

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WINNING AND LOSING

Concentration, Distraction, Partnership Handling, Decision Fatigue & Temperament – Peter Gill



Twenty years ago, a bridge magazine polled 50 bridge experts. Among the questions was: which three of the following 15 items are most important to be a really top expert at bridge (rank 1-2-3 please)?

Declarer Play, Defence, Bidding System, Bidding Judgement, Partnership Handling, Bidding in General, Card Sense, Temperament, Bidding Conventions, Bidding Discipline, Concentration, Competitive Bidding, Opening Leads, Counting, Card play, and Signals.

Giving 3 points for 1st, 2 for 2nd and 1 point for 3rd, Concentration totally dominated the vote, scoring about 130 points out of 150, followed by Temperament and Partnership Handling, with a gap to 4th place.

Given these results, shouldn't our improvement at bridge include coaching in these areas? Hence this talk. If you like the talk, please let me know, so that we can arrange follow-up talks at Nationals in future.

1. Concentration

Distraction and fatigue are among the main causes of poor concentration.

Distraction can occur when emotion from what just happened interferes with one's concentration. I think Mike Lawrence in his bridge tip called Ecstasy gives great advice – that you have to beware after any triumph (the distracting emotion = ecstasy) or disaster (the distracting emotion = despair).

Trick One is a very important time for all players – as soon as dummy comes down, thinking hard is essential. Yet this is a time when many dummies distract declarer by saying something like: "Sorry I didn't use Stayman, I guess I should have" or the like. Many declarers cannot concentrate fully when they listen to partner's comment. Here's a sample hand:

You hold ♠K J 9 7 4 ♥10 9 5 ♦8 6 ♣A K Q. RHO opens a weak 2♥, vulnerable. You overcall 2♠. Pass by LHO, and your partner raises to 4♠ which is doubled in the pass out seat by LHO, who leads ♥J. Dummy comes down with A5, Q43, AK105, 5432. If you say to partner "Why didn't you bid 3NT?" you fail. If partner (dummy) makes a comment to you, he has erred.

The solution is that you should duck HJ with as few hints of desperation as you can manage. RHO, playing you for a singleton heart or xx in hearts, might duck ♥J.

Let's look at the full deal: LHO had Q10863, J, Q975, J108. Any form of distraction at trick one reduces your chances of smoothly finding the only play that gives you a chance. If ♥J is ducked, you can make 4♠x in various ways that involve cashing winners then end-playing West who has to trump his partner's hearts in the ending. (After the heart lead and club shift you ruff a diamond low in dummy, play off the top clubs and spade ace then exit with a heart).

David Lusk from Adelaide gives excellent advice in an article called Focus on page 14 of the Nov 11 ABF Newsletter. David says he counts his cards multiple times, in order to "clear my brain of all extraneous thoughts". David recommends that you develop a focusing routine such as that, and use it at the start of play, after disaster, and after protracted breaks in play. Mike Lawrence's Tip means that it should also apply after +1100 or slam success (Ecstasy), before the last board (keep focusing on the bridge, not on the lunch break), and whenever you are distracted.

My personal “focusing routine” is that I say internally to myself “Next Hand” or “This Hand” multiple times, so that I forget about the previous hand. After I had done that for a few years, it has become automatic and I no longer notice doing so – my brain has re-trained itself to do so on virtually every hand.

For more information on re-training the brain and brain plasticity, see Norman Doidge’s book ‘The Brain That Changes Itself’. If time permitted, we could discuss applications of that book to bridge improvement. Recent research suggests that you need to participate in an activity like bridge more than one session a week in order to re-train the brain, so this Gold Coast Congress should be good for your brain!

Two of the regulars in recent Australian teams consulted a sports psychologist in order to improve their concentration. Their excellent subsequent bridge results speak for themselves.

Jens Auken from Denmark says in a BOLS Bridge Tip that you should try to develop the ability to spot Kill Points, i.e. points in the bidding or play when stopping to think are crucial. That’s not so easy to do, and Jens gives little advice on how to do so. Possibly a topic for later?

At Eastern Suburbs bridge clubs in Sydney that serve cappuccinos, whenever your opponent is paying for the coffee as they play cards, the chance of them playing the wrong card is greatly enhanced. Ever since I noticed this, when I’m directing and collect table-money from each table, I try to collect it between hands so that the players are not distracted by my activity into making errors. I think players also become distracted when the Director is at the table and can thus often get confused and play wrong cards or say wrong things to the Director or misunderstand what the Director is saying.

Decision Fatigue, or even general tiredness which is something different, can also cause concentration errors, a term identified in the New York Times. When you are suffering general tiredness, Zia’s advice is to take it easy and let partner be in charge, let partner make most of the decisions.

2. Partnership Handling

When Jeff Meckstroth is asked in a Youtube interview if he and Eric Rodwell (the world’s best pair) ever get angry, he replies “just about every hand”. But “we’re very good at rooting for each other”, he adds.

Handling of team members also is important. Kate McCallum, an American who won the 2008 Gold Coast Teams wrote in a training paper for female internationals, among other good advice, that you have to take care of your weakest team member(s), to make sure they are in their Comfort Zone and don’t feel like they are letting the team down in any way. The same applies to partners.

3. Temperament

Getting irritated with partner is one thing. Anger management is an issue we will skip past. Getting annoyed with oneself is more common and is a serious problem, partly because when you are annoyed with yourself, you are more likely to lash out at partner, especially if (s)he could have prevented your own error, which upset you. This happens a lot at bridge. My friend from university days Jon Free asked me recently whether I still get annoyed at the bridge table. That made me think about how annoyed I used to get.....

Avi Kanetkar at a neighbouring table once noticed my veins reacting as I got very annoyed with an opponent. After the match, Avi advised me that this can cause strokes. Having seen a husband die of a stroke at the next table to me in a NSW Country Congress many years ago after a match when we couldn’t help notice him berating his wife loudly, I have tried to heed Avi’s advice. Avi is in the 2013 Australian Open Team and Australian Senior Team, so his advice is worth following. Easy does it.

We all have problems and we all try to deal with our anger. At bridge, making a massive effort to take it easy and not get upset is necessary if you want to become a really top expert.

(Ed: around 80 people attended Peter Gill’s discussion of the above themes between Sessions on Saturday. See the calendar of events in this Bulletin for details of other guest speakers.)