

How Much Has Bridge Changed in 75 Years?

by Jeremy Dhondy



IT was all happening in 1936: an abdication, a controversial Olympics in Berlin, a civil war in Spain and of course the founding of the EBU.

Now the EBU has reached its 75th anniversary milestone, it is time to assess how much bridge has changed in that time. We can look at trappings such as bidding boxes and electronic scorers, at the use of technology to give us results in a couple of minutes or in the comfort of our own home thirty minutes after the duplicate has finished. We can wonder at the fact that international bridge is played behind a large wooden screen, a decision reviled at the time it was introduced in 1974 but largely preferred by those players these days. We can take our stop and alert cards and wonder how those people 75 years ago ever coped without them. Did you know they didn't even have an *Orange Book* (but they had just revised the laws)? Ah! The good old days.

When sports fans get nostalgic about the past they want to put their favourite player of many years ago against the current number one and compare them. Fred Perry vs Roger Federer? WG Grace vs Sachin Tendulkar? Jesse Owens vs Usain Bolt? There will then be endless discussion in the pub about who is best. Generally standards of fitness, training and equipment have improved so much that if you could get the time machine and send a modern day sportsman back, he would prevail.

1936 Bidding

So does the same apply to bridge? Let's start with some bidding. In 1936 Acol was about two years old and had yet to be what most people in England played. The first book on the topic would not appear until 1938. Americans were being converted to

methods espoused by Culbertson and others. Whatever else these methods were, they represented some of the first efforts to bring some order into the bidding. Great matches were played to decide which was the best system. Whoever won, they always failed as the task of showing superiority of system over a few hundred boards was doomed to failure. In America the first life masters were appointed but it would be years before a scheme for master points would produce life masters by points earned. In England it was 1956 before such a scheme started.

A book on bidding published in time for the 1936 season was *The Beasley Contract Bridge System* by Lt Colonel HM Beasley Esq. In the foreword to his book he says that: 'I remember a few weeks ago at Harrogate when 1100 players from all parts of the British Isles turned up to play in the various competitions.' He then tells us that we will be astounded by the percentage of accuracy we will achieve if we follow his point count for honours and distribution. This is pretty similar to the Milton Work Count we all know and love, and a minimum 85% satisfaction level was guaranteed.

Here is an example, a bit alien to modern bidding I suspect:

♠ A 10 7 2		♠ K Q 9 6
♥ K 10 9		♥ 8 4
♦ A K J 10		♦ 9 7 4 2
♣ K 3		♣ A 6 4

Recommended auction:

West	East
1NT	2♣
4♣	

1NT is 15-17. West downgrades because of the honour doubleton. East holds a hand worth responding so bids his major. West re-evaluates his hand, decides his trumps and doubleton are useful and raises to game.

All bids at the two level over 1NT are natural and show some values, so if you played Beasley you did not have Stayman or transfers available. Stayman would not appear for another ten years and even though many credit Jack Marx of England with the idea, it was not published until after World War II. You also had no way of making a weak take out in Beasley, so with something like:

♠ Q J 9 6 5 4
♥ 5
♦ 8 7 6 5
♣ 3 2

you were condemned to play in 1NT unless the opponents rescued you.

Partner opens 1♠ (at least four spades) and a normal opening bid. What would you call on:

♠ Q 2
♥ Q 10 6
♦ A K Q 10 6 4
♣ 10 2

... and what do you imagine Lt Colonel Beasley would call?

I guess we would all bid 2♦ without too much thought but the recommended bid in Beasley is 4♦.

Say partner opened 1♦ and you held:

♠ K J 9 4 2
♥ A 10 6
♦ 9 4
♣ K 10 6

You would respond ... ? Well, 1♠, of course. Wrong! In Beasley you would respond 2♠ because you have more than a minimum responding hand.