

BRIDGE YESTERDAY

I'm sure my devoted readership (both of them) has been wondering why I haven't written any columns recently. The fact is, I haven't played any bridge in about a year and a half; my last article entitled "George" appeared in *Bridge Today* in 2004. It described how my childhood buddy Bill and his wife Susan (not their real names) took up bridge after retirement and how they fixed me up with a retired doctor named George, a life master with over 500 points, for a sectional open pairs.

Well, a couple of weeks ago my wife and I went to visit Bill and Susan again, and after much argument I got Susan to play with me in a local weekly duplicate. (Since my last article, Susan has become a life master.) It took a lot of persuading, but finally Susan agreed to be my partner; right there is one striking difference between bridge today and bridge yesterday. When I was starting out in bridge, I would have given my eye teeth to play with a player like me. Today's players don't want to, because it moves them up to a higher stratum, and makes it harder to win master points.

Well, Sally turned out to be a pretty decent player, a lot better than George. When it came to bidding, she knew every system ever invented, and even made some very thoughtful bids. For example, holding, not vulnerable,

Axx xxx Jxx Qxxx

she heard me pass as dealer. Her vulnerable RHO opened a heart, she passed and LHO bid two hearts. I jumped to three spades and righty bid four hearts. She took the sacrifice in four spades, and justified her bid with the impeccable logic that I should be able to take seven spade tricks for -500. I was impressed with her reasoning which I thought was sophisticated for a beginner (yes, today even life masters can be beginners). Here's another example of her good bidding. She held:

Kxx QJ10x Axx K10xx

I opened one heart and Susan bid 2NT, in our system showing a limit raise or better in hearts. I bid three clubs, showing slam interest, and

Susan raised to four clubs, showing better than a limit raise. I now bid four hearts, and Susan passed, reasoning that she had shown the full value of her hand with her four-club bid. It turned out that six hearts depended on the heart finesse, which actually failed, but I was pleased by Susan's expert-style reasoning in not moving over four hearts. Whether or not she *should* move is perhaps a matter of debate, but at least she had a very solid reason for her action.

Would that Susan's play were on a par with her bidding. Here were a couple of card combinations that came up, and despite my undertaking lengthy explanations I got the impression that she never really understood. With plenty of entries in both hands, you need to play this suit:

J6532

KQ874

I just could not convince Susan that low to the Jack was the correct first play in the suit; she just somehow couldn't quite grasp the difference between that trump holding and this:

J6532

KQ984

where one starts with the King (or Queen). And as far as restricted choice was concerned, she had never heard of it, and didn't understand any of my explanations. She kept insisting that with a holding of

87654

AK1032

when East drops the Jack under the King the correct play on the next round was to finesse the ten. She kept insisting that she would play the Ace. Her reasoning? "East might hold the singleton Queen now." When I was trying to convince her that holding

J9876

AQ532

the correct first play was the Jack from dummy, she said she'd play the ace from her hand because "East might hold the singleton King."

Why does she know so much about bidding and so little about play? Bidding forms the core of the curricula in most bridge schools. Bridge magazines devote way too much space to bidding (especially *Bridge World* with its absurd "Master Solvers Club.") The rationale behind what the magazines stress is that most of their readers are already experts, and experts know all about the play of the cards, but may want to vary their bidding systems. (Just a guess.) But the bridge schools, catering to beginning players, should know better. Susan told me that the school where she had learned bridge was going to offer a course in "Two-over-one" next month, which she intended to take. Why?

On another note, at the duplicate, where Susan and I finished third, we were beaten out by an old, old friend of mine, Rev. Jim Jackson of Tryon, NC. I used to play against Jim often during my days at Duke University (1949-53) when both of us were frequent partners of the late Billy Woodson. Jim is still an exceptionally fine player, and I'd like to think that I can still take a finesse with the best, but when it came to the play of the cards Billy Woodson was in a class by himself. (He's the one who taught me about double squeezes, by the way.) Maybe if the spirit moves me I'll try to dig out some of Billy's old hands and write another column one of these days.