

The Essence of Bridge

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to this, the 27th session of Shark's Pointers Online!

Today, I am going to take a little more time than usual in my introduction before getting into my hands. Today's subject is "The Essence of Bridge".

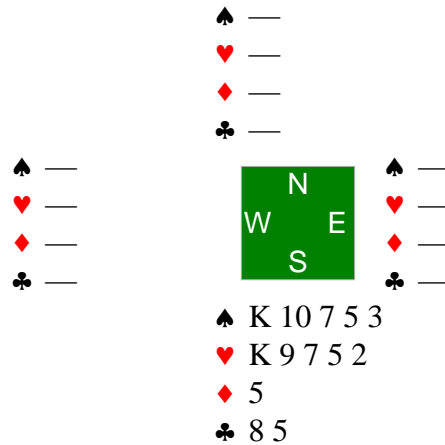
The other day, I came across this quote from a business school text. It suggested that "the essence of strategy is to make controversial choices in order to gain a competitive advantage, but difficult choices often engender opposing views...While things do not usually get this heated, strategy is always controversial; in fact, the very essence of strategy is controversial choices and trade-offs."

Wow! Let me read this again.. "the essence of strategy is to make controversial choices in order to gain a competitive advantage, but difficult choices often engender opposing views...While things do not usually get this heated, strategy is always controversial; in fact, the very essence of strategy is controversial choices and trade-offs."

While this came from a business school document, it sure sounds like it has an awful lot of applicability to our great game of bridge. This got me thinking about my discussions about the essence of bridge going back about 40 years.

I was blessed to have great mentors when I started out on my bridge journey. One in particular was the late, great Charlie Coon who passed away in January, 2003 at the age of 71. Charlie had finished 2nd in World Championships in 1962 and 1990, and won 6 major NABC+ events including the Blue Ribbon Pairs and the Vanderbilt Teams. It was my privilege to play with Charlie on a regular basis over the last 25 years or so of his life, and while we never won a major event together, we did finish high frequently in NABC+ events and won a lot of regionals together. On 3 separate occasions, we represented New England in the North American Pairs national finals. Charlie went to Phillips Andover and Harvard. I went to MIT, which he frequently disparagingly referred to as "the trade school". As much as he was schooled in the liberal arts, and I in science, he came up with some very technical conventional agreements. For example, whereas most played the partnership auction 1D-1H-1S-2C-2N-3S as the way to show a forcing hand with 4 spades, and 1D-1H-1S-3S as being invitational, Charlie came up with an agreement he referred to "Heisenberg". We played the latter as being forcing, and the fourth suit bid of 2C as suggesting uncertainty thus denying 4S.

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Opening Lead 9 of ♠

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 ♣	1 ♦	1 ♠
Pass	4 ♦	Dbf	Pass
Pass	4 ♥	Pass	5 ♥
Pass	6 ♠	All pass	

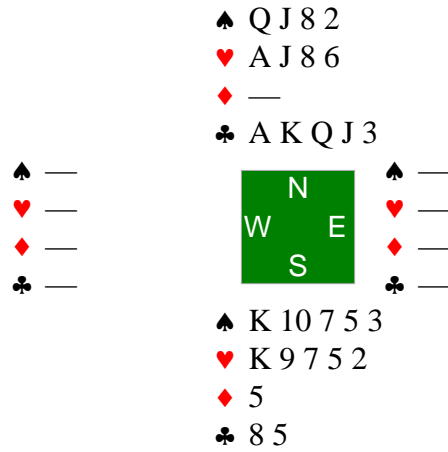
6 ♠ by South

One day, I asked Charlie what was the essence of bridge. What was the most important thing I would have to master if I wanted to become a really great bridge player like Charlie. He replied in one word, "Topology!". Well, not having the benefit of a background from Andover and Harvard, I had to go to the dictionary and I found out that "Topology is the study of those properties of geometric forms that remain invariant under certain transformations, such as bending or stretching..." So, what the heck does this have to do with bridge. Many of the lessons I have given such as "Aces and Spaces" and "What's It All About, Alfie" hint at some of factors that go into an appreciation of what Charlie suggested was the essence of bridge. Simply stated, its all about the shape!"

Another one of my great partners, friends and mentors is the world champion Patrick McDevitt. We played a session the other night in which there were 2 hands that exemplified the importance of "topology" as it may pertain to our great game of bridge.

Above is a shapely 6 count that I held. The bidding was as shown. Note my pass of the double allowed Pat to bid 5H. When Pat did bid 4H, remembering Charlie's admonition about "Topology", I took a shot and bid 5H. I held my breath as Pat bid 6S, but was delighted when I got a trump lead and I saw dummy.

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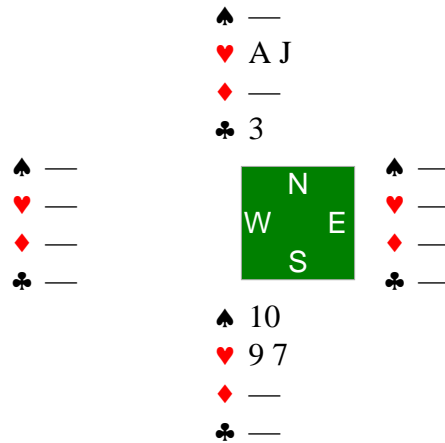
Opening Lead 9 of ♠

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 ♣	1 ♦	1 ♠
Pass	4 ♦	Dbl	Pass
Pass	4 ♥	Pass	5 ♥
Pass	6 ♠	All pass	

6 ♠ by South

East won the A of ♠ and continued with the A of ♦. Here was another one of those "Ice Cold Contracts", I spoke to you a couple weeks ago. 4 spades in hand, 1 ruff in dummy, 5 clubs, 2 hearts!. So, I ruffed the diamond in dummy and drew two more rounds of trumps as East followed to 3 rounds. Now I played the AK of clubs as East showed out! Uh Oh. Back to 11 tricks!. The rest of the play was easy. I continued with the Q and J of clubs, then played a heart to my K and played off the rest of my trumps. This was the ending as I played my last trump...

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Opening Lead 9 of ♠

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 ♣	1 ♦	1 ♠
Pass	4 ♦	Dbl	Pass
Pass	4 ♥	Pass	5 ♥
Pass	6 ♠	All pass	

6 ♠ by South

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West had to pitch a heart, so I pitched a club. When I now played a heart and West followed, it was obvious to rise with the Ace and score up the slam. Here was the complete deal...

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North Deals
N-S Vul

♠ 9	♠ Q J 8 2	♠ A 6 4
♥ 10 3	♥ A J 8 6	♥ Q 4
♦ Q 10 8 6 3	♦ —	♦ A K J 9 7 4 2
♣ 9 7 6 4 2	♣ A K Q J 3	♣ 10
	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; margin: 0 5px;"> N W E S </div>	
	♠ K 10 7 5 3	
	♥ K 9 7 5 2	
	♦ 5	
	♣ 8 5	

Opening Lead 9 of ♠

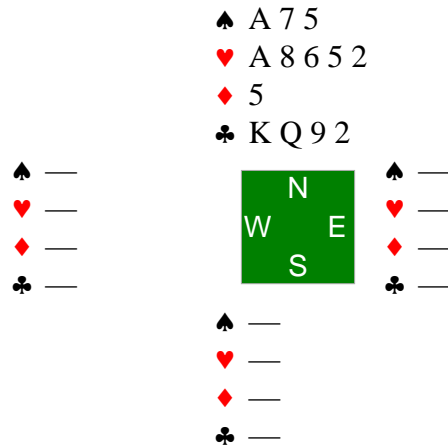
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 ♣	1 ♦	1 ♠
Pass	4 ♦	Dbl	Pass
Pass	4 ♥	Pass	5 ♥
Pass	6 ♠	All pass	

6 ♠ by South

Before jumping off from this hand, note how EW do in 7D. They lose only 2 hearts and 1 club. Down 3 doubled white is 500 - less than the value of a NS game. ! It's tough for E to dive with his hand - especially with a silent partner, but West just cannot sit on his huge fit with 5 trumps and a singleton spade at favorable vulnerability. Knowing how to handle hands like this really is at the essence of bridge mastery.

Later in the session, another very interesting and shapely hand occurred..

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<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		1 ♦	Pass
1 ♥	Pass	1 ♠	2 ♣
Pass	3 ♦	Pass	4 ♣
Pass	Pass	4 ♦	Pass
Pass	4 ♥	Pass	5 ♣
All pass			

5 ♣ by South

I held the North hand. My 3D bid was a splinter in support of my partner's belated 2 club bid. When partner signed off in 4C, I passed as I knew my partner wasn't strong enough to overcall immediately. But when opps continued with 4D and this was passed around to me, I tried 4H. There was a chance that partner had 3 good or any 4 hearts, so I offered this as a choice of contracts. Pat wisely retreated to 5C and the opening lead was the Q of diamonds.

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East Deals
N-S Vul

♠ 9 8 3	♠ A 7 5	♠ K J 6 4
♥ K J 10 4	♥ A 8 6 5 2	♥ 9 7
♦ Q J 9 7 6 2	♦ 5	♦ A K 8 3
♣ —	♣ K Q 9 2	♣ J 8 7
	<div style="display: inline-block; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; border: 1px solid black;"> N W E S </div>	
	♠ Q 10 2	
	♥ Q 3	
	♦ 10 4	
	♣ A 10 6 5 4 3	

Opening Lead Q of ♦

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		1 ♦	Pass
1 ♥	Pass	1 ♠	2 ♣
Pass	3 ♦	Pass	4 ♣
Pass	Pass	4 ♦	Pass
Pass	4 ♥	Pass	5 ♣
All pass			

5 ♣ by South

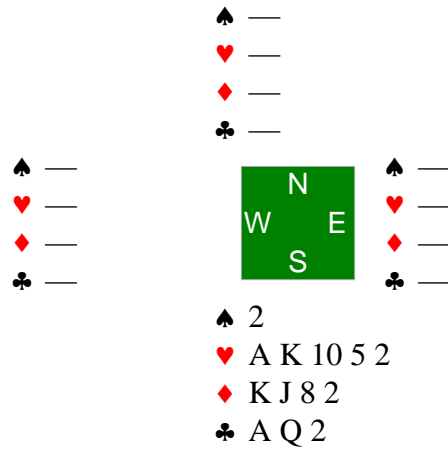
The Q of diamonds held the first trick and West shifted to the 9 of spades. Pat ducked, as East won the Q and continued a spade. Pat won and eventually lost a heart to go down one. Here was the complete deal...

Before jumping off this hand. Let's take a look at the EW hands. What the heck is West doing?

You remember my chapter on "I've Got A Secret"? Well, West has a couple of secrets. 6 card trump support and a void in the opponents's suit. A "sacrifice" in 5D is pretty clear. The reason I put "sacrifice" in quotes, because what do you think South will lead on this auction? That's right, the Q of hearts! Now a successful spade guess - which is not unlikely on this auction- and East can pitch a 2 spades on West's hearts - and EW will actually lose only a spade and a heart!

OK, one more variation on this theme...

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<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 ♥
1 ♠	4 ♥	4 ♠	5 ♥
Pass	Pass	5 ♠	?

After you open the bidding, you have a spirited auction. East bids 5S, what is your bid?

Before you answer, how many tricks do you think you have on defense, and how many tricks do you expect to make in a heart contract? To me, it looks like we'll lose 3 of 4 tricks, and we are likely to score 2 or 3 tricks, maybe 4 on a very lucky day. So, double seems clear, right?

Wrong! You have no guarantee you will be scoring any heart tricks and the only sure trick you have is the Ace of clubs. You have no idea if opps are sacrificing or bidding to make. Pass the decision around to partner. Chances are, he'll know what to do.

Here was the complete deal...

The Essence of Bridge

South Deals

E-W Vul

♠ A J 6 4 3	♠ 8	♠ K Q 10 9 7 5									
♥ Q 7	♥ J 9 8 4 3	♥ 6									
♦ A Q	♦ 7 6	♦ 10 9 5 4 3									
♣ K 10 5 3	♣ J 9 7 6 4	♣ 8									
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	N										
W		E									
	S										
♠ 2											
♥ A K 10 5 2											
♦ K J 8 2											
♣ A Q 2											

Opening lead 3 of ♥

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 ♥
1 ♠	4 ♥	4 ♠	5 ♥
Pass	Pass	5 ♠	Dbl
All pass			

5 ♠× by West

As you can see, after a successful diamond finesse, EW lost only 1 ♥, and 1 ♣ - scoring up +850.

More significantly, NS have an excellent save in 6Hx - losing only 1 club, 1 spade, and 2 diamonds. (-300).

Alphonse "Sonny" Moyses was the editor of *The Bridge World* from 1955-1966. To this day, playing in a 4-3 trump fit is known as playing in a "Moysian".

Knowing now that Topology is the Essence of Bridge, I hope you will start thinking about what to bid a little bid differently on these very shapely and distributional hands. Moving forward, I should expect you won't be looking to play in a "Moysian", but you may want to start looking to play in a "Mobian"!

See you next week!