

Skill preferred, but luck is more than welcome

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Many years ago, **Allan Falk** was playing in the **Vanderbilt Knockout Teams**. At one point early in the event, Falk and his teammates found themselves pitted against a squad that included some of the continent's best players. Falk remembers the occasion so well because the heavily favored team bid five slams that rated to make better than two-thirds of the time – and each went down on a foul trump split, and each was a loss for the stars. Falk and company surprised even themselves by advancing in the Vanderbilt. It doesn't take much analytical skill to conclude that the major factor in the win by Falk's team was good, old-fashioned luck. They were in the right place at the right time. Falk does note, by the way, that his team was good enough to win two more matches after their big upset.

Just about anyone will tell you that luck is a major factor in most competitive endeavors. The big question about luck is . . . well, what *is* it? What is that inexplicable thing that envelopes you when you're having a 70% game? Where does it come from? Where does it go, especially when your 70% set is followed by 45% disaster?



"I don't believe in luck," says **Zia Mahmood**, one of ACBL's most successful players (he and **Bjorn Fallenius** won the first national pairs event at this tournament). "All fortune is relatively even." Zia acknowledges, however, that when he plays rubber bridge, he doesn't hesitate to let on to his opponents that he is a "lucky" player. "A perception of luck is important," he says. "Players find it easier to lose to someone they think is lucky because then they

can blame fate."



Ability, says Zia, is much more important. "In every game of skill – bridge, poker, chess – the best players win." A lot of success, he says, depends on outlook and attitude. Where one player might pick up a five-card suit headed by the AKQ and think of all that could go wrong, Zia says he looks at the suit and sees five tricks. "When you play any game with confidence," he says, "luck becomes kind of an aura." That seems to be another way of saying, as most expert players surveyed for this article assert, "You make your own luck." Translation: You have to give the opponents enough rope to hang themselves. Says **Steve Garner**, Zia's teammate in the **Bermuda Bowl** in the recently concluded world championships in Shanghai, China: "You don't wait for people to fall over dead. You have to help them." Garner's regular partner is **Howard Weinstein**, another member of the Bermuda Bowl squad, which won the bronze medal: "In the short term, luck can be a factor, but it all evens out."



Zeke Jabbour, the bridge world's resident philosopher, categorizes luck as "a residue of design," and he points to Zia as prime example of how illusion can become reality for Zia's opponents, particularly regarding his confident approach. "His reputation helps create the luck he receives," says Jabbour. One's demeanor at the table can contribute a lot to one's fortune, Jabbour adds, but he acknowledges also that sometimes luck – in whatever nebulous form it might take – descends on you and you get in a zone. "At times you can't understand it."



Whatever luck is, says **Lynn Deas**, sometimes it's almost palpable when a player is on a roll. "You e xude vibes at the table," she says, "that make the opponents play bad." When she gets into a zone, Deas says, she takes pains to stay there, doing what her instincts tell her to do. "Always," she says, "go with your feelings." It's worth noting, of course, that not all luck is good. Sometimes that roll you get on feels more like circling the drain than riding a wave. Says **Barry Rigal**, expert bridge writer and player, "If you believe you are lucky, you are, but I have my own personal black cloud." One might ask where Rigal stored his bad luck on the occasions that he has won North American championships. "Someone else's karma overruled mine," he says. Players might scoff at the idea that Fortune sometimes smiles on them, but none will turn luck down when it arrives mid-game in an important event. Says Falk, who has won major championships: "I've always preferred being good to being lucky, but lucky wins more events." Luck or lack of it notwithstanding, Falk says, "In general, the winners deserve to win."

Wishful tricking

Do you know what a "wish trick" is? A poll taken not long ago indicated that not everyone does. For those still in the dark, a wish trick is one that includes the ace, 2, 3 and 4. Many players announce a wish trick when those four cards are played to a trick. One of the ACBL's most ardent wish trickers in world champion **Nick Nickell**. "Some people believe a wish trick is only a wish trick if the cards are played in order: ace, 2, 3, 4," he said. "I'm not that much of a purist."

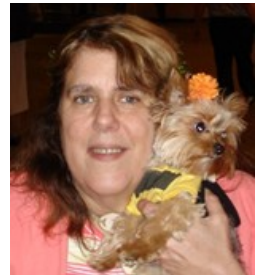
Nickell also described the variations of a wish trick: multi-suited, multi-colored and the very rare case of a wish trick on the third round of a suit. The first player at the table to call, "Wish trick!" gets a wish. Some players believe in what is known as the high wish trick: ace, king, queen, jack. Expert wish-trickers also have a signal to take the pressure off partner. If dummy is holding the ace and king of a suit and declarer leads the 2, followed by the 3, declarer will call for the king rather than the ace to let dummy know that no wish trick is possible C declarer has the 4.

Nickell announces his wish tricks whenever possible. "It keeps you even, balanced and relaxed," he said. He admits to some strange looks from foreign players - unfortunate, uninformed souls - at world championships. During a U.S. team trials, he once held the ♠A 4 3 2. His friend and fellow wish-tricker **Dave Smith** was operating the vugraph computer. "Look," Nickell whispered to Smith, "I have a wish trick in my own hand." When told that the term wish trick was missing from the ACBL's Official Encyclopedia of Bridge, an affronted Nickell snapped, "That is a blatant omission that must be corrected."



Superstitions abound in a logical game

Every now and then, **Zeke Jabbour** writes in his Bridge Bulletin column about his wife, **Sharon**, and how she underruffed in a national championship and went down in a contract she could have made, costing them first in the event. What he hasn't written about regarding that incident, according to Sharon, is that he blamed himself for the accident. Says Sharon: "Zeke said it was because he lost his lucky pen." That's just one example of how superstitious bridge players can be. Many, as you can imagine, have a fear of the number 13. "I have one woman at my bridge club," says Tournament Director **Terry Lavender**, "who is so terrified of the number 13 that when she plays I don't even have a table 13. We go from 12 to 14."



TD **Matt Smith** said some players have acquired a fear of the number 4 because they have heard that the Chinese symbol for the number is the same as the Chinese symbol for death.

Lavender says she sold a **Blue Ribbon Pairs** entry to a player who said his favorite numbers are four and 10. When she told him she didn't have either but did have number 14, a combination of the two, "he was delighted." Besides favorite and dreaded numbers, there are rituals. **Lynn Deas** says that if she's having a good game, she always goes to the same stall in the restroom if she needs to go during a session. A friend Deas played with at a regional, she recalls, wore the same dress five days in a row - and recorded five wins.

TD **Diane Beyer** says her former mother-in-law would get up and walk around the table if something bad happened during her session. TD **Priscilla Smith** says some players refuse to ask for a certain entry, believing it's bad luck not to take what the TDs give them. Zia says he knows of a world-class player who, for good luck, always "mooned" the moon on New Year's Eve and another who would change pens if he was having a bad session. Smith says his one superstition is that he believes that if you're on a roll and having a huge game, you will interrupt your run if you get greedy. Push it, he says, "and the streak is over." Deas is even superstitious about the so-called "wish trick," explained in the sidebar accompanying this article. She says that when the ace, 2, 3 and 4 are played on the same trick, "You gotta say, 'Wish trick.' It's a charge if you don't." Deas acknowledges, however, that the concept can be overdone. She recalls that, playing with the late **Norb Kremer**, they had a bidding misunderstanding and she landed in 7NT, doubled by the opening leader, who had the ♦A. The ace was led, and the play went 2, 3, 4. "Norb said, 'Wish trick,' " **Deas** recalls. "I could have killed him."