

Meet Laraine Brokaw

Born in the Bronx, raised in Queens, lived in Manhattan—a true New Yorker. I was a late-in-life only child (can't you tell?) with wonderful parents who sent me to dancing school, Girls Scouts, summer camp. I was lucky. I have too many degrees for one person—a BA and MA in Spanish Language and Literature (I speak Spanish, Italian and French), a Masters in Public School Administration & Supervision and a Law degree. I started my career as a teacher of Spanish in the NYC public schools, and I rose quickly to be the youngest high school principal in NYC history (age 33). I was very successful getting rid of bad teachers (despite the Union), and I turned to my friend and said, "I think I should go to law school—but I'll be 43 when I graduate." She said, "You'll be 43 anyway." Wise friend.



I attended law school at night during the last four years of serving as principal of a large school with 4,500 students. After graduation I clerked for the famous Jack Weinstein and then began a career as a trademark lawyer working for companies such as Kraft, Citibank, Paco Rabanne. I moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, in 1999 (the why is a story for a bottle of wine), and shortly thereafter, I was offered the position of Special Master for all the Asbestos Litigation in New York City. I did that for 13 years until I retired in 2014. I had two great careers—but retirement is the best job I've ever had. I have travelled to 100 countries (all 7 continents) and cannot wait to travel again.

I played duplicate bridge with my first husband when I was in my late 20s. It was husband-wife bridge—he always played the hand, and I was the dummy (which may account for the weakness in my declarer play). We played at local duplicate games, at my parents' condo in Florida, where not a single husband played with his wife, and occasionally at a New York club where every bid was artificial. When we divorced, I pursued my two fabulous careers, and bridge never entered my mind, although I loved it.

Fast forward a few decades. I am married to a great former military guy (we met on Match.com in 2002 and I moved to Tucson) who has never even played poker. He calls clubs "puppy feet." He was not going to be a bridge

partner. When he fell seriously ill in 2015, and we spent more time than usual at home as he recovered, I needed to get out of the house. I knew Barbara Rosenthal from my days as a knitter, and I called her. I needed to learn how to bid the modern way, and so I took Barbara's beginner class. During that class she mentioned Marty Bergen's book, *Points Schmoints*. The name intrigued me, so I bought a copy.

I read it cover to cover, laughing all the way. The explanations were crystal clear. Marty's sense of humor was sensational. I said to myself, "I want this guy for a teacher." So I called him up in the summer of 2017. He answers his phone, "This is Marty."

I flew to Florida for a full week of one-on-one lessons with Marty. I ended up with a spiral notebook that I filled with his concepts and principles. I called that book *Marty Sez*. My *Marty Sez* file boxes now could fill a basketball arena.

After I returned from that first trip to Florida, Marty and I spent a lot of time on the phone going over hands I had played. He identified my many errors and also explained where I went wrong plus why and what I should have done. Then he did the same with the many errors made by my opponents (all of yours LOL). It was eye-opening. I never could have figured out what I was doing wrong without his help. Eventually when I began to have regular partners, I would invite them to join me on the phone with Marty to go over the boards we played. To do this, you need to put your ego aside, be willing to hear about your errors, and be interested in correcting them + LEARNING. Marty can be brutally honest. "That may be one of the worst bids of all time." "When are you going to learn to count points correctly?" "What you did was crazy." "Your bid was VERY, VERY wrong." I had to warn everyone that his language would sometimes be "colorful." Even when we got a good board, we often were criticized. Marty is definitely NOT a resulter!

I finally decided that it was time to play bridge with Marty at a tournament. In August 2018, I flew to Palm Beach Gardens for our first Regional together. I had our very detailed convention card PLUS a notebook to help me remember all that we had discussed. I'll admit I was very nervous. We played in side games 3 times a day for 6 days and 2 sessions of Swiss Teams on the final Sunday. I never felt tired! My adrenaline was pumping. Somehow, we did quite well and often won. The late, great World Champion, Lynn Deas,

and her student were our teammates in the Swiss, and that was a real treat.

When you sit down at a table to play with Marty, the first thing he does is put out a type-written card to show the opponents. It states:

Frequent upgrades and downgrades.

Preempts may be undisciplined.

At trick 1 on defense, I always take time to think.

All very, very true.

As for Marty's preempts at that tournament, I cannot tell you how many times he would preempt at the 3 level, and when the opponents got the contract, the dummy would table the AKQ in Marty's suit! I quickly learned that leading the suit Marty preempted in would frequently NOT cause declarer to be even a little bit nervous. As Larry Cohen has written, "All Marty needs to bid is 13 cards."

Then there were those pesky Bergen Raises that I insisted on playing. During that first tournament, sitting across from Bergen himself, I repeatedly screwed up Bergen Raises. I opened 1S; he bid 3D; so I raised to 5D! Or, he opened 1H, and I had a weak hand with a lot of clubs, so I bid 3C and he alerted and bid 4H. You get the picture. I no longer forget Bergen Raises, but for a while, it was very embarrassing.

As a side note, I wish I had a dollar for every person who has asked me, "Is it true Marty Bergen doesn't play Bergen raises?" NO. It is not true. He believes in Bergen Raises and DONT and every one of the many conventions he invented (including some you have never heard of).

I have never played with Marty for the master points. It has always been to learn. We definitely have had some awful games, but I learn from both good games and bad games.

I decided that playing with Marty at a tournament was an experience that needed to be repeated. We continued to work reviewing hands over the phone, and I would periodically travel to Florida to play with him in a Regional. I got to meet and play against some of the bridge legends (Rodwell, Meckstroth, etc.). One afternoon when there was no side game, we played in the Flight A Open Pairs, and managed to beat both Jeff and Eric (playing with

students) and came in first. As great as it was to win, I will always remember the board where I played in my first redoubled contract and made an overtrick!

The Covid crisis and online bridge does have an upside for me. Marty can play at our club without traveling to Tucson, and I do not have to travel to Florida to play with him. He continues to be my teacher and my friend, and we continue to discuss and revise our agreements. Every time I play with him, I realize how much there is to learn.

I truly look forward to seeing everyone again at the table. In the meantime, send me your stories!!!