



—BRIDGE—  
MASTER

VERSUS

—BRIDGE—  
AMATEUR

MARK HORTON

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# INTRODUCTION

You must have noticed when reading reports of bridge tournaments that the same names keep appearing at the top. Names with which you are probably already very familiar: Zia, Meckstroth, Rodwell, Bocchi, Duboin, Versace, Hamman, Soloway, Forrester, Helgemo, Robson, and so forth. Yes, these truly are the giants of the game; but how big in fact is the gulf between them and the average club player? Perhaps not as big as you might think.

The road to bridge mastery isn't through being able to recognize and execute an entry-shifting trump squeeze or a Devil's Coup. Although technical mastery like this plays a role, it's a small one — the chance to make esoteric plays just doesn't come up often enough. No, there are two keys to getting to the top. The first key is spotting and taking advantage of small opportunities for gain in the bidding and play — actions that may add only a small percentage to your chances on a given deal, but over the long run will pay big dividends. The second key is simply avoiding error as much as possible. This may surprise you, since you probably don't think you make that many errors when you play. Remember though that it was world champion Michael Rosenberg who said, 'Nobody's any good at this game; the top players are just less bad than the rest.' When a bridge master, a professional-level player, plays against amateurs, he can expect to encounter a significant number of errors in the bidding, play and defense. Unless it is the amateur's lucky day, each of these errors will result in some kind of loss.

Bridge players often attain a certain level of expertise and then seem unable to advance any further — much like a marathon runner, they 'hit the wall'. They find that they are consistently being beaten by stronger players, often without knowing why. The simplest explanation is that they don't sufficiently analyze the information available to them. Think of bridge as a game of mistakes in which the master plays more accurately, sees further ahead and makes fewer errors than his amateur opponent. He also has a superior concept of the strategy of the game and a keen understanding of the many situations that can arise during the course of a deal. The master knows a number of 'bridge secrets' that enable him to score points over and over again. He appreciates the possibilities

inherent in each phase of the game — bidding, play and defense. He can analyze accurately and foresee the consequences of each bid or play. His bidding and card play are sound and he makes fewer and less serious mistakes than other players. He has the ability to concentrate for longer periods. The amateur, meanwhile, is prone to error. He bids and plays less accurately and his analytical powers are undeveloped. His concentration is easily interrupted.

In this book I am going to illustrate many of the simple techniques that the master player routinely employs that give him a significant advantage over the amateur player in every area of the game. At the same time I shall highlight the most common mistakes that can be made by the amateur. Every one of these deals was taken from actual play — none was constructed for this book. In fact, in some ways collecting the material was the easiest part of the whole project! In every example I will show you how the amateur bid, played or defended — and then how the expert improved on that. I have used the pronouns “he” and “she” as appropriate to refer to the genders of the players originally involved.

As you read the book, you should try to play along. You have the advantage of knowing that the amateur’s choice of actions is not the optimum, that somewhere there is an improvement — so you should try to find it. Don’t be afraid — you will encounter little that’s complicated, and a great deal that is just common sense. Every one of the principles and techniques I illustrate here is within your grasp, and if you put in the effort to understand them, they will become second-nature to you at the table too. Then you will be moving along that road to bridge mastery yourself.

One last thing though: please forget everything you’ve learned when you play against me!

*Technical note: The use of an asterisk (\*) in an auction indicates that a bid has a conventional meaning. Often the meaning is obvious, but where appropriate, the bid is explained by a footnote or in the text.*



PART 1  
**BIDDING**



## EVALUATING YOUR HAND

Evaluating your hand is one of the most basic areas of bidding, and one that the amateur frequently struggles with. Naturally, if you cannot assess what your hand is worth, it is hard to give partner the description he needs to make his own judgments, and your partnership will suffer accordingly. The master is able to evaluate his hand with considerable accuracy, quickly appreciating which strain (suit or notrump) or level (partscore, game or slam) it should fall into.

Whatever system you have agreed to play, you need some method for assessing the potential of the cards you have been dealt. You need to be able to categorize your hand and decide whether it is a hand on which to be aggressive or to stop early. Most of us start with some version of point count for our high cards, but bridge masters go well beyond the basic 4-3-2-1. They realize that aces are worth more than 4 points, that jacks are worth less. They know that high cards are worth more in combination and that high intermediate spot cards can be extraordinarily valuable. For example, K-x is worth at best one trick, and Q-x-x of dubious value, while K-Q is for sure one trick and K-Q-x is a possible two. Meanwhile, K-Q-10 is a very likely two tricks. The simple point-count method doesn't come close to reflecting these differences.

Losing Trick Count, which many employ only as a secondary evaluation method, reflects the texture of a hand: are the high cards together, and are they in long or short suits. Look at these two '12-point' hands:

♠ 10 8 5 3 2   ♥ A K   ♦ Q 5 4 3 2   ♣ K

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

A master might be reluctant to open the first example and would be unlikely to make an overcall with it if the opponents opened the bidding. Meanwhile, the second is not only an automatic opening bid or intervention, but partner needs only (for example) the ace of clubs, king-fourth of diamonds and two little spades to give you a good play for slam!

Experience is the best teacher in evaluating hands. Next time you miss a slam, don't just say, 'Well, I only had 12 points'. Think about some of the other issues, like texture and control cards; did you underestimate the power of your hand given the auction? Was there some way you could have figured out that slam was worth investigating? Likewise, the next time you find yourself in a no-play contract, or (worse!) doubled in a no-play contract and going for a big

number, ask yourself how you could have avoided getting there. Were there clues in your hand or the bidding that were warning lights, ones that you didn't notice or that you ignored? If you can think objectively about the contracts you should have reached, and also about the ones you shouldn't, without simply pointing the finger of blame at partner, you will begin to learn the hard lessons that the master puts into practice every session.

## *A good 15*

Dealer North

Both Vul.

♠ 10 9 4 3

♥ K 9 8 6

♦ A J 10 2

♣ 8

♠ K 8

♥ 5 4

♦ Q 9 8 6 5 4

♣ A Q 5



♠ A J 7

♥ A Q 2

♦ —

♣ K J 10 9 7 3 2

♠ Q 6 5 2

♥ J 10 7 3

♦ K 7 3

♣ 6 4

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	pass	1♣	pass
1♦	pass	2♣	pass
3♣	pass	3NT	all pass

Yes, a void in a suit partner bids is not usually an asset (often partner will have wasted honors there), but nevertheless, this East failed to appreciate the tremendous potential playing strength of his hand. After making a serious underbid of 2♣, he arrived in the second-best contract of 3NT. South led the three of hearts to the four, king and ace. Declarer, playing matchpoints, now tried a spade to the king and a greedy spade to the jack. South won with the queen. With declarer marked with ♠AJ ♥AQ and some club honors, it was not too difficult to switch to a low diamond now, giving the defenders four tricks in the suit for a remarkable one down.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	pass	1♣	pass
1♦	pass	3♣	pass
4♣	pass	4♦*	pass
4♠*	pass	6♣	all pass

At the expert table, the master made the much more descriptive rebid of 3♣, over which West was delighted to show support. Two cuebids later, East jumped to the excellent slam.

Perhaps our amateur East was just being lazy, or perhaps he really did think that his powerhouse was a minimum hand. Either way, he got severely punished. Going down in game trying to recover a few matchpoints simply added to the shame.

### *What did you want me to bid, partner?*

My second example is a classic illustration of how a huge number of points can be lost when a player fails to appreciate the potential of a hand:

Dealer West

North-South Vul.

	♠ —										
	♥ K 5 4 3 2										
	♦ K 6 3										
	♣ K 10 8 7 5										
♠ K 8 7 5 2	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A Q 9 4 3
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ Q 10		♥ 9 8 7 6									
♦ J 10 7 5 2		♦ 9 4									
♣ 3		♣ A J									
	♠ J 10 6										
	♥ A J										
	♦ A Q 8										
	♣ Q 9 6 4 2										

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	pass	1♠	pass
4♠	dbl	all pass	

South's decision to pass her partner's double meant that she collected only +100. It certainly did not meet with her husband's approval... but when did any action at the bridge table by a wife meet with her husband's approval?

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	pass	1 ♠	pass
4 ♠	dbl	pass	6 ♣
all pass			

At the other table, an expert South realized that her partner's double had to be based on very good distribution, a near maximum pass and almost certainly a void in spades. That meant she was effectively playing with a 30-point deck! She jumped to the contract she felt sure would have a decent chance — an assessment that delivered twelve very easy tricks and +1370.

### *Defensive values*

In competitive auctions, the decision to bid on or to let the opponents play the hand can be difficult. Once again, it is a matter of hand evaluation. The master recognizes hands that will take tricks on offense — typically hands with quick tricks and controls, like aces and kings. In contrast, hands with slower values, queens, jacks and intermediates, especially in the opponents' suits, are better suited to defending. By the same token, distributional hands are more offensive while more balanced types of hands suggest better prospects on defense. It is a common mistake to bid aggressively when a hand is defensive in nature.

Dealer South  
East-West Vul.

	♠ Q 10 6 3 2										
	♥ J 8 3										
	♦ Q J 2										
	♣ Q 6										
♠ A		♠ K									
♥ A K Q 9 6 5 2	<table border="1" style="width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">N</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">W</td> <td style="text-align: center;">E</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">S</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>		N		W	E			S		♥ 10 4
	N										
W	E										
	S										
♦ K 8		♦ 10 9 7 6 4 3									
♣ 7 4 2		♣ K J 8 3									
	♠ J 9 8 7 5 4										
	♥ 7										
	♦ A 5										
	♣ A 10 9 5										

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
4♥	4♠	5♥	2♠*
pass	5♠	dbl	dbl
			all pass

When South doubled five hearts, he was clearly showing significant values outside the spade suit. Holdings like QJx, Qx and Jxx are notoriously poor on offense, so North's decision to retreat to five spades with such good defensive cards is hard to understand. The play that ensued did not justify his choice.

West cashed the king of hearts, the ace of spades and exited with a top heart. Declarer ruffed, crossed to dummy with a spade and eliminated the hearts. He then went back to dummy with another spade and played the queen of clubs, covered with the king and ace. After going back to dummy with yet another spade, declarer played a low club and escaped for one down, -100.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♥	pass	1NT	pass
4♥	4♠	pass	2♠
5♥	pass	pass	dbl
all pass			

At the other table, although South delayed his entry into the auction, the situation was essentially the same. This time, a master player sitting North displayed better judgment, looking at his own soft values, and was happy to follow his partner's suggestion. There was no way for declarer to avoid the loss of three tricks.