

# The Game That Trumps All Others

by ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH



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I am not sure if there are clinics that will help you get over bridge, but if there are not, then perhaps some enterprising entrepreneur will take up the idea. I think it would work, but the problem is that we all know what those admitted would do in their spare time. Exactly.

And somehow I feel it would not work. Addicts have to want to change, and most bridge players I know have no desire to do so. Of course they claim to be only social players; nobody stands up and says, "My name is John, and I play bridge all the time." That's the first step, but nobody seems to take it. That's not entirely serious. Most players of bridge are ordinary social players, and not addicted in any way. Yet it's true that bridge is a very special game that can take over lives to a remarkable extent.

## How to Start Playing

Here are some ways beginners can start to play, according to experts:

**Learn to Play Bridge I, Fred Gitelman for the American Contract Bridge League** This free software program was created by a founder of Bridge Base Online. Players can learn basic rules in five minutes, or go through the entire program and digest the equivalent of a 1,000-page book, says Mr. Gitelman. <http://web.acbl.org/LearnToPlayBridge/>

**"Bridge Basics I: An Introduction," Audrey Gran** This volume is the first of the five-book "The Bridge Basics Series."

**"The ABCs of Bridge," William S. Root** Mr. Root's book is "a good place to start," says two-time world champion Sharon Osberg, who plays frequently with Messrs. Buffett and Gates.

**Bridge Base Online** For those with a bit of bridge knowledge, get online here, says champion Bob Hamman. "You get constant input" by watching games analyzed by some of the best bridge teachers and players in the world, he says, referring to game comments on the site.

I receive a British bridge magazine called Mr Bridge, which keeps its head above water by advertising bridge holidays. The ads make it very clear that the point of the holidays they are peddling is to play bridge; being in Turkey, or Morocco (both popular bridge destinations) is not the point of the exercise. You go to Turkey or Morocco to play bridge—serious bridge, with morning, afternoon and evening sessions.

And if you don't fancy a seaside hotel filled with other bridge players, then how about a cruise on a ship filled with fellow players? These set out from British ports regularly throughout the summer, taking players to the fjords of Norway, to St. Petersburg, to Greek islands, all while feverish bridge-playing goes on in every public room and on every deck. And if you are worried about your standards, then there are cruises for novices and cruises for experienced players. Everyone is catered for.

My wife and I have never gone on a bridge cruise, but on the one occasion in which we did go take a cruise, the Queen Mary II 'round South America, bridge classes were available as an alternative to ballroom or Latin American dancing. My wife, who's a much stronger player than I am, plucked up her courage to go to a class that described itself as intermediate. She discovered that such was the level of bridge on the QMII, that she would have been better placed in the novices' class. That must have been a difficult thing to be told when one has been playing bridge regularly, every other week, for 35 years.

The problem is the rules. Most games have a small number of rules or propositions that will see you through the game, sometimes rather well. Bridge is different: There exist whole tomes on strategies and conventions that go on for page after page of rigorous analysis. Marty

Bergen shows what can be done here. His famous "Points Schmoints!"—one of the great bridge best-sellers—is just the tip of his oeuvre. The serious reader can then progress to "To Open, or Not to Open" and "Understanding 1NT Forcing." I have read none of these, preferring a somewhat antiquated manual called "The Sports Illustrated Book of Bridge" by Charles Henry Goren. What appeals to me about Mr. Goren is his understanding. A religious manual—which any bridge book necessarily is—should always take into account that there are the weaker brethren, whose bidding is not all that might be desired. Mr. Goren, it is said, took a most sporting attitude to bridge and was not indignant with the bad bids of others. Bad bids, he said, made good drama, a quote that we weaker players should pluck up the courage to use more frequently.



Associated Press

Warren Buffett and Bill Gates play bridge at the Nebraska bridge regional in Omaha in August 2005.

## A Game Bridges Generations

With players like Warren Buffett giving it cachet, the game, once a bigger pastime, holds its own.

Investors know Warren Buffett as the Oracle of Omaha. His online bridge partners know him by another handle: Tbone. He says the skills the game teaches—making inferences and working well with a partner—are invaluable in broader life. "I really do recommend it to people," he says.

Some figures suggest Mr. Buffett has a receptive audience.

The American Contract Bridge League, the sanctioning body for competitive bridge in North America, says it expects to have nearly 163,000 members by the end of the year, a 15-year high. A spokesman for Bridge Base Online, a site partly owned by bridge enthusiast Bill Gates (screen name Chalengr, according to Mr. Buffett), estimates 100,000 computers log onto the site daily, up from 75,000 two years ago, but says the growth could reflect players defecting from other sites.

What seems certain, says Jay Baum, chief executive of the bridge league, is that baby boomers are driving most of whatever growth there is. As boomers age and get more free time, he says, they're discovering the game offers a low-cost way to socialize. And with the league's base graying—the average age of its members is nearly 69, up from 66 in 2002—aficionados say bridge gives tennis knees a chance to recover.

Bridge has "deception, it's got analysis and you can play with your opponent's head a little bit," says Bob Hamman, one of the world's top-ranked bridge players, about the game's appeal. Don't give up, he advises: "If someone's played for maybe 100 hours, they end up liking it."

Bridge used to stand taller as an American pastime. In 1931 and 1932, the so-called Bridge Battle of the Century pitted two proponents of different bidding systems against each other for five weeks. NBC Radio nightly aired a 15-minute broadcast about the match.

First Lady Lou Hoover played in Washington, and Samuel Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer in Hollywood, says Gary M. Pomerantz, author of "The Devil's Tickets" (2009), which chronicles bridge's rise at the end of the Roaring Twenties and beyond. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig played with sports reporters. The Great Depression "was the moment when bridge was young and sexy," Mr. Pomerantz says in an interview. The game would enjoy strong popularity through the 1960s before being edged aside by TV and other distractions, but "never again would it reach that fever pitch."

The game continues to inspire passion in its devotees. Former Bear Stearns CEO James Cayne made headlines in 2007 and 2008 for hitting the bridge circuit while his firm was foundering.

As for Mr. Buffett, he plays online most nights. "I just picked [my handle] out of thin air," says Tbone. He once famously said that if he were playing bridge, a naked woman could walk by and he wouldn't notice. Mr. Buffett adds now, "I'm 79, but when I'm playing bridge I feel 20."

-- Juliet Chung

Mr. Goren's book tells us more than players of my low standard can possibly remember. It reminds us of the early history of bridge, which, like the history of baseball, is full of uncertainty and obscurity. One thing seems to be accepted—that bridge derived from the much simpler game of whist. Gradually whist became more sophisticated and the new game was born.

Of course it had its opponents—no new game gets away without scathing criticism from those who thought the old games were just fine. In the U.S., *The New Republic* accused bridge players of a "drunken attempt to escape from realities." Other, more temperate, criticism was leveled at the effect that bridge had on conversation—a fair-enough point, as conversation at the bridge table tends to the perfunctory.

A milestone in the development of the game came with the introduction in the 1920s of the modern system of scoring. This was an invention of Harold Vanderbilt, a scion of the famous shipping and railroad family, who went on a cruise with three friends and invented a better scoring system. The scores that one sees on the modern bridge score pads—with totals above and below the line, and with penalties of varying severity—go back to this famous cruise.

Bridge is still a game that a single player may leave his or her mark on. The Stayman Convention was so named after Samuel Stayman, who wrote on it in the 1940s. The idea here is to use a two-clubs bid after a one no-trump opening to invite one's partner to reveal whether he holds four cards in a major suit. Simple enough? Yes. But the difficulty with these rules, I find, is remembering them. It is, however, very impressive to be able to say to a new partner: "You play Stayman, I take it?" That may sound like showing off, but it at least reveals to the other players that you know something about the game, even if it may not be very much.

There are psychological aspects to bridge that should be taken into account by anybody thinking of taking up the game. The first thing to be aware of is that bridge is not an inherently friendly game. It is not as bad as croquet, which makes players red in tooth and claw, but it certainly brings out the bad in you. This is because bridge is quite unlike so many other games that are merely played for fun: this game is deadly serious.

What's the point of playing bridge? It's difficult to pinpoint the exact attraction, but it must have something to do with the fact that bridge is an intellectual game. I am always impressed with players who appear to know exactly where all the cards are. Obviously the bidding reveals something about who holds what, but these players are able to use statistical models to work out just what the chance is of another player having five hearts or whatever it is. So, from that point of view, it's a game of concentration that hones the neurons.

It's also a game of memory. Again, there are players who shoot past us in their chariots in respect of their ability to remember what cards have gone out. These people remember exactly who played what and in what order. For most of us that is impossible, but at least we can try to remember what trumps have gone. That is not too tall an order, as there are only 13 in any hand, but many of us are still surprised when a trump we did not quite notice is produced with a flourish.

From the social point of view, if one has to choose whether bridge is a good or bad thing, it is undoubtedly the former. The world is full of lonely people, and lonely couples too. Bridge makes lonely couples into lonely foursomes, at least for that short time round the table. It is also a good game to grow old playing, when tennis and other games get a bit much for creaking limbs.

Bridge is a quintessentially bourgeois game. It is a fine game for respectable people to play—people who don't get to night clubs or bars all that often, or who do not have all that many extramarital affairs. It is also a very good game for those who have no other excitement in their lives: If your average day has no great salients to it, then the prospect of getting a high-point hand at the bridge table in the evening is a very attractive one. And if you are an all-round inadequate, then being a strong bridge player is a tremendous boost.

If I were to imagine a typical bridge player, I suppose that I might say Woody Allen. Now I have no idea if Mr. Allen plays bridge, but he looks as if he should, and I think that he would be a very agreeable bridge partner. His etiquette would be good: He would not criticize his partner, his criticism being reserved, I should imagine, to self-deprecation. He would also be very strong on post-game analysis of what went wrong. I imagine that he might go on at that for some length.

Another good bridge player would have been Liberace. Again I'm not sure whether he played bridge, but I suspect he did. Liberace had a terrific memory, apparently, and so he would have been excellent at remembering what cards had gone out. He would also smile very sweetly if one made a mistake, and one would not have felt bad at all, even after some very irresponsible bidding.

My ideal bridge four? W.H. Auden, me, Woody Allen and Barack Obama, who strikes me as being the sort of person who is considerate—and a listener. I'm not sure whether the current president plays bridge; he has other things to do, I suppose. And my least ideal bridge four? Saddam Hussein (an unforgiving partner), me, Marilyn Monroe (bad memory for cards), and Gandhi (not competitive enough).

— Alexander McCall Smith is the author of more than 60 books, including the "No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" series.