

You've Learned How to Play Bridge - Now What?

Dave Bernstein, a friend and partner of mine from our Palo Alto Unit, who studies the game more than anyone I know, responded to my desire to help beginning bridge student graduates and players from limited games get to the next level. The pages that follow include the books he thinks are the best of the best for advancing players. I thank him for all his work. (For the sake of bleary eyes, I excluded many of the more advanced books he listed. If anyone is interested in the unedited version, please let me know.)

In addition to books, there are CDs on play and defense available (Bridge Master 2000 and Bridge Master 2000 Sands-Janitschke edition, as well as Bridge Baron 17 are popular and highly touted) that you can purchase on line or at Regionals/Nationals from the booksellers. As a bonus, these CDs will also help you get used to card combinations so you can play a little faster.

It is important that you and your partner fill out a convention card. The ACBL website has a play by play on every aspect of the convention card (look under "Conventional Wisdom") For example, you know that you play 15-17 no trumps and have no trouble filling that in on your convention card. But do you and your partner agree on what the meaning of 3 clubs is over 1NT? To some, it's forcing, to some it's invitational, to other players, it has a conventional meaning and has nothing to do with having any clubs. For newer players, we have a FAT FREE CONVENTION CARD. There is also a STANDARD YELLOW CARD. The Standard Yellow Card was developed for experienced bridge players who wanted to be able to have a standard set of conventions. It is by no means a simple card. Newer players should either use the Fat Free (if available) or a regular convention card. All new partners should spend at least 20 minutes before the game to go over their card.

You can download Bridge Base On Line (it's free) and watch experts play – including those at the highest levels during National events. Bridge Base also allows you to take lessons from "pros" and play on line with your own partner or a stranger. (Playing on line with strangers is a crapshoot, however.) www.bridgebase.com

Please take advantage of our website www.paloaltobridge.com. Get to know it. There is a treasure trove of information there including a page on proper etiquette and rules, as well as what all those funny words like "stratified" and "flighted" and "IMPs" mean. Look under Other and click on Miscellaneous.

Click on Bridge Links. On that page, you will find lots of wonderful websites to visit. One that will help you with bidding – www.prairienet.org/bridge is a great website for beginning and advancing players.

Unit 503 also has a mentor program – where a stronger player is paired with a newer player. Please see explanation under Mentor Program on our website when you're ready.

Most of all, keep smiling and have fun!

Lori Spaeth - 8/12/07

Suggested Books for Advancing Players (as well as some tips and things to think about)

By David Bernstein

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to suggest bridge references to assist newcomers transition into open games. I recognize that this transition can be somewhat challenging, but in general the players will welcome your participation, offer assistance if asked (but don't hesitate to get a second opinion), and most important the best way for anyone to improve his/her game is to play with and against more experienced players.

Two of the major changes that you will experience in the open games are: (1) The level of bidding and play varies from expert on down; many of the players will be at or near your level, and (2) The opponents will compete in the auctions more often than you are accustomed to. In this article I will list a few references; you and your favorite partner(s) can work on them together. These are probably suitable to your current level.

In each category (bidding, play, defense) the references will be in ascending order of difficulty. In addition to the books, I would suggest that you read appropriate articles in the Bridge Bulletin and that you read some bridge columns. The columns in the SF Chronicle (daily Goren and Wolff, and Wolff on Sunday), the San Jose Mercury News (Stewart), which is also in the Int'l Herald Tribune so you won't get withdrawal symptoms when traveling abroad. Also there is a free daily column by Mike Lawrence on the internet at Bridgeclues.com.

A cautionary comment about bridge books in general. As you go into the next stage of your game, there aren't many books that can be considered textbooks in the sense that you read them chapter by chapter until you've finished Bridge 102. There are many excellent books that you may pick up and just read a section or two. But you should spend a bit of time looking through the Table of Contents. Then when another topic becomes of interest, you'll know where to find a good treatment. I have some books that I reread every couple of years, and get more benefit each time.

Bidding

Many expert authors will tell you that the choice of systems and conventions is not nearly as important as having a good partnership understanding about what the bids in your chosen system mean. The best approach is to have a small number of frequent partners and work on things together. A partnership can grow stronger beyond the advancement of skills of the individual players.

It is not necessary to have a large number of conventions. My own suggestion is that you never adopt a new convention on the spur of the moment right before a game. Before adopting a convention (which is usually an artificial bid) you and your partner should agree on the answers to the following questions:

- What are the advantages/reasons for using it?
- What do you give up by not having the natural bid that it replaces?
- Is it compatible with the other conventions that you use?
- Do you know the meaning of the responses and following rebids?
- Do you know how/whether the convention changes if the opponents interfere with a double, a counter convention, an overcall, or a preemptive bid?
- Do you know if it is used by a passed hand?
- Does its meaning depend on the vulnerability?
- What bids are forcing, invitational, or simply competitive?

The upshot of this is that you shouldn't strive to adopt all (or many) of the conventions that people tell you about. Having said that, it is still important to gradually become familiar with the more popular conventions so that you will understand your opponents use of them. Don't be afraid to ask for explanations.

A few of the basic references available are:

William Root, "*Common Sense Bidding*." A fairly complete description of Standard American bidding; it is clearly written with many example hands and some discussions of competitive auctions.

Barbara Seagram and Marc Smith, "*25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know*." This gives the best description I have found for many popular conventions. It gives the rationale for using the convention and goes into the subsequent responses and rebids in good detail. It also contains many sample hands and quizzes for each convention. The hands are carefully (perhaps too carefully) chosen to illustrate the merits of the conventions. This book will also enable you to review the conventions that you already use to be sure that you and your partner agree on all of the subsequent responses and rebids as well as the criteria for using the conventions. At this time you should only be interested in a few of the 25 conventions, but this will be a good reference if and when you want to learn about other conventions.

Mike Lawrence, "*Partnership Understandings*." This is a brief handbook that a partnership should go through together. It's mainly a long set of multiple choice and true or false questions. It doesn't give answers but raises the issues on which it's essential for partners to have the same understanding. I went through part of this booklet with one of my steady partners and was embarrassed and enlightened by the results.

William Root and Richard Pavlicek, "*Modern Bridge Conventions*" This does not have as detailed a description of a few common conventions as "25," but it is a reference book for very many conventions. It discusses issues such as forcing/not forcing and how that depends on the set of conventions used.

Barbara Seagram and Marc Smith, "*25 Ways to Compete in the Bidding*." This deals with competitive auctions and helps the reader understand not only how to compete but when to and when not to. It follows the same format as the first "25" book.

Declarer Play

Unlike bidding and defense this is an element of the game that does not depend on partnership understandings or cooperation. You can improve your declarer play through reading, watching others, and practicing independent of your partners' efforts in this aspect of the game. There are also many ways in which you can improve your results totally independent of which card you play; here are just a few examples:

- **Pause long enough before playing from the dummy at trick 1 to plan the whole hand. Many authors write that more hands are lost by a hasty play to trick 1 than at any other trick.**
- Don't let the opponents see that you have a problem. If you start squirming in the middle of a hand, they'll know that you're either in trouble or you have to go to the bathroom (in which case they'll play very slowly).
- When you get a bad trump break, don't say, "Oh my God, you have 5 of them!" The other opponent doesn't know the number, or whether it's a serious problem for you.
- Don't pull a card from your hand until it's your turn to play. Doing so gives away information that your decision is independent of the previous player's card.

In choosing books, you should start with those that cover basic techniques first and a broad spectrum of possible plays second. You probably lose more tricks because you misplay various common card combinations than because you can't execute squeezes and endplays.

One problem with many such books is that by having sections on specific types of play, they are telling the reader the type of play to look for. That is probably a pedagogical necessity. This is one reason to augment your book learning with bridge columns.

Even though some types of plays will be more advanced than you're ready for, this will help you to see when other players make these plays and eventually make them yourself. A few good references are:

William Root, "*How to Play a Bridge Hand*." This covers a wide range of basic techniques, specialized plays, and card combinations that you want to become familiar with. It is written at a very accessible level with comprehensive coverage of several basic, but very important techniques.

Barbara Seagram and David Bird, "*25 Ways to Take More Tricks*." This book covers essential elements of proper technique.

Watson's *Play of the Hand*, while almost 75 years old (updated in 1958!), is still one of the best books ever written on declarer play.

Edwin Kantar, "*Take Your Tricks*." This is another of Kantar's tip books; it contains several hundred valuable short tips all related to declarer play. It's impossible to read

part or all of this book and not improve your play and your thinking about a hand. While you may skip the more advanced sections for now, the sections on card combinations will be immediately useful.

Defense

Many authors will tell you that defense is the hardest part of the game. It requires close cooperation between partners in a condition of incomplete knowledge of the card layout. Many of these authors will also tell you that counting (distribution, high cards, tricks) is one the most important habits to develop. As Eddie Kantar said, "There are three types of bridge players – those who count and those who don't." This is a skill that will come gradually, but it will only come if you start now.

There are several good books on defense. As with books on bidding, it is wise for both members of a partnership to read the same books, especially when it comes to issues of signaling, which card to lead from various combinations, etc.

William Root, "*How to Defend a Bridge Hand*." This is a companion text to Root's book on play. It is also at a basic level and deals with many of the standard techniques and problems.

Barbara Seagram and David Bird, "*25 Ways to be a Better Defender*." This is similar to the "25" book on declarer play and gives detailed discussions and examples of some of the more frequent defensive situations and basic techniques.

Mike Lawrence, "*Opening Leads*" Much of this book is more advanced than you will want at this stage, but it is one of very few books devoted solely to the topic of opening leads.

Edwin Kantar, "*Defensive Tips*." This is similar to Kantar's other "tips" books. Like the others, much will be too advanced, but it's worth seeing some of the more basic sections.