue 1 - Forcing Pass
Issue 2 - Leads on Notrump Doubled contracts
Issue 3 - Opener Reverses
Issue 4 - Reverses, Part II - Responder Rebids
Issue 5 – Psyches, Part I
Issue 6 – Psyches, Part II
Issue 7 – Street Smart Bridge Player, Part I

We hope you are enjoying the BridgeHands website and eMag Newsletters. We always look forward hearing from you regarding your comments or suggestions.

Sincerely,

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