

Drama in Tenerife

by Pietro Campanile

The recent, thrilling final of the Bermuda Bowl and its astonishing conclusion, viewed online by more than 5000 spectators on bridgebase.com, has served as a powerful reminder that bridge can be a great spectator sport, within certain constraints. As in most other sports, the viewing interest is directly proportional to the importance of the event and the uncertainty of its outcome. Not many people will be rushing to watch the live relay of the qualifying round of the Liechtenstein national championships or indeed the final round of a match where one team is leading by 90IMPs with 20 boards to go.

The idea that bridge can be turned into a spectator sport dates back to the 1930s, when Ely Culbertson established his empire on the huge public interest arising from his "Match of the Century" against Sidney Lenz. Culbertson's Blue Book achieved the amazing record of selling more copies in one month than the other top ten publications ranked on the New York Times' Bestsellers list combined!



Ely Culbertson

Since then bridge has obviously come a long way, but has never managed to recapture such wide appeal among the public at large. The live screening of important events has greatly benefited from the huge technological advances of the last half-century and nowadays almost all international events will provide a highly refined Vu-Graph service for the benefit of the local audience and, more recently, online viewers.

Such a service can be great fun for your average bridge addict but it can turn into an exquisite torture for the players looking at their teammates' efforts live on screen.

Let us move on to Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands and the venue for the 2001 European championships. The event itself has historically been dominated by Italy and before the last round of the tournament the top four positions were basically locked up. What was yet to be decided was the outcome of the race for the all-important fifth place, the last qualifying spot for the Bermuda Bowl. France, Israel and Denmark were involved in a very close finish with the French slightly ahead but due to play their toughest opponents, the highly talented but temperamental Bulgarians.

It was no surprise, therefore, that this was the match the organizers decide to show for the last session of the VuGraph and by the time we got to the last board, the theater was completely full and the tension running very high.

The French had not been doing well but because of the other results they only needed a decent score on the final board to get their ticket for the 2001 World championship. Here is Board 20, the last of the event:

Bd: 20	♠ 543
Dir: West	♥ K109753
Vul: Both	♦ 64
	♣ 102
♠ KJ876	♠ A9
♥ J	♥ AQ86
♦ 52	♦ KQ3
♣ KQJ96	♣ A543
	♠ Q102
	♥ 42
	♦ AJ10987
	♣ 87

In most of the other matches E/W managed to get to the easy 6♣ quite comfortably and the commentators predicted the same result here; in their estimates, that would have been enough to

keep France in fifth place.

West	North	East	South
Palau	Mihov	Allegrini	Nanev
1♠	Pass	2♣	Pass
4♣	Pass	4♦	Dbl
Pass	Pass	4♥	Pass
5♣	Pass	?	

Palau and Allegrini looked weary and incredibly tense; the pressure on them was enormous. The qualification for the World Championships was the very least that the ever-ambitious French Federation expected of its players.

The bidding proceeded normally until Palau opted for an exuberant 4♣ reply to his partner's 2♣. He did have great support, but with an aceless hand he would have been better advised to bid only 3♣. The auction went on, but when his partner continued to express a strong wish for slam with 4♥, Palau started to get cold feet and the feeling that his first reply might have exaggerated his values led him to another surprising action: he denied any further interest and bid 5♣ instead of showing his spade control.

Allegrini was now on the spot. He was looking at a powerhouse, and yet his partner was firmly breaking on the way to slam. The tension and fatigue were obviously big factors in the French player's decision-making process. He was afraid of losing a diamond and a spade and finally put the ill-fated green card on the tray, causing dismay among the French supporters in the audience—especially a certain Monsieur Michel Abecassis, who had been witnessing the bidding

slowly unfolding like the last terrifying scenes of a horror movie, with himself and his team as the unwilling protagonists. The French champion could not understand how Allegrini could bring himself to believe that Palau might have bid 4♣ with a hand like ♠Qxxxx ♥K ♦Jx ♣KQJxx, where 6♣ would have no play. Even ♠QJxxx would have made the slam no worse than 50%. Unfortunately for him, there was not an awful lot he could do from his seat in the VuGraph theater.

Anyway, all's well that ends well. Thanks to a late rescheduling of the venue, the French team was invited to the 2001 Bermuda Bowl—as the host nation.



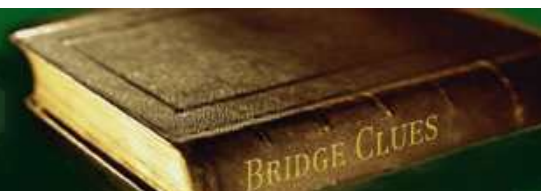
Michel Abecassis, not looking happy after Allegrini passed 5♣. (Photo by Ron Tacchi)



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