

Is your relationship strong enough to survive a game of bridge?

My mother warned me: 'Don't marry a bridge player - they're impossible to live with'. She was right...

by Roselyn Teukolsky

The genteel world of bridge is being roiled by an alleged cheating scandal.

Two top pairs at the highest levels of championship bridge - Fulvio Fantoni and Claudio Nunes, Italians with the Monaco team, and the Israelis Lotan Fisher and Ron Schwartz - are reportedly under investigation by the European Bridge League and Israel Bridge Federation. (The claims have not been substantiated and Fantoni has said he has “nothing to say” about the allegation and will answer “in the appropriate setting,” while Fisher has said the accusations were prompted by jealousy.)

Whatever the truth, a lot is on the line at the highest levels of the game: fame, huge amounts of money (players receive big bonuses for winning) and those enormous male egos.

When I play tournament bridge, the only thing that's on the line is my marriage. This is not a genteel game. My husband and I are very serious players and in the early years had aspirations of playing on that world stage.

When I was little, my parents played couple's bridge. Every Saturday night they would have four couples playing on two teams with husband-wife partnerships. The shouting would start early and gather steam as the evening wore on. I perceived that this is what my parents did for fun.

Neighbours in our apartment complex once sent in the police to investigate the commotion. I remember everyone's utter astonishment when the embarrassed policeman came into the room — they were, for goodness sake, just having a normal bridge game.

“Don't marry a bridge player,” my mother warned me. “They're impossible to live with.”

However, I had simmered in a bridge stew all my life, so my future course seemed inevitable. I found the perfect husband: good-looking and sexy, and able to play his cards out splendidly. The early years were wonderful, with bridge, hormones and courtship all intertwined. He nibbled my ear at our wedding and whispered bridge bids to get me to smile for the photographer.

In my wedding photos I'm a beaming, merry bride because some of his bids were — then as now — hilarious. He was a perfect husband in other ways too, happy to drive to bridge tournaments in bad weather. And willing to sit in a hotel ballroom across from me for 10 days during the summer.

Errors became personal, infractions designed specifically to injure him. He was never a shouter, deploying instead a quiet, stern Captain's demeanour. He could also communicate

his displeasure with a grimace or the twitch of an eyebrow, or with vicious thoughts in his mind, which I easily read. He, of course, played perfectly.

Twenty-five years later I wrote my book about the highs and lows of couples' bridge, called *How to Play Bridge With Your Spouse ... And Survive!* The chapter headings say it all: Premarital Bridge, Postmarital Bridge, Extramarital Bridge, The Breakup, and Happily Ever After. Somewhere in there were Separate Beds, because at the end of the day, when the event is just a bad memory, you can't shrug it off: you have to go home and sleep in the same bed as the man who played like that. There's no king-size bed big enough.

The great unfathomable mystery of my husband's existence is how it is possible that someone who has turned out to be perfect in life is now not so in bridge. I just cannot fathom what happens in his brain when he sits down to play with me. A lot of the time it turns to mush. This is a brilliant physicist at a world-class university we're talking about.

I'm the first to admit I'm a flamboyant bidder, someone with great creativity and flair at the bridge table, which doesn't always work out well. One day, after a particularly unbridled bid, after we had received a bottom (that is, disastrous) score on the hand, he looked at me mournfully and said: "If you really loved me, you wouldn't bid like that." So now, before I make a bridge bid, not only must I ask myself what my hand is worth, but how much do I love him?

But if marital bridge has its downsides, serious bridge when you have young children is something else entirely. My younger daughter, when she was six years old and watching me pack to travel to a bridge tournament, once said to me: "When I grow up and have children, I won't leave them to go and play bridge."

I paused, then said to her: "Well, darling, that will be your choice. Mummy also had a choice - whether to play bridge, or whether to play bridge and have children." The children are now middle-aged adults. They seem undamaged.

Not long after the book was published, when my husband and I would go to tournaments, women would sometimes sit down at our table, look at the benevolent, nice-looking man sitting across from me, and say, "Is that him?" He was very good-natured about it all, and secretly enjoyed being the famous monster sent up in my guide to marital bridge.

I lived my married life in a world of bridge. When we needed a vacation, we went to a bridge tournament. When we wanted a real vacation, we found a tournament in Hawaii. My children deserved quality time and I taught them bridge. The maths students I taught at the local high school asked where they could use their maths in life and I explained probability with bridge hands. I always thought my husband and I would be champions.

Sadly, though, it's a game that forces you to accept your limitations. The awful day you realise you will never be the world's best player, will never play this game on a world stage, is a bleak day indeed. But time passes, and you continue to enjoy this maddening "hobby" because there's no game quite like it and you're hooked.

It's a bad time right now to be a player in the world's biggest competitions. Our universe is being shaken by the cheating allegations. Meanwhile I continue to play the game passionately - and with my favorite partner.