

The Humble Zlatan of Bridge

By Christina Lund Madsen

Interview with Peter Bertheau, Sweden Open

Peter Bertheau was on everybody's lips after he slowbided his way to 7th at the World Championships in Lille in 2012, leading his team to the World Championship title Sweden had been longing for. He once described himself as the Zlatan of bridge and



although his talents as a striker and self-confident air bears some resemblance to his even more famous countryman, Bertheau possesses a humbleness rooted in his curiosity in others and deep love for the game.

We are sitting outside a restaurant in picturesque Opatija with the sea and mountains as our main audience. It is just before the beginning of the first match of the European Championships and Peter is like a horse about to enter the race course, yet patiently answering my questions.

How do you see Sweden's chances at this championship?

He pauses. "We definitely have the potential to win the whole thing. We can win and we can miss qualifying after the first week. It is so random because the amount of boards makes it such a short tournament and everybody is so good, so if you lose a couple of matches you are out. We would be satisfied making it into the top 6. It is always nice to be on the podium, but third or sixth doesn't really matter. We are aiming for gold."

What is your opinion about the format of this event?

"I prefer the format we had before with a full round robin, but I know it is very hard to keep it with so many teams. My opinion is the more you play, the tougher it is, the better the event."

Like Zlatan, Peter is not reluctant to utter his opinion.

How do you find the decision of reducing the amount of boards from 20 to 16?

"I think it is a terrible, terrible decision. Really poor decision. For me it increases the randomness.

It used to be the toughest event in the world. Now it becomes more like a holiday tournament."

His partner Per-Ola Cullin arrives at our table as I ask the following question:

Your team did not qualify from Dublin in 2012 but won the World Championships in Lille 6 weeks after. What is your explanation for that?

Bertheau is smiling. "It is quite easy. We didn't play in Dublin." (Both laughing) "The fact is that we were selected for both tournaments, but we both have small kids and family and also played the American nationals, so we decided to play only the World Bridge Games.

I now ask the ignorant question: Are you happy with that choice?

He just looks at me confidently and replies: "If we had played the European Championships we would have won it already," followed by a laugh, Per-Ola telling me "You cannot write that".

What did it mean to you personally winning in Lille?

He is thinking for a while. "We have been close so many times, second in the Rosenblum, the Europeans, lost a Bermuda Bowl semifinal. It meant more than I realised. It is a nice feeling to finally be the winner. It was more relief than happiness. Sad to say."

We send Per-Ola away so I can ask about their partnership. Three years ago Fredrik Nyström and Peter played together and Johan Upmark with Per-Ola. Then they switched partners, which has turned out to be very successful for both pairs.

You changed partnerships some years ago. How did you see that then and now?

"In the situation we did it I was a little ... It was a lot of work to get where Fredrik and I were. We played for 13 years. But there is something with Per-Ola that me and Fredrik didn't have."

What is he like as a bridge player?

"His highest level is very, very high. He can be very strong. As a card player he is top class. Some tournaments he is amazing. Sometimes he needs to warm up. It is because he doesn't play as much as the rest of us. His weakness is the bidding. Sometimes he invents something and expects me to understand it though I have no clue. Then we have to discuss and agree on something. I didn't have those discussions with Fredrik because we played for so many years. We had better harmony, but I don't know why."

"I personally think that my game has evolved playing with Per-Ola. When I played with Fredrik it was like... He was so insanely aggressive, and you cannot both be so aggressive in a partnership, then it becomes too difficult. In some way I feel more free to do what I feel is right."

Describe Per-Ola as a person.

"I need to think about how to phrase it. I think he is the

most intelligent person in the whole tournament. When you think about what he has accomplished. He is 35 years old, he is a bridge world champion and he is a judge. He is such a bloody good guy that... But he has become a bit less social during the past years. So have I. I am not as social as I used to be. Before I had kids I was almost afraid of being by myself. Now it is almost the opposite. When I come to a tournament I just want to be by myself, go to the room. Watch a movie. When you go to tournaments in the beginning you don't know anyone. Now you know everybody. It is not as exciting talking to the same persons every time."

As the clock is ticking towards game time his tension increases. His hands play with a sugar bag during our conversation.

Do you ever get nervous?

"No." The words fall without any hesitation.

Did you use to be?

"Yes. When I played chess when I was younger I got really nervous. Playing bridge not so much. You learn to control it I guess. If you play the biggest and toughest events in the world all the time you get used to situation. The worst situation is when you are up by 40 with 16 boards to go. I feel disgust rather than nervous. You know they will try to hunt you down, take weird actions."

His captain passes by and asks how the Zlatan of Bridge is doing. I ask them who gave him that nickname. Obviously himself, a lack of modesty that Zlatan himself would surely support.

Do you think you resemble Zlatan?

"No," he replies, waiving me off. "I look up to Zlatan, I think he is a bloody cool guy. When he enters the room there is no doubt who is the star. Everybody has respect for him. Even the most important politicians in Sweden treat him like royalty. He is my idol. He used to be such a punk, you know. He has bad sides as well, but I really like him."

They don't resemble each other physically either. Where Zlatan has a pointy nose and sharp features, Bertheau has soft curves all around. A look that matches his gentle nature.

How would you describe yourself in three words as a person?

"Kind. Ironic. Fat." He laughs.

The Italian open team walks by and he throws the sugar bag after them. Not to be provocative, rather as a greeting. He looks at me and asks. "What do you think they talk about?"

Throughout our conversation he often asks me what I think, though he is the main topic. It makes him very easy

to talk to and difficult not to answer. He displays a genuine interest in other people that makes him highly popular and serves as a contrast to his self-confident air.

Also when we talk about bridge, which is uncommon for a bridge star. Many top players have a huge ego and usually stand firmly on their opinion.

"When it comes to bridge I am definitely curious. I always think everybody knows something I don't know. I think it is one of the reasons I learned bridge so quickly. When it comes to bridge talk I prefer to listen rather than speak myself."

What would you have been if not a bridge player?

"Running a youth club. Or teacher of the youngest classes. I love kids. Kids are... The best thing I know is to hang out with my kids. I am also a football coach. It is the best thing I know."

Which is your best memory?

"Of my life? Probably when I had my daughter. Incredibly intense feeling. Surreal. She came one month early, we were quite young, 26. We didn't plan to have a child, but were like ok, here we go. We were not mentally prepared to be parents."

Would you rather have waited?

"No, I am so happy. It is great that the time with small children is over. My daughter is 12 now. A teenager. And my son is 9. Now we can do things together. But of course some years disappeared where we could have done other things."

Which is your worst memory?

"I am very lucky so far. I don't have any traumatic memories. My grandfather was a person I cared a lot for. To see him fade away was very hard. He was also a top bridge player although he never taught me bridge. It is a shame he didn't live to see our successes. When we won in Lille I thought that he should have lived to see that."

Short about Peter Bertheau:

Married to Kathrine Bertheau, originally from Norway. They met as juniors and she moved to Sweden and is also in Opatija representing the Swedish women's team. Together they have a son and a daughter, aged 9 and 12.

He studied one year of math at university and worked one year as a computer programmer until dedicating his life to bridge.

Professional bridge player and World Champion in Lille 2012.

A much better dancer than you would guess him to be.