



BY LARRY COHEN

Learning to Improve

In this article, I wish to provide "universal" information on learning how to get better at bridge. Sure, you can take many lessons and read many books. A good memory is useful, but it is not the key ingredient to improving your bridge game.

Here, in a nutshell, are my thoughts on how anyone can grow their game:

1. Concentration at the table is the number-one ingredient to playing well. Some days are just bad-hair days. Your brain won't be in high gear (personal issues, medication, aging, etc.). On those days, you will make errors. Just accept it. Some days are worse than others. When you are having such a day, stop lower in the bidding and hope the other players are going down in game/slam.
 2. Logic is much more important than memory. Don't try to solve bridge problems by rote. Face each decision (in bidding, play or defense) by using a logical checklist. It goes to the tune of, "If A, then B." "If not C, then D." Translated to bridge terminology, your thinking needs to go: "Since he bid hearts twice, he has six of them, so I should not insist on notrump." Or, "Partner didn't lead diamonds, so he probably doesn't have the ace and king. Declarer must have one of the high diamonds."
 3. Memorizing and learning new conventions is not the way to improve your game. Sure, if you have a good memory and lots of time to thoroughly study and learn high-tech methods (and a partner who does the same), it will be a slight help. But, I see this to be a poor use of time and effort. It is much better to understand completely the most important conventions. Yes, you all know Stayman and Blackwood, but even those methods are often misunderstood and abused. Negative doubles and even something as basic as takeout doubles/responses are important fundamentals to master.
- These come up lots of times every session. Thorough understanding of all doubles and basic bids on the one and two levels would be infinitely more useful than learning "transfer lebensohl" just to keep up with the Joneses.
4. At-the-table attitude and demeanor is crucial to playing well. Keep partnership harmony. No faces. No negative comments to partner. Be nice to the opponents. Try to actually enjoy this great game. It will clear up your mind to think more clearly and logically.
 5. When you do take bridge lessons (or read bridge literature), be realistic. Go easy on yourself. Even a college student can't memorize tons of information and accurately recall it weeks and months later. When learning bridge, try to just grasp a few key issues clearly — don't bite off too much at once. When I teach a two-hour session, and give, say, 15 "pointers," I'm happy if my students walk away and have learned three or four of them well. Until you've heard the same lesson over and over, it is not reasonable to expect to get it all.
- There isn't much technical bridge advice in this article. However, I feel that if you work hard at these concepts and don't fall back into old habits, you will get instant gratification. Your game will improve as will your experience. **Good luck!**

Larry Cohen is one of the world's most popular bridge lecturers. People enjoy his simple teaching style — always with a dose of humor — on cruises and at country clubs all over the world. His 26 NABC championships include four Blue Ribbon Pairs victories, two Life Master Pairs, a Vanderbilt, two Spingolds and two Reisingers. The ACBL's 2002 Player of the Year, Cohen wrote *To Bid or Not to Bid: The Law of Total Tricks*, the best-selling bridge book of the '90s with more than 90,000 copies sold in six different languages. Cohen's column, *The Real Deal*, is a monthly feature in the *Bridge Bulletin*. This column comes from the author's website, where you will find a wealth of bridge information: larryco.com