

Tribute to Bob Rowlands

By Peter Lee, September 2024

I was saddened to hear of the death on 23rd September of my long term bridge partner Bob Rowlands. He was in a care home in Eastbourne, having been discharged from St Mary's hospital following a broken hip suffered in late May, when he suddenly collapsed and died. At the time of writing this, the autopsy to determine the cause of death has not been carried out.

He was born in Swansea on June 1st 1942 – so was 82 at the time of his death – but moved to Lewes in 1954 when his parents separated, and attended Lewes County Grammar School. While waiting for his sister Beth to complete her education he taught himself bridge using “Bridge for Beginners” by Victor Mollo and Nico Gardener. In 1961 he, his mother and Beth moved to Queens Club Gardens, London W14 where he lived until his death. He got a job in local government with Kensington and Chelsea council in July 1961 and played rubber bridge and then, in 1962, made his first venture into duplicate, winning the London Teams of 4, including a quarter-final win by over 100 IMPs against a team including Boris Schapiro. He retired from his job in 1989, to concentrate on bridge teaching.

Bob showed his skill aged 21 years on his hand:

Dummy

♠ A 3

♥ K J 5

♦ K 9 3

♣ K J 10 8 5

Bob

♠ K 10 5

♥ Q 10 7

♦ J 10 6 5

♣ A Q 2

Contract 3NT

Lead ♠4

After a weak 1NT on his left and 3NT on his right, partner led the 4 of spades, and dummy played low. Bob quickly played the spade 10, and, on winning the club Queen at trick 2, exited with the spade King, beating the contract with partner having five spades to the Jack. Had he won the King at trick one the defence would only have taken one trick in spades, but on Bob's defence they took three. This was a very good effort for an inexperienced 21 year old, Bob calculating that his partner was marked with one point at most.

In 1966 Bob played in the European trials with Brian Cowley and made the team with Harrison-Gray/Tony Priday and Louis Tarlo/Claude Rodrigue. They finished a close fourth, 3 VPs behind the winners (France).

Bob would also have qualified in 1969, but one of his team led out of turn against 3NT, the resulting penalty meaning that his opponents won the trials and his team was second, whereas a normal lead would have resulted in his team winning the trials and representing Great Britain in the European Championships.

Bob also played in five Camrose matches, winning all of them, the last in February 1977. He retired from playing internationally aged 34.

Bob was a member of the Laws & Ethics Committee in 1979-1983 and the Selection Committee in 1984-2005.

His domestic successes included the following wins:

Gold Cup (2003), Crockfords Cup (1975, 1976), Spring Fours (1975, 1987), Pachabo (1967, 1968, 1987), Hubert Phillips (1980, 1982), Lederer (1970), Life Masters Pairs (1968), Grandmasters Pairs (1983, 1998), National Pairs (1976, 2003, 2007, 2012, 2014), Corwen (1986, 1999, 2011), Tollemache (2001), Brighton Pairs (1967) and Portland Pairs (1971) as well as numerous successes at County level – for Essex initially, and for Surrey in the last 40 or so years.

In 1966 he won the Sunday Telegraph Salver, for the most Master Points won in the year.

He was the youngest player to become a grandmaster when he achieved it, though I understand that his record was later broken. Though he played very little in the last 10 years due to a bad back, he is still in the top 10 of all time EBU Master points winners.

In recognition of his successes in international and national bridge events, and his support of junior bridge, Bob was awarded the EBU's Diamond Award in 2016. Earlier, in 2010 he was given the John Armstrong Award, an award for those who play bridge in the best spirit.

I played with Bob regularly from about 2000 to 2015, and had great success with him.

Some of my successes with him spring to mind.

First, we won the National Pairs four times, including by a margin of 7.3% in 2012.

Second, we won the Lady Rose final (Surrey knock-out teams) against a very strong team, after being about 55 imps down after the first set.

Third, there was a hand from the Tollemache where we gained the maximum of 24 imps with both the Surrey pairs we scored with. We were non-vulnerable against vulnerable and the auction went 4 hearts from Bob, double, 6 hearts from me, double, pass from Bob, and then 6NT from my right hand opponent holding ♠ AJ2 ♥ Void ♦ AJ875 ♣ AK865, and (so he thought) asking his partner to play in 7 of a minor. I passed showing 0 or 1 defensive tricks and, after a pass on my left, Bob, holding ♠ 1085 ♥ AQJ9653 ♦ Q2 ♣ 4, doubled to show 1 defensive trick. The next hand redoubled in order to (so he thought) reinforce the message, and his partner passed it (not unreasonably) as he thought partner had as heart stop. I led a heart and we took 7 tricks for 3400, compared to the 2140 available for 7 clubs (or 1100 if we save in 7 hearts), my left hand opponent having ♠ K976 ♥ 10 ♦ K4 ♣ QJ10972.

I end with a hand Bob (South) played in 6 hearts when he was very young.

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

After the unopposed sequence 1NT, 3♥, 4♥, 6♥ Bob got a heart lead. He won, cashed the Ace of clubs, crossed twice in hearts and ruffed two low clubs high. As the clubs broke 5-2 he was still a trick short. However Bob ran winners to reach the four card ending shown below, with the lead in dummy.

♠ 9 ♥ ♦ K 8 6 ♣	♠ Q ♥ ♦ Q ♣ K J Contract 6♥ South needs three more tricks	♠ ♥ ♦ A J ♣ Q 10
♠ ♥ ♦ 10 9 5 2 ♣		

Bob played the spade Queen, and East had no good alternative. He discarded the diamond Ace to avoid being end-played in clubs, but then the diamond Q sealed the slam. West should have kept all his spades and thrown a diamond (or led a diamond at trick one).

Rest in peace Bob, and my condolences to his sister Beth, and all those who knew him well.