

Bridge Yesterday

"In short, whoever you may be
To this conclusion you'll agree,
When every one is somebodee,
Then no one's anybody!

W.S. Gilbert, *The Gondoliers*.

It was recently reported in the news media that the faculty at Princeton University had become concerned about "grade inflation" and had voted to limit the number of A's given in any course. Would that the ACBL might take heed, and attempt to do something to combat master-point inflation. But just as at Princeton Phi Beta Kappa keys apparently have been available to everybody, so the once-proud designation "Life Master" has lost its luster.

In fact, the duplicate bridge-playing populace has become addicted to the master point. A case in point is my friend Susan who, with her husband Bill, took up duplicate bridge as a retirement hobby. She has accumulated 278 points, and is looking forward to Life Mastership with mixed emotions because she will have to move up a stratum where it will be more difficult to win points. I've asked her several times to play with me in pair events, but she always refuses, since when she plays with her husband she doesn't have to play in the "A group." The pleasure of learning to be a good bridge player has been superseded by the intoxication of accumulating points.

Of course, the ACBL is responsible for this ludicrous state of affairs by its creation of tournaments which cater to the master-point addicts. Stratified and bracketed games, Swiss teams (in lieu of BAM), "continuous pairs," etc. All of these are designed to encourage more weak players to come to tournaments and, moreover, *to discourage them from becoming better players*. The result is that sectional and even regional tournaments are no fun any more, and that's why I haven't played in one in over five years.

This past weekend, Bill and Susan took me to a tournament and arranged a partnership for me with another retiree who was a Life

Master with 500 points. An hour before play began George (that was his name) and I sat down to discuss our bidding systems. Well, George knew every bidding system that had ever been created: Lebensohl; check-back Stayman; systems "on;" splinters, Texas transfers, 1430 Roman key card Blackwood, Gerber, Jacoby transfers, Jacoby raises, fourth-suit forcing...the list went on and on. This emphasis on bidding evidently came at the expense of his card play, as I'm going to document momentarily. But first I must comment on the remarkable fact that every beginner I've ever partnered had somehow learned all the conventions known to man. Is it really easier to learn how to count points than it is to count a hand? To use a transfer bids than to make transfer squeezes? I think the answer is that bidding systems can be memorized, whereas reason and intellect are necessary for card play.

Although in some of my articles in this series I've tried to stress the use of logic in bidding, this message has evidently not yet reached the *hoi polloi* of the bridge world. I think part of the fault must be ascribed to bridge magazines: "The Master Solver's Club" in the *Bridge World* was the first of a now-common genre of boring microscopic analyses of bidding. Even *Bridge Today* carried such a feature at one time, now mercifully consigned to the oblivion that it deserves.

Here's an example of George's dummy play.

5
AK7
Q10986
KJ92

KJ84
QJ1098
KJ7
Q 5

A107632
72
A432
4

Q9
643
7
A108763

Against the contract of four spades, South led his singleton Diamond. George ran this to the ace, drew trumps and finally wound up losing two hearts, a diamond and a club. When I asked why he didn't try to set up the hearts for diamond discards, he said he didn't understand how that would do any good!

On the next hand, which was cold for five spades, George managed to make four:

54
AK832
104
J1076

8632
J5
K87
A832

AK1097
Q97
A
KQ94

QJ
1064
QJ96532
5

South led his singleton club, and George let it ride to the King. He laid down the ace of spades and when the Queen dropped he continued with the King, clearing the suit. (There was no convenient entry to the dummy for the percentage restricted choice finesse, not that George would have known about that anyway.) Now George laid down the Queen of clubs from his hand! Because of the fortunate lie of the heart suit, he still could have made five by setting up the Queen for a club discard from dummy, but he didn't even try! Where did those 500 master points come from?

I won't bore you with the hand where he forgot 1430 (he's the one who suggested playing it incidentally) and bid five diamonds over four notrump to show one ace. Naturally I thought he had three, and bid six Spades, against which the opponents cashed the first two aces. Or the time holding a doubleton club with six showing in the dummy he tried, at trick two, to give me a club ruff, playing North, who had opened three hearts, to hold five clubs! But I'll close with a hand played by an opponent in this 500-1500 master-point bracket to show that George was not alone in his lack of card-playing ability.

AKQ63
98
Q85
953

J975	1082
AKQ6	1054
96	J432
876	KJ10

4
J732
AK107
AQ42

With North-South vulnerable, West passed and South opened one diamond. I overcalled one heart with my four card suit and somehow NS ended up in four spades instead of the cold three notrump. (Well, four spades is actually cold too but North managed to go down.) My partner led a heart and I won the Queen and King and then, desperately trying to kill the impending squeeze, shifted to a club. Dummy's Queen won, and declarer now ducked a spade. George won and continued with a club. Declarer entered her hand with the Queen of diamonds, and played all the trumps. George was forced to pitch the high club, but declarer didn't realize that the nine was high so she cashed out the AK of diamonds, going down one! How about that, sports fans!

The remarks I've made in this column are not intended to disparage anyone, particularly not George who is a very nice guy and quite intelligent (he holds a doctorate). Rather I'd like to suggest that the priorities of many beginning bridge players are wrong, focused on winning points rather than learning the game, and that the ACBL is a co-conspirator by providing so many opportunities for these players to win points without playing well. And the bridge magazines that devote an inordinate number of pages to incessant analyses of bidding sequences are also partially to blame for shifting these players' attention away from card play to bidding esoterica. Golf, anyone?

By the way, names have been changed to protect the guilty.