

The Inner Game of Bridge

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D25 Senior Regional & Cape Cod Open Sectional

May 2, 2014

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I. Welcome and Introduction

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself...” - Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for participating in today’s talk entitled “The Inner Game of Bridge”. My name is Mark Aquino. As you may already know, I’m the President of the New England Bridge Conference and many of you may also recognize me as the author of the “Shark’s Pointers” articles that have appeared in EMBA’s Quick Trick over the past 8 years.

I want to stress that today’s talk is about you, not me. But to reinforce my points, and hopefully to make this talk a little more fun, I am going to share with you some true anecdotes about my experiences at the table over the years.

In the next 25 minutes I am going to touch upon a topic that I think hits at the very essence of peak performance at the bridge table. Before we begin, I want to throw out a question to you ...Does anyone know what the biggest single factor that stops social rubber bridge players from playing duplicate in our clubs is? How about club players not going to sectionals? Members of our district not playing in regionals or national tournaments?” You got it...it’s the FEAR FACTOR. No matter what your present skill level is, I promise that in the next 30 minutes you will pick up a couple or tried and true techniques on how to improve your level of self-confidence and help alleviate your fears. I don’t guarantee you will instantaneously become a consistent winner at bridge. I do promise you, however, that if you follow these techniques, your enjoyment of the game will instantaneously improve and your results will indeed steadily improve over time – regardless of whether you may currently be a novice or an experienced and accomplished player.

How many of you have heard of the Milton Work point count? You may recall that he was the first to assign 4 points to an Ace, 3 to a King, 2 to a Queen and 1 to a Jack. Today we are going to use the numbers 4-3-2-1 to help you remember some of today’s key lesson points.

So let's get started. It's great being here in Hyannis today – home of the famous “4C's” – The Cape Cod Community College. Today we're going to be discussing the 4 C's of Winning Bridge.

At the end of this talk, everyone should also be able to better understand at least 3 keys to improving one's self-confidence.

You'll also learn at least 2 techniques on how to improve not only your own concentration at the table, but also ways to help your partner improve his/hers, and even a few tricks on how to better assist the opponents in helping you to improve your results.

Finally, we are going to learn about the single most #1 important convention – and I'll give you a hint, it's not Blackwood, and it even isn't Stayman – but it's close.

II. The 4 C's of Winning Bridge

1) Competence

Hopefully, you are all here to learn how to improve your Competence- the 1st of the 4C's we'll discuss today. Competence won't come overnite, but you can begin to improve your skills immediately, and this along with the other 3 C's go hand in hand. Bridge is truly a game of skill. It is extremely complex and there are layers upon layers of complexity. What we bridge players love about the game is that there are 635,013,559,600 different hands a player can receive. A hand only takes a few minutes to play, and every hand is different. We never get bored. The one thing that is common amongst all bridge players is we all make mistakes. It is truly impossible to perfect. Show me a player who tells you he never makes a mistake, and I will show you a liar. Perhaps that is why in an ACBL Bulletin interview a few years ago, world class million dollar stakes poker champ and Flight B bridge enthusiast, Barry Greenstein, was quoted as saying that “the game of bridge is bigger than any one person”. What we are going to be exploring is ways to help each and every one of you get the most out of your present ability, and ways to help increase your skill level – immediately.

2) Coaching

Can I get a quick show by hands of those of you who are over 60 years of age? (90+% will probably raise their hands). OK, put your hands down. A quick show of hands of those who expect to be able to be playing bridge for the next 45 years (now less than 10% of the hands will probably be raised).

I have been playing regularly for more than 45 years and I can tell you it is a marvelous, and amazingly enjoyable game, but it also has multiple layers of complexity. I won't lie to you that I have some magic elixir that is going to keep everyone here alive for the next 45 years. The good news is that there is a way to fast forward your progress and development, minimize your learning curve and faster than you would believe possible start improving your results.

The key to speeding up your individual learning curve and enhancing your competence is the second C – Coaching.

There's an old saying that if you don't know where you are going, you are going to have a real tough time finding out how to get there. You also may have heard the expression that you need to know what you do not know. The same thing applies to the game of bridge. There are many layers of complexity and learnings in every bridge hand. I can't stress enough the importance of having a partner who is more knowledgeable and experienced than you and is willing to help coach and mentor you. If you can get someone to do this for free, all the better, but to ensure some level of commitment, you might want to consider hiring a personal trainer at bridge to help you accelerate your progress.

I myself was blessed to have had some great coaches and mentors from my earliest days playing bridge. For more than 25 years, I was partnered with the late, great Charlie Coon, a top internationalist, and we enjoyed tremendous success across New England and across the USA. Seated in the audience, I am thrilled to see my very first coach – John Hrones. John, would you stand up please? Let me tell you that if you have a good coach, you can become a winner faster than you might ever dream possible. John is an excellent case in

point. I started playing bridge in the dorm during my sophomore year at MIT. John was a few years older. He had lived in the same dorm but had already graduated from MIT and received his Master's from Michigan. He was also a very established player when we first met and became good friends. Back in Boston to find a job during the summer of 1970, John agreed to play with me in the opening event of the Boston Summer Nationals that were being played at the Sheraton. I had less than a masterpoint, and John was already a Life Master. In those days, there were no separate flights or brackets. Guppies like me swam in the same pool with the sharks. This event was enormous. 1,036 pairs! John and I had a 232 on a 156 average – nearly 75% and came in 1st overall. So the lesson is, with a good Coach, you can win – and start winning right away!

OLYMPIAD FUND PRS. (1,036 prs.)	
1. John Hrones Jr., Shaker Heights, Ohio - Mark Aquino, Cambridge, Mass.	232
2. Jack LaNoue, New Orleans - Col. William F. Christian, Metairie, La.	227
3. Frank Burstein, Springfield, N.J. - Judy Carroll, Livingston, N.J.	222½
4. Louis Reich, Cambridge, Mass. - Carol Greenhut, Hartford, Conn.	219½
5. Paul Gardner, Bausman, Pa. - Alex Danilenko, Philadelphia	212½



3) Concentration

The 3rd C we are going to talk about today is Concentration.

In his excellent book entitled, “The Art of Mental Training- A Guide to Performance Excellence”, a former Naval Aviator, black belt Brazilian judo expert, and Federal Agent named DC Gonzalez states that “whatever is going on inside your head has everything to do with how well you end up performing.” He suggests it is critical to imagine being successful, focused and alert.

If your mind is cluttered with a lot of distractions, you just will not be able to concentrate, and the frequency and severity of your mistakes will reflect this. If you're worrying about the mistake you made on the last hand, you probably will make another mistake on this hand, because your mind just isn't refreshed.

Without question, one is most likely to make a huge blunder on the first hand of a session – and the last. And do you know at which trick, most mistakes are most commonly made?.....That's correct! – At Trick 1.

Do you know when the 2nd most frequent mistakes occur? - At Trick 12. Try to keep focused thruout the hand! Often it is just a matter of sticking with the plan you took the time to establish at Trick 1!

If you want to start improving your competency, and your overall results, get in the habit of clearing your thinking before you sit down to play the first hand of a session, and if you just had a disaster, wipe that off your mind before you start the next hand. Take another deep breath before you make an important decision in the end game. And when you are about to start the last round, take a short break, and make a special effort to take a few extra seconds to think just about the cards in front of you, and force yourself to not think about your overall score.

4) Confidence

We just talked about Competence, Coaching, and Concentration, now we are going to talk about one of the most important keys to winning bridge – Confidence.

How many of you have seen a player go into the tank, obviously nervous and afraid, not knowing what to bid or play? How does this impact your confidence if you are that person's partner? What if you are the player's opponent?

If you bid and play with confidence, it has a very unsettling effect on your opponents. If you are tense and tentative, it brings out their killer instincts. I have long believed that there is a force field that exists at the bridge table. There is an invisible force between you and your partner and this is constantly at war with the force that exists between your opponents. There is also another force field of sorts and that is the one that exists within one's one mind. There are techniques to help win the various battles that are going on and these are what we are going to explore. If you exude confidence, it shatters your opponents' confidence and if you are nervous and afraid it heightens their alertness and substantially increases their odds of doing well against you.

I'm not going to lie to you. A lot of time you just have to pretend to be confident, as your knees are knocking, and you are truly petrified. Let me share a story about a situation I confronted several years ago, and a trick I used to help me bolster my self-confidence. I was playing in a National tournament

and noticed that at the next table I was going to play against a well-known world champion woman player from New York. She didn't know me at the time. I sat down at the table, greeted my opponents warmly and after a brief pause, I turned to the world champion and said, "excuse me ma'am, could you hold your cards back please?" My poise and self-confidence had a very unsettling effect on her. Going thru her mind had to be thoughts like, "doesn't this guy know how great a player I am?", "why isn't he cowering like most of my opponents?", "have I really been showing my cards?", "Could this be why I got a bad result on board 3?" All of these things had to have entered her mind, as she proceeded to make 2 big blunders and we scored two tops on that round.

Can anyone share tricks he/she may have used to bolster self-confidence?

III. The 3 keys to Improved Self Confidence

So how do we overcome the lack of confidence?

In his book that was first published in 1974 entitled, "The Inner Game of Tennis-The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance", Tim Gallwey points out 3 keys to improving self-confidence:

"1) Learn how to get the clearest picture of the desired result.

To get a clear picture of the desired result, one must always be aware of the scoring. Know if +100 is good enough or if you need to get +200 to succeed. You must listen to the bidding, recognize if the opponents are too high or if you are playing if you are in a contract that few people will be in. You can determine if there is a particular theme to this hand. This all takes practice, but thinking about these things will make a big difference in your results.

2) Learn how to trust yourself to perform at your best and learn from both success and failure. We'll talk a little more about this later, and finally...

3) Learn how to see 'non-judgmentally' – that is, to see what is happening rather than merely noticing how well or badly it is happening. This overcomes

‘trying too hard’. All of these skills are subsidiary to the master skill, without which nothing of value is achieved – the art of relaxed concentration.”

IV. 2 Ways to Improve Concentration

1) One thing that might help your concentration is to go back to a time in your life when you were extremely successful – or remember a great bridge result you enjoyed. Stop and take a few seconds to remember that feeling. When you start having negative feelings about yourself, about your partner, about your chances of winning, stop them immediately. Replace them with positive thoughts and feelings. Force yourself to remember why you enjoy the game, why you enjoy your partner, and remember the feeling of joy and confidence when you were “in the zone” or when you did something great at or away from the table. All these things will help clear your mind and put you in a state of relaxed concentration.

2) How many people are familiar with meditation techniques?

The second thing that I do is to take a deep cleansing breath before the first round and the last round – and after a disaster. This really helps to maintain concentration and focus and work thru the many disasters that are sure to come during a session of bridge.

V. The #1 Most Important Convention

Based upon what I have taught you so far, would you think I like to play a lot of conventions or as few as possible? If you guessed as few as possible, you’re right! As your confidence, competence, and concentration improves, you can and should work with your coach to improve your knowledge and awareness of

conventions but for now it is most important to work on mastering just one convention.

It's not The Stayman Convention, it's what I call "The Stamina Convention."

Even the best and the brightest make more mistakes when they are physically exhausted. In order to improve our results immediately, the best thing we can do is to improve our stamina. People often ask me how I prepare for a big event. What I try to do is get a lot of sleep and a lot of exercise. Diet is extremely important as well. Lots of caffeine and lots of carbs are not only not healthy for you, but they also adversely affect your ability to maintain sustained peak performance. While at a tournament, I try to work out at the gym or go for a swim each and every day. What do you do to improve your stamina?

VI. The Art of Mental Training

How many people have heard the expression that "The difference between success and failure is this much" ? (place hands apart in front of face then move them back towards your head) ...the distance between one's ears.

Self-confidence is the breeding ground for competence. They go hand in hand.

Staying on an even keel and not getting too upset at yourself for your mistakes, or too upset at your partner for his/her mistakes is incredibly important for maximizing your endurance and stamina, and this will result in reduced overall mistakes, as well as maximum enjoyment for you, your partners, and for your opponents as well.

Learning how to see "non-judgmentally" is not only invaluable for your own relaxed concentration, but it a very important partnership skill. Bridge is a partnership game and getting the most out of one's partner is hugely important. If you can acquire the ability to look at an obvious error that your partner makes and try to understand what may have contributed to it, rather than bring it up at the table or express emotion, you will succeed enormously. We all have blind spots. We all fall asleep at the table. A lot of times, errors are induced by dwelling on earlier mistakes. If we don't want partner to keep making mistakes,

don't even mention the mistake he/she just made. If there is a bidding misunderstanding, discuss it – privately, if at all possible – and move on.

One of the tricks I use to try to maximize my partner's concentration and focus when I'm putting down the dummy is to carefully place last the suit that has been led. This gives partner a few extra seconds to think about the entire hand, count his winners and losers, consider the logical distributions and locations of high cards, etc. before playing to trick one, which, as you know is where most mistakes are made.

I don't have any real proof that the few extra seconds will make a big difference, but I did perform a little experiment just last week playing with a top-notch Flight A declarer. We were in 3NT, the opening lead was the 2 of hearts (4th best), and just for kicks, I decided to see what would happen if I violated my own rule, and so I put down my hearts first. Here was the full deal:

		North	
Dlr: N		♠ Q 3	
Vul: None		♥ K 6	
		♦ A 9 6 5 2	
West		♣ 10 8 7 4	East
♠ K J 10 8			♠ 6 5 4
♥ A 7 5 2			♥ Q 9 8 4
♦ 10 8 7			♦ K 4 3
♣ 6 5			♣ Q 3 2
		♠ A 9 7 2	
		♥ J 10 3	
		♦ Q J	
		♣ A K J 9	

As you can see, entries are critical on this hand, and it is important to be able to win the first trick in dummy so as to be able to finesse a club. With clubs 3-2 and the queen onside, dummy's 10 of clubs will eventually provide an entry to dummy's diamonds. So the play should be, Heart K, 4 of clubs to J. Club A, and diamond Q. If this loses to the K, and opps run 3 heart tricks ending in the North hand and return a spade, declarer will rise Ace, unblock the diamond J, and cash two clubs ending in dummy so as to be able to score dummy's diamond A and 9 to bring your total to nine tricks – 3 diamonds, 4 clubs, 1 heart, and 1 spade.

My partner went down! He had a rare lapse and played low at trick 1 from the dummy! This is the way to guarantee 1 trick holding Kx opposite Jxx, but with J10x, we will always score 1 trick whether the K wins or not. The importance of needing the entry – and playing a low club, not the 10 – for guaranteeing a 2nd entry escaped him. He has won several NABC championships, by the way, and is a many time Grand Life Master. It just goes to show, that even the great ones can benefit with a few extra seconds to think!

There are lots of things we can do to improve not only our own performance but that of our partners as well. Something that a lot of players miss is that we can also impact on our opponents' performance – both positively and negatively.

In matchpoint events, your score is adversely affected when your opponents leave your table and mess up the next round. Leave them feeling happy and confident and improve your chances of them scoring well against their next opponents– that will help your score. If you have a good round or just had a great result, keep quiet. Act as if you didn't even notice, and don't discuss it. Certainly don't gloat. Being nice to your opponents when they come to the table – and especially as they are leaving - not only makes the game more enjoyable for all, it also an important strategy for improving your results.

VII. Learning from Mistakes

Looking at the game one hand at a time is not easy to do, but it is a fundamental key to success. Oftentimes our greatest lessons come from our mistakes. Here's a suit combination that has been haunting me since 1981. I played in an event called the President's Pairs at the Boston NABC, and I had a suit combination of Kxx in my hand opposite AQ109xx in the dummy. I had plenty of entries to both hands and needed 6 tricks in this suit to score up 6NT, for a fine result. I plunked down the K and to my chagrin my LHO showed out! Playing low to the AQ at the first trick guarantees 6 tricks because if RHO shows out, I can return to the K and then finesse the 10, and if as occurred here, LHO shows out, I can run the 10, finessing, then cross to the K and get back to the long suit thru a side entry. That hand occurred 33 years ago! I remember it as if it were yesterday and this suit combination has re-occurred a number of times since then. (Good news is that I made that mistake back then as I have never made that mistake again!)

VIII. The Success Trap

Success can be just as distracting and disruptive to one's thinking as failure. Always try to remain on an even keel and your judgment – and your results – will improve. I'll give you a personal example from nearly 10 years ago- on how success adversely affected judgment and not understanding objective on the very last hand actually cost my partner and me a very prestigious national championship.

In the fall of 2004, my partner and I went all the way from 104th place after the first of two days in the Life Masters Pairs at the NABC in Orlando to finish 2nd overall. Our final session – nearly 69% across the field was amazing. Boy, were we in “the zone”. If I could describe the ideal state of mind for winning bridge, that would be it. Down the stretch in the 2nd Final session, as we opened each hand, we were asking ourselves, “how are we going to get a top on this one?” We weren't wondering about whether we would play well, or were worrying

that the world class opponents we were facing would do something brilliant against us. We were totally relaxed, incredibly confident, and convinced that something would happen that would yield us a great result. If we had been able to maintain our concentration to the very end, we would have actually won the event, but as happens all too often, we lost our focus on the very last hand. That's all it took to lose the event! We were +130 in 4D on a hand in which we only had about 20 high card points, but the field was +140 in spades or hearts. We disdained a finesse that happened to win. What happened? Were we just a bit unlucky, because had the finesse lost, the field would have been +110 to our +130? This might have occurred it is true, but the truth is we lost because we failed to understand the desired result on that hand, and didn't even try the finesse. I believe that the truth is that we had been doing so great that all we wanted was to ensure a sure plus on the very last hand. A plus wasn't the objective on this deal, however. +130 score was actually a terrible result, whereas +150 would have earned for us the win!

2nd overall in a major unrestricted national event is truly a great accomplishment, but our great success actually contributed to our failing to achieve our main goal – which was, of course, to win the event.

IX. Summary

To summarize, your results and your partners' results will improve immediately if you begin to discipline yourself to focus on getting a clear picture of your objectives, to trust yourself to perform at your best, to do the things that will help improve this performance, like getting lots of rest, exercise and eating properly, to think non-judgmentally and above all to not try too hard.

Remember the 4-3-2-1 tips. Enjoy the game, enjoy the process, and watch your confidence and competence grow by leaps and bounds!

Hope you've enjoyed this talk and hope you'll start employing some of the techniques suggested. For more information, I strongly suggest your reading the two fine books cited here- Tim Gallwey's "The Inner Game of Tennis- The Classic

**Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance”, and “The Art of Mental Training-
A Guide to Performance Excellence” by DC Gonzalez.**

Thank you!