

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [8]

Bridge is a mind game in more ways than one. It is obviously (although this is perhaps not so obvious to everyone) a game of logic and calculation. But it is also a mind game in the sense that human psychology plays a part. For example, how do you feel when you sit down to play against opponents whom you know to be better than you? Confident? I don't think so. Will you make the same bids and plays as you would against much weaker opponents? Again, I doubt it.

Last weekend some of us travelled up from Cardiff to a village hall in mid Wales to play in the Welsh Pairs Championships. Eighteen pairs had entered; fifteen turned up. Some were put off by the threat of bad weather; others had probably forgotten they'd entered (this is bridge in Wales in the twenty-first century; we're all getting older and our minds are going). On the Saturday night it snowed heavily. On waking on Sunday morning we found ourselves in a sea of white. It was a struggle to de-ice and move our cars and the roads were a skating rink. It was obviously too much to expect everyone to make it back to the village hall six miles north of Llandrindod. Accordingly the event was called off and the players made their way gingerly back to Cardiff.

There was only one benefit as far as I was concerned: I got to watch some of the final of the Vanderbilt (a major American bridge event) on Bridge Base Online. In particular I got to watch Geoff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell ('Meckwell') play Eric Greco and Geoff Hampson. Greco and Hampson are one of the world's top pairs. Meckstroth and Rodwell are bridge legends. Some of us would pay good money to watch Meckstroth, a great bear of a man, play the dummy; and if you're defending against him, watch out – he'll have the shirt off your back.

The following hand was played in the second stanza, with the Nickell team, for which Meckwell play, having suffered a crushing loss in the first stanza when our heroes were rested (as is generally the pattern with that team). So Meckstroth and Rodwell had over 50 IMPs to make up.

Then came this hand.

Dealer West; both vul

	♠8	
	♥KQJ4	
	♦1043	
	♣QJ1076	
♠AK1092		♠53
♥106		♥A9872
♦985		♦QJ762
♣K95		♣A
	♠QJ764	
	♥53	
	♦AK	
	♣8432	

Meckstroth and Rodwell sat East/West, with Geoff Meckstroth in the West seat. They bid as follows:

<u>W</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>
1S	P	2H	P
2N*	P	3D	P
3N	P	P	P

**showing a weak no trump, allegedly*

Meckwell are renowned for their aggressive bidding. Bidding - and making - Three No Trump contracts on a combined 23 count is routine for them. In this instance they had reached 3NT with a combined 21 points, and they were playing against one of the best pairs in the world. But, as I said, bridge is a mind game.

Eric Greco, North, began with the Queen of clubs, taken by Meckstroth perforce with his Ace. The defence had got off to the best possible start. All the kibitzers would have been wondering where on earth Meckstroth would go for his tricks. This was how the play went from there.

- Queen of diamonds, taken by South's King.
- Eight of clubs, ducked by Meckstroth and won by North with his 10.
- North now switched to the King of hearts – a mistake (better to press on with clubs), but not fatal as North/South still had plenty of tricks. The King of hearts was taken by Meckstroth with his Ace.
- Spade to the 9, winning the trick when South (correctly) did not split his honours.
- 9 of diamonds, covered by the 10 (a mistake, but Meckstroth would have got this right anyway), the Jack and the Ace. Declarer's three little diamonds were now established. No matter – the defence had their two heart winners to cash, so the game would still go down.
- Club return for South – the final mistake (he needed to play a heart to his partner's two established winners). Meckstroth took his King and now had nine winners in total – three spades, one heart, three diamonds, and two clubs.

The defenders made several mistakes, of varying levels of seriousness, but in summary they fell between two stools in seeking to establish first one suit (clubs) and then another (hearts), switching back and forth between the two and getting the timing all wrong. Meckstroth guessed everything right.

These were two world class defenders and they let through an impossible game, making errors that might embarrass a competent club pair. But they were defending against Geoff Meckstroth and bridge is, as I've said, a mind game.

The Fleisher team, for which Greco and Hampson play, still went on to win the Vanderbilt Trophy. Greco and Hampson are a world class pair.

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