

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen!


Today, I want to go down a different road than previous sessions. I think it is time to regroup. As I think back on some of my great sessions and some of my horrendous sessions there is one central truth. When I have done poorly, I was not "at the table", when I did great, I was completely "at the table". That's what I want to talk to you about today - being "at the table" and what that means.

6 years ago this month, when I was launching an expert panel at regionals in my role at that time as New England's District President, I gave the inaugural presentation at the Senior Regional in Hyannis. I entitled my talk, "The Inner Game of Bridge" - after Tim Galwey's bestselling books on "The Inner Game of Tennis", "The Inner Game of Golf", etc. Since Hyannis is the home of the Cape Cod Community College, known locally as "The 4 C's", I used that as a tie in to what I called "The 4 C's" of accelerated improvement at the game of bridge - Coaching, Concentration, Confidence, and Competence. These 4C's are very much interrelated and iterative. I give many examples in my talk that suggest how following some basic guidelines can help improve your results quickly and dramatically - regardless of your present skill level. I have regularly shared my notes from that presentation with my students and have sent them to some of you individually. I'm going to ask Tim Hill to publish them with my notes from today's talk so you may be able to have them as a handy reference. Today, I am going to touch upon some of the topics I raised in the 2014 talk.

The first thing I point out is the all important "Fear Factor". I find this to be the most pervasive and insidious problem facing our game today. Players are afraid to play up. Back in the day when we had face to face competition, social players would be afraid to play in club duplicates, club players would be afraid to play in sectionals, sectional players would be afraid to play in regionals, and regional players would be afraid to play at the Nationals. The ACBL came up with a clever way to help alleviate fears by introducing novice games, 199er and various stratifications of players - Flight A, B,C etc. When I started playing 50+ years ago, there were no strats. All the guppies were thrown in with the sharks, and it was sink or swim, or more aptly, "eat or be eaten". A great many of us are still playing today, so I would say that this method does have it's advantages. For sure, it helped us alleviate our fears.

What's It All About Alfie?

South Deals
E-W Vul

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

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 N
Pass	3 N	All pass	

3 N by South

So today, I am going to revisit some of the timeless topics I raised in my 2014 talk in Hyannis. Certainly, your mere presence at these weekly Shark's Pointers Online discussions is a testament to your eagerness to receive coaching. I hope the extra competence you may have been gaining will result in enhanced confidence. I talk about a few techniques aimed at enhancing your concentration in "The Inner Game of Bridge". I'll show a few examples of common situations in which you're being "at the table" will spell the difference between success and failure. I don't think any of these examples are beyond your current level of expertise. I do think that the best of us will doze off every once in a while, so this might help.

I'm calling today's discussion, "What's It All About, Alfie?". The key on any of these hands is to be alert to realizing what is going on in a given hand, and what, if any are the things that we can do to control or help resolve any problems we might see. Let's take a look at one of the most common situations as depicted in today's hand.

Your declarer in 3 NT at matchpoints and the opening lead is the 10 of spades. What's your plan?

If you covered the spade and took advantage of the "free finesse", East will duck, and hold up one round of diamonds before winning the ace. Now, as much as you might huff and you puff, you'll never see the dummy, and down you go in a cold contract. If you play low from dummy and win your ace, now after knocking out the Ace of diamonds, you will eventually get back to dummy with the QJ of spades to run your diamonds and make the game. This is easy - unless you are not "at the table"

What's It All About, Alfie?

South Deals
None Vul

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

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1 N
Pass	3 N	All pass	

3 NS by South

In my talk about the Inner Game of Bridge, I suggested that the best aid to concentration is getting a lot of rest. I suggest that the most important convention isn't Blackwood or Stayman - it's stamina! We all screw up when we are tired.

Just yesterday, this hand came up in a friendly team game online. I opened a 14-16 point 1 NT, and partner raised to 3 NT. The opening lead was the 10 of diamonds, I won in dummy and saw that while there was a risk I could go down, I needed to play on clubs, so I won the lead in dummy and played the 9 of clubs to my K, which held the trick. Now I returned my other diamond to dummy - and didn't pay attention as East failed to follow! So, now I ran ALL my diamonds - including the 5 which lost to West and down I went in a cold one. I was sound asleep. Later in the same session, this hand came up....

What's It All About Alfie?

South Deals
None Vul

♠ 10	♠ 9 6 3	♠ J 8 7 4 2									
♥ Q 6	♥ K 9 5	♥ J 8 7									
♦ A 10 7 6 5 4 3	♦ K J	♦ 8 2									
♣ Q 10 4	♣ A J 9 8 3	♣ K 5 2									
<table style="border: 2px solid green; background-color: green; color: white; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto; text-align: center; line-height: 60px;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>				N		W		E		S	
	N										
W		E									
	S										
	♠ A K Q 5										
	♥ A 10 4 3 2										
	♦ Q 9										
	♣ 7 6										

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

4 ♥ by South

On this hand, I got the lead of the 10 of spades. Normally, when one preempts, a lead will be a singleton. I won the Ace in hand, and played a low heart to dummy's King and then made a "safety play" by covering the 8 with my 10 losing to West's Q. Now after Ace and a diamond, I had to guess what to do. Looking at all four hands, it's obvious I should have left the trump out and played on spades, ruffing my small spade in dummy. But I was sleepy and went down!

So, a very important aspect of being "at the table" is to get enough rest and exercise.

Let's look at a couple of other hands...

What's It All About Alfie?

East Deals
None Vul

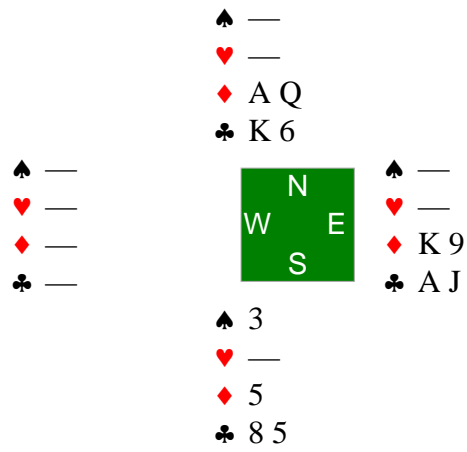
	♠ Q J 5										
	♥ 10										
	♦ A Q 10 8 6										
	♣ K 9 6 2										
♠ 9 6 4	<table style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto; text-align: center; color: white;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 8 2
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ 6 5 2		♥ A Q 9 8 7									
♦ 4 2		♦ K J 9 7									
♣ Q 10 7 4 3		♣ A J									
	♠ A K 10 7 3										
	♥ K J 4 3										
	♦ 5 3										
	♣ 8 5										
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>								
		1 ♥	1 ♠								
Pass	2 ♥	Pass	4 ♠								
All pass											
			4 ♠ by South								

One of the most obvious defensive situations is leading trumps to cut down declarer's ability to score extra tricks by ruffing in the short hand. On this hand, I was declarer again, but this time I think it's safe to say I truly was "at the table".

This hand looks easy for the defenders. After West leads the 2 of hearts (3rd/5th best), East wins the Ace and seeing his good diamonds behind dummy's, he makes the obvious shift of the 8 of spades. What will happen in practice is that declarer will win in hand and take a diamond finesse, when that loses and East returns his other trump, South will probably win in hand, ruff a heart and play Ace and a diamond, ruffing high. When West shows out, South will draw the last trump and play a club towards the K. This will lose, and East will eventually lose another club and another heart - down 2.

Well, listening to the bidding would suggest that the Ace of clubs is probably with the opening bidder, so this line of play is probably not going to succeed. So, after winning the trump in hand, I ruffed a heart in dummy, drew two more rounds of trumps and no played a diamond to the 10. I was hoping it might force the K, but as it was East won the Jack and was endplayed in all 3 suits! He made the best play of a heart, but I guessed right and finessed the J. Now, following the "A" in "S-H-A-R-K" squeeze technique, I played ALL my winners - my K of hearts, and my last two trumps. This was the position as I played my last trump:

What's it All About, Alfie?

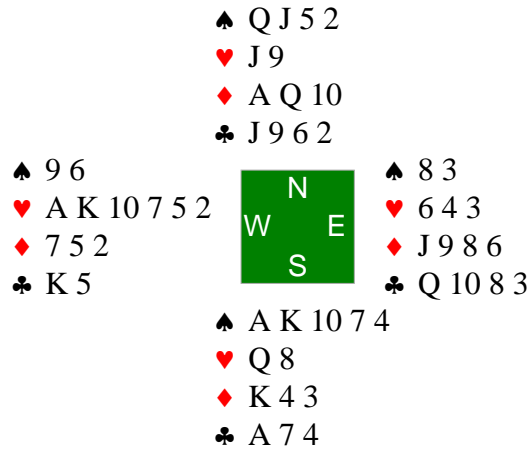


4 ♠ by South

On the lead of the last trump, dummy will discard the 6 of clubs and now East has an impossible problem. If he discards the J of clubs, South will throw him in with a club to lead away from the K of diamonds. If he discards a diamond, declarer will rise with the A and drop his K.

What's It All About, Alfie?

North Deals
None Vul



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

4 ♠ by South

Ok, here's another situation where you have to be alert on defense. You start with the AK of hearts, and shift to the 2 of diamonds. North rises with the A as your partner plays the 9, and declarer follows with the 3. Now declarer plays a club to his Ace.

Now declarer draws trumps, plays two rounds of diamonds ending in hand and throws you in with the King of clubs. Down to only hearts, you need to concede a ruff and a sluff - contract making.

Did you see what you needed to do? That's right. You needed to unblock the K of clubs under the Ace. Not an easy play, but being "at the table", you foresaw the need to do make this great play!

What's It All About, Alfie?

North Deals
None Vul

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

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	2 ♣	Pass	2 ♥
Pass	2 N	Pass	4 ♦
Pass	4 N	Pass	5 ♣
Pass	5 ♦	Pass	6 ♥
All pass			

6 ♥ by South

The auction here needs clarification. 2 ♥ by South said nothing about hearts, but showed either one ace or two kings. South's 4 ♦ bid was a Texas Transfer to 4 ♥. 4 NT was RKCB. 5C showed 1 or 4. 5 ♦ now was a Queen ask. South's 6 ♥ bid confirmed the Q.

West led the Ace of spades. Looking at all four hands, can anyone see how West defeated 6 hearts?

He shifted to a club. North now led the K of hearts, and West smoothly played the J!. South thought for a long time, but finally decided to play the J to be a singleton and finessed the 9!

West's thoughtful false card gave declarer a losing option. Not a difficult play on this bidding, and it might not have worked - but no other defense would have a chance of succeeding.

Congrats to West for being at the table!

So, to conclude, today's Shark's Pointer is that you can improve your results dramatically if you are alert and "at the table". If you are sleepy - I don't care how good you are, you are going to get terrible results that you wouldn't ordinarily get. The key is not to be brilliant - just be alert when it is important to find a play that will give you a chance to succeed when another play is sure to fail! I do hope you will all take the time to read "The Inner Game of Bridge" that I will get posted on the Westwood website.