

THE BRIDGE BUM

MY LIFE AND

PLAY



Second Edition
revised & updated

Forewords by
Alfred Sheinwold
& Eddie Kantar

ALAN SONTAG



THE BRIDGE BUM

M Y L I F E A N D P L A Y



ALAN SONTAG

MASTER POINT PRESS • TORONTO

© 2003, 1977 Alan Sontag

All rights reserved. It is illegal to reproduce any portion of this material, except by special arrangement with the publisher. Reproduction of this material without authorization, by any duplication process whatsoever, is a violation of copyright.

Master Point Press

331 Douglas Ave.

Toronto, Ontario Canada

M5M 1H2

Phone: (416) 781-0351

Fax: (416) 781-1831

Internet: <http://www.masterpointpress.com>

<http://www.masteringbridge.com>

<http://www.ebooksbridge.com>

<http://www.bridgeblogging.com>

E-mail: info@masterpointpress.com

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Sontag, Alan

The bridge bum : my life and play / Alan Sontag. – Rev. ed

ISBN 978-1-55494-092-9

1, Sontag, Alan 2. Contract bridge 1 Title.

GV1282.26.S64A3 2003

795.41'5'092

C2003-902595-0

Editor

Ray Lee

Cover and interior design

Olena S. Sullivan/NewMediatrrix

Interior format and copyediting

Deanna Bourassa

Printed and bound in Canada by Webcom Canada Ltd.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

07 06 05 04 03

To:
My parents, Rose and Louis Sontag, and Robin and Robert

Foreword to the First Edition

ALAN SONTAG CALLS HIMSELF A BRIDGE BUM, BUT DON'T LET HIM kid you. He is a success at bridge and would be equally successful at any other occupation. Sontag is a born winner.

If you're about to read his book, or if (like me) you read an introduction after you've finished reading the book, you might want to know something about the man. Think back to the American Contract Bridge League team trials of 1972. Four teams, winners of the principal bridge championships of that year, were competing for the right to represent North America in the 1973 World Championship; and Sontag was a member of one of those teams.

In the last session of the finals, with the score very close, Sontag's partner (whom I do not name since I have to live in the same world as the temperamental stars of bridge) made a very peculiar bid; and as a consequence of this bid Sontag became declarer in a contract of four hearts.

The opening lead was made, and the dummy came down. From my seat behind Sontag I could tell that the contract was simply silly. There was no chance at all for four hearts, but there would have been 11 easy tricks in spades and 10 easy tricks in notrump.

The average declarer would throw his cards disgustedly on the table and invite the opponents to take whatever they were entitled to. The average champion, more disciplined,

would play the hand out, meanwhile directing a stream of abuse at his partner by way of disclaiming all responsibility for the disaster. The partner would naturally respond in kind, and the partnership would cease to function even if the players managed to get through the rest of the match.

I must confess that I was looking forward to the battle and wondering what vivid expressions I would hear. But Sontag smiled reassuringly at his partner and said apologetically: "This is all my fault . . . But don't worry. We can get it back." And then he played the hand — calmly and thoughtfully. Mind you, he deceived nobody. Everybody at the table knew that the hand was a disaster for Sontag, but the tension was gone. After scoring the hand, Sontag and his partner grinned at each other and went on to play courageously and skillfully for the rest of the match.

Of course, this is the way civilized human beings should behave. But if you have seen the antics of some of our famous athletes when things go just a little wrong, you know that in championship competition civilized behavior is the first casualty. The point is that Sontag had the chance to destroy his partner and dissociate himself from disaster; but he wanted victory rather than an excuse for losing.

That's when I first learned that Sontag is a born winner. He has since demonstrated that in many matches, some of them described in this book. He would be embarrassed if I stated that he is a gentleman and a credit to the game, so I wouldn't dream of saying such a thing.

Instead, let me say that *The Bridge Bum* is a book that every bridge player will enjoy reading and that every bridge writer will wish he had written.

Alfred Sheinwold, 1975

Foreword to the Second Edition

WHEN I FIRST READ THIS BOOK, I LOVED IT. NOW THAT I AM REREADING IT AGAIN, I love it even more. It reads like an exciting novel. The opening salvo telling about the match pitting Alan's team against the World Champion Lancia team (Garozzo, Belladonna, Forquet, Sharif) in New York with five Lancia cars on the line, is just about the best bit of bridge writing I can ever remember reading. Even though I knew the outcome, I couldn't put the book down. And Alan's bridge exploits around the world prove that truth really is stranger than fiction. How this book was ever allowed to go out of print is beyond me.

Personally, I played many years with Alan as a partner. Before we got together, I believed Alan was one of the world's truly great players and playing with him convinced me I was right. He plays with flair (attracts kibitzers like flies), has an unsurpassed passion for the game, is supportive, and oh so funny.

He has to be the fastest gun alive. I have never met anyone who plays faster and makes so few errors. Once in a pairs game he left the table after one board thinking we had completed the round. The three of us waited and waited for Alan to return. He didn't. Finally with three minutes on the clock, I went out to look for him. Sure enough he was in the lobby waiting for the next round to begin! When we finally made it back to our table there was 1 minute on the clock.

We all thought we would need a late play. Alan insisted we could finish in time. So we bid the hand and Alan became the declarer. We finished before the clock ran out!

After all these years, Alan has never seen me make a contract nor has he ever seen me go down in one. You see, every time I am the declarer, Alan leaves the table and has a kibitzer play his cards. At first I thought he left because he was antsy, but then I started to think maybe he couldn't bear to watch me play the hand! But I digress.

If you want to read a great bridge book, this is it. I guarantee many pleasurable reading hours are in store for you, but honesty compels me to tell you that the book has one fatal flaw: it ends.

Eddie Kantar, March 2003

THE BRIDGE BUM

M Y L I F E A N D P L A Y

Chapter 1

THERE HAD NEVER BEEN A BRIDGE CHALLENGE MATCH QUITE like the one on May 17 and 18, 1975. Perhaps there never will be again. Members of the World Champion Italian Blue Team, augmented by actor Omar Sharif, were at the New York Hilton to play against four Americans: Peter Weichsel, Matt Granovetter, Ron Rubin, and myself. The stakes were what made the match so unusual. If we defeated the Italian team we would win five new Lancia automobiles, total value \$37,500 (in the days, a lot of money).

Bridge is a national pastime for Italians, and they treat their champion players like royalty. The Blue Team, Italy's best, had dominated World Championship competition for almost twenty years. I know of no other team in any other sport that has been on top for so long. The Fiat Automobile Company, the largest corporation in Italy, decided to cash in on the popularity of bridge by sponsoring the three best players on the Blue Team, plus Sharif, in a series of matches in America. So confident was Fiat that its Lancia Bridge Team was unbeatable that the company offered five new cars to any team that could defeat them.

The Lancia Team left Italy amid the same sort of fanfare accorded the Team Canada ice hockey club that journeyed to the Soviet Union. The country's national pride was at stake. It was inconceivable to Italian bridge players that their champions would lose. The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge recited the awesome accomplishments of the Blue Team:

“They set an international record which will probably never be equaled: four consecutive European Championship wins, ten consecutive World Championship victories in the Bermuda Bowl, and first place in the World Team Olympiad in 1964, 1968, and 1972.”

“I’ll give you two to one,” said Victor the Bookmaker. “No, I’ll make it twelve to five. You’re a bunch of kids.”

I did not take the bet. I felt our team would win, but I was just about the only person who thought so. A friend of mine did bet with Victor. He put up \$2,000 at 12 to 5.

We were a bunch of kids compared to our famous opponents. I was twenty-nine. Peter Weichsel was thirty-one. Ron Rubin was twenty-seven. Matt Granovetter was twenty-four. There are exceptions (I know great players who are in their seventies), but bridge champions usually peak in their late thirties.

I make my living playing bridge, so winning the automobile was very important to me, but far more crucial was the self-satisfaction to be derived from defeating the finest bridge players ever to sit at a table. It was our first, and perhaps last, chance to go against them. There had been speculation that members of the Blue Team would soon retire. Players wanting to be remembered as the best had better beat them while they were still active, or forever suffer in comparison.

The players on the Lancia Team had the knack of winning. Besides Omar Sharif, our opponents included the cream of the Blue Team — Benito Garozzo, Giorgio Belladonna, and Pietro Forquet.

Benito Garozzo was forty-eight years old, a cold, calculating Rome jewelry store owner described by Victor Mollo in *The Bridge Immortals* as “accepted as primus inter pares by his colleagues on the all-conquering *Squadra Azzura*.” In 1975 I considered Benito Garozzo to be the best player in the world. At the table he is proud and merciless, but when not

playing he is courtly and has impeccable manners. He was on the World Championship team between 1961 and 1969 and 1972 through 1975 (the Blue Team went into temporary retirement in 1970 and 1971). Entering the match at the New York Hilton in May, 1975, Garozzo had never been on a losing team in international competition.

Giorgio Belladonna, who owned the fashionable Club Elite in Rome, formed with Benito Garozzo the most powerful and feared bridge partnership in the world. Belladonna was fifty-two, a giant bear of a man with an expressive face and an explosive temper. When a match went badly for Belladonna, which was seldom, he seemed to grow larger and larger in his chair, huffing and muttering and snorting. Belladonna was a member of the World Championship Blue Team from 1957 to 1959, 1961 through 1969, and from 1972 to 1975. The Garozzo-Belladonna partnership was rumored, through 1973, never to have lost a pairs event (when they were finally defeated in Monte Carlo in 1974 there was evidence that the victors were cheating).

Pietro Forquet was a fifty-year-old Naples banker with boyish good looks and a movie star's charm. Forquet was unflappable, almost eerily serene. His mother taught him how to play bridge when he was eighteen, and he has been on twelve World Championship teams. Whereas many players resort to daring tactics and psychological strategy, Forquet relied on basic, precise, computer-like logic. No one could be more dedicated to a sport than Pietro Forquet, but even his iron discipline was once taxed by the demands of championship bridge. He was married on the eve of the 1964 Olympiad and his coach, Carlo Alberto Perroux, ordered separate bedrooms for the bride and groom until the tournament was over.

Finally there was fifty-year-old Omar Sharif of Egypt, the 1963 Academy Award nominee for best supporting actor

in *Lawrence of Arabia* and a star in dozens of other films. Sharif is an excellent player, although not on a par with Garozzo, Belladonna, and Forquet. He loves the game and has done as much as anyone to promote bridge. He is obviously a man of the world, elegant, cultured, enormously popular with women. Sharif played in two of the most interesting bridge matches of all time: the one at the New York Hilton for the five Lancia automobiles, and one in London in 1970 against the British experts Jonathan Cansino and Jeremy Flint. The stake in that match, which was filmed for television, was the incredible sum of \$2.40 a point. The match lasted a mindnumbing eighty rubbers and Sharif won \$18,000. Obviously, although Sharif was the “weak link” on the Lancia Team, he was a player of the first rank. Moreover, I had an additional good reason to want to beat him: a girl I was fond of decided it was over between us when Omar appeared and joined us for lunch. Sharif promised to make it up to me. I figured winning that Lancia Beta Coupe would more than square things.

Edward Wehle, an American Fiat executive, at a cocktail party the night before the match, summed up what undoubtedly were the feelings of the Lancia Team: “I’d love to see you boys win a car. But I don’t think we’ll be giving any away here in New York.”

The match began at 4 P.M. on May 17. We played in two separate suites. Peter Weichsel and I were opposed by Pietro Forquet and Omar Sharif. Our teammates, Rubin and Granovetter, went against Garozzo and Belladonna. The match consisted of each partnership playing sixty boards (a board is a hand). Ten boards would be played the afternoon of May 17, twenty that night, then the procedure would repeat itself the next day.

Only about twenty people were allowed in each suite to watch the match. These included Fiat officials, a variety of newspaper reporters, American Contract Bridge League

(ACBL) officials, and a few friends of the players. Millionaire Lea du Pont was there. She was a friend of Garozzo. Omar Sharif was accompanied by a stunning blonde, which was fine with us. She did not help his concentration, nor, I imagine, did the cognac he drank during one of the evening sessions.

Few people were allowed into the suites, but downstairs one of the Hilton's ballrooms was packed with more than five hundred spectators following the progress of the match on VuGraph. VuGraph was an enormous movie-type screen which permitted the almost instantaneous simulation of the actual playing of a hand. A panel of bridge experts, including Alan Truscott of the *New York Times*, Edgar Kaplan, a great player in his own right and the editor of *The Bridge World*, and Harold Ogust, president of Travel-With-Goren Enterprises, provided commentary for people in the ballroom. The Lancia Team looked like a team. They were faultlessly attired in dark blue suits, narrow red ties, and sparkling white shirts. The *New York Times* generously described our clothing as "casual and inexpensive." The Lancia Team exuded poise and confidence and clearly was trying to psyche us, beat us before the first hand was played. Tom Buckley, writing in the *Times*, said they had "the opulent and self-confident air of those mysterious figures who play baccarat with the 10,000 franc plaques at Cannes and Monte Carlo."

Despite appearances, it turned out the Lancia Team was not as calm and composed as they wanted us to believe. They were being paid a lot of money by Fiat, they believed they were representing all of Italy, and a defeat would go down very hard indeed. Alan Truscott of the *Times* described what happened: "There was considerable tension... This tension took its toll on the very first deal when there was an opening bid out of turn. Instantaneously an

opponent came to the rescue. 'Let's redeal it,' he said. And they did.

"But there was a twist to this scenario. It was Forquet, winner of 15 world titles, who nervously opened out of turn. And it was Sontag, playing for the first time against one of the world's all-time great players, who waived the penalty. He could of course have called the director who would have enforced the law: Sharif would have been barred from the bidding, and there might have been a lead penalty in addition."

A moment or so later I followed Forquet to the water cooler. "Do you always get nervous before an important match?" I really wanted to know.

"Yes," he said. "Always."

Permitting Forquet and Sharif to play a new deal won me the "Sportsman of the Year" award from the International Bridge Press Association, but my action was not motivated by generosity. I did not want to win on a technicality. Almost from the moment I first began playing bridge in 1962, I had been in awe of the Italians. When learning to play well became an obsession, I could think of no higher goal than earning a chance to compete against them. Taking advantage of a technicality would have proved nothing, especially to myself. My three teammates agreed.

It was satisfying that the great Forquet took us seriously enough to suffer from a case of nerves. It confirmed what all of us felt: despite our youth and relative lack of experience, we had an excellent chance against the Lancia Team.

Rubin, Granovetter, Weichsel, and I had, as a team, never lost a match. To qualify to meet the Lancia Team we had won a tournament against thirty-five of the best teams in the East.

Ron Rubin had been playing in important bridge tournaments since his early teens. He was a person addicted to solving problems, which was one of the reasons he became

an outstanding bridge player. Rubin would literally spend as much time as necessary to find the solution to a problem. He was utterly dogged, and his skills extended to other card games besides bridge. Blackjack was easy for Rubin, and he regularly won healthy amounts of money in Las Vegas employing a complicated card-count system. He proved that almost any other card game is child's play compared to bridge.

Matt Granovetter, at twenty-four the youngest member of our team, made his living as a bridge professional. Granovetter and Rubin, in terms of speed of play, were probably the slowest partnership in America, but they were also one of the most successful. The reasons for their slow play were an extremely complex bidding system (it was a relay method whereby one partner initiated a series of questions through his bidding, and the other answered) and an almost fanatical quest for exactitude. Using the relay system, Rubin and Granovetter once bid a grand slam and claimed the contract before the dummy was even shown! The declarer — Granovetter — explained to the amazed opponents almost to the card what was in his partner's hand.

Peter Weichsel had been my regular and favorite partner since 1973. Weichsel also had skills other than bridge. He was excellent at basketball and tennis, was always in A-1 physical condition, and had recently advanced to the semi-finals of an international backgammon tournament. Weichsel had won five national bridge championships, one international championship, and more than fifty regional and sectional tournaments. The very first time Weichsel and I played together we won the National Life Masters Men's Pairs in Phoenix.

I was not considered a liability to our team. I had won four national championships, two international titles, and more than forty regional and sectional tournaments. In real-

ity, Weichsel and I were thought of as the stronger of the two partnerships going against the Lancia Team.

How our match with the Lancia Team was scored was of great importance. "There are two methods of scoring," states an ACBL booklet. "I. Total points. Simple, but old-fashioned. Add up the plus scores and the minus scores your team has made at both tables. The difference is the amount by which your team leads or trails. The disadvantage of this method is that the result of a match is likely to be determined by one or two large swings, especially in the slam department. A more satisfactory but more complicated method is used in serious competitions: II. International match-points (IMPs)."

IMPs were used in scoring our match against the Lancia Team. Each table, of course, played the same hands. If Weichsel and I were North-South on one hand, Granovetter and Rubin would play the East-West cards at the other table.

The total points our team had won or lost on each deal were converted into IMPs by referring to the following scale:

TOTAL PTS	=	IMPs	TOTAL PTS	=	IMPs
0-10	=	0	600-740	=	12
20-40	=	1	750-890	=	13
50-80	=	2	900-1090	=	14
90-120	=	3	1100-1290	=	15
130-160	=	4	1300-1490	=	16
170-210	=	5	1500-1740	=	17
220-260	=	6	1750-1990	=	18
270-310	=	7	2000-2240	=	19
320-360	=	8	2250-2490	=	20
370-420	=	9	2500-2990	=	21
430-490	=	10	3000-3490	=	22
500-590	=	11	3500-3990	=	23
			4000 and up	=	24

Thus, if Weichsel and I had a plus score of 100 playing North-South, and Granovetter and Rubin had a plus score of 200 playing East-West, our team would have a total plus score of 300 points which converts to 7 IMPs.

After Forquet bid out of turn a new hand was shuffled and dealt. There was a hush in the room and spectators moved closer to the table. I was keyed up.

I picked up the first hand and glanced across the table at Peter Weichsel, normally a player of indestructible calm. Peter was arranging his cards, which were very expensive and had "Lancia" written on the back, and his hands were shaking. I knew what he was experiencing. For a month I had thought of nothing but the match. I became so preoccupied with the prospect of playing the Lancia Team that I had difficulty eating. Finally I took a week's vacation in Miami Beach with my girlfriend, but nothing helped. The match was all that mattered to me.

"One diamond," Peter said.

"Pass," said Omar Sharif.

"One spade." My voice was strong. I'd had nightmares imagining it would crack.

"Pass." This was Forquet.

Weichsel: "Two notrump."

Sharif: "Pass."

Sontag: "Three notrump."

The others then passed.

"What does two notrump mean?" Sharif asked me, before making his first lead. Under the laws of contract bridge, players are entitled to know what the bidding of their opponents signifies.

"The bid," I said, "normally shows six diamonds and fifteen or sixteen points."

Peter frowned and I suspected I had been less than accurate with Sharif. I had described the Precision System we

were employing, but Peter, as all great players occasionally do, made an inspired evaluation of his hand and departed from the Precision System. Until the hand was nearly over I did not realize I had misled Sharif.

It didn't matter. Peter played our vulnerable (this was not rubber bridge, so a partnership could be vulnerable at any time) three notrump contract expertly and made it, for a score of plus 600. In the other suite, Belladonna, holding the same cards Peter had, made an orthodox rebid of one notrump and Garozzo, with the cards I held, passed. Belladonna did even better than Peter; he made four notrump, but he had bid only one. That gave Belladonna and Garozzo plus 180, which subtracted from our plus 600 came to 420 points in our favor, or 9 IMPs.

It was an auspicious beginning. This was the hand that had been redealt because of Forquet's out-of-turn bid, and the *New York Times* headline read "Justice Triumphs." Here was the hand that gave us the 9-IMP lead:

NORTH (Sontag)											
	♠ A J 9 7										
	♥ K 8 4										
	♦ 9 7 6 4										
	♣ 9 6										
WEST (Sharif)	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <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		EAST (Forquet)
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♠ K 6 3		♠ Q 8 5 4 2									
♥ 9 6		♥ Q 7 3 2									
♦ 8 5 2		♦ K Q									
♣ K Q 10 5 2		♣ 8 3									
SOUTH (Weichsel)											
♠ 10											
♥ A J 10 5											
♦ A J 10 3											
♣ A J 7 4											

At the end of the first afternoon session, ten of the sixty hands had been played and our lead was 9 IMPs, all of them thanks to Peter's enlightened and aggressive call of two notrump, which made my three notrump bid automatic.

No words were exchanged between the two teams after the first session. The atmosphere was grim, almost warlike. Much as I admired the Italians and their unprecedented accomplishments, I had to think of them as enemies. They were standing in the way of my making a lot of money: if we could maintain our lead, the fees I could command for teaching and playing would increase dramatically; if we lost we would simply join that almost endless list of players who already had been defeated by the Italians.

The afternoon session ended at 5:45 and we went to the House of Chan restaurant. My teammates picked at their food. I did not even bother to order. It would have been impossible to keep anything down, which was just as well. It is a scientific fact that after a big meal, blood, which would normally help a person think, is used to digest food. World-class players usually get by on as little food as possible during important competitions. There are many elements that contribute to the making of a champion bridge player, not the least of which is being good in physical condition, but primarily it is a mental game, a game that when played well requires the individual to think clearly on a variety of levels. As Sherlock Holmes observed, food and thinking do not mix.

There were eight of us at dinner. I felt very good when a supporter of ours, talking about Peter Weichsel and myself, said that "finally the U.S. has found a pair as good as Belladonna and Garozzo."

We were not cocky. Such a luxury would have been silly and, worse, destructive. Still, it was impossible not to be excited. For one-sixth of a match we were leading players for whom there was no frame of reference, players superior

to any the game of bridge had known. So we sat in the House of Chan and told each other we could keep it up.

After a while I excused myself and went for a walk. I wanted to be alone and think about this crazy game I had skipped school to learn. It had been a lark, an excuse to avoid that hated Speech class, but now it wasn't a lark any more, it was my life and my livelihood and I wanted to be better than anyone who ever played. I walked to Rockefeller Center and stared down at the deserted ice skating rink. I went to Times Square. I walked up 41st Street to Port Authority.

It was time to get back to the Hilton. "Great!" I remembered one of our supporters shouting when we had left the hotel following the opening session. "Nine IMPs ahead! You'll be thirty ahead when the night is over!"

We were 28 behind. Belladonna and Garozzo ate up Rubin and Granovetter, and Forquet, suave and continental, and Sharif, sipping cognac and patting the blonde's thigh, were, as Alan Truscott wrote in the *Times*, "almost perfect." For the Americans the night was "a sad blow to their hopes of winning the match and with it five Lancia automobiles."

A deficit of 28 IMPs is more than substantial, and 25 of those were lost on one hand, the thirtieth and last deal of the opening day. We had frittered away our afternoon lead of 9 IMPs, and were slightly behind going into the last hand. But we were absolutely unprepared for the disaster that befell us. It was a classic example of the role luck plays in bridge. This was the final hand of the session:

NORTH (Granovetter)

♠ A K J 9 7 6

♥ —

♦ K Q 9 7 6

♣ A 3

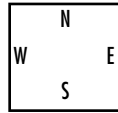
WEST (Belladonna)

♠ Q 10 4 2

♥ A 9 7

♦ 4

♣ J 10 9 6 4

**EAST** (Garozzo)

♠ 8

♥ Q 10 8 4

♦ 10 5 2

♣ K Q 8 7 2

SOUTH (Rubin)

♠ 5 3

♥ K J 6 5 3 2

♦ A J 8 3

♣ 5

Neither side was vulnerable. The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	1♣	2♣	2♥
4♣	pass	pass	4♦
pass	5NT	pass	6♣
pass	7♦	all pass	

This truly was a rare and great hand. In spite of the pre-emptive tactics of Belladonna and Garozzo, Rubin and Granovetter were able to circumvent their barrage and arrive at a grand slam contract that had a 70.25% chance of success (yes, great players, using modern, superior bidding techniques, really are able to reach contracts which can be calculated with that mathematical exactitude).

It was midnight when Rubin and Granovetter bid their grand slam. As I mentioned, both were very slow players (Granovetter was recently barred from defending a major championship he had won because of his disruptive snail-

like pace), so Weichsel and I were finished for the night quite a bit before they were and were able to watch them play the hand on VuGraph. We had already played the hand, of course, but as East-West, so we knew what to expect. In our suite Forquet and Sharif made a mistake and ended in six diamonds (the “right” bid was seven), and they made it. The probability of success in seven diamonds was excellent, but because of the 4-1 distribution in the spade suit the only way Granovetter and Rubin could have made the grand slam was to see their opponents’ cards.

The audience in the ballroom could see the cards on VuGraph and was aware that seven diamonds was virtually impossible. These spectators were very partisan to the Americans — many of them were players and had seen this country’s bridge teams humiliated all too often by the Italians — and there were groans when Rubin and Granovetter bid the grand slam. They went down and the difference was that staggering 25 IMPs. Had they made seven diamonds — and the percentages were with them — we would have picked up 11 IMPs. Instead we lost 14.

I was tired and distraught. We had been just plain unlucky but no one would remember that. My girlfriend Kathy and I went to P. J. Clarke’s — which looks like any other bar except it is always crowded and the food is superior — and drank beer and ate Eggs Benedict. Kathy told me our luck would change, that there was still a full day of competition ahead. I could not really believe her. We had been given an opportunity all serious players dream of, and it had not worked out.

We went for a long drive, all the way to the end of the Long Island Expressway, and then we drove to Long Beach to watch the sun come up. It was 7 A.M. before I fell into bed. I stayed with my parents, my biggest boosters, in Queens.

Peter Weichsel drove me to the Hilton that afternoon. He was optimistic, filled with hope, and he lifted my spirits. Sharif was playing over his head, Peter felt, and Belladonna and Garozzo were not doing as well as expected. All we could do was our best and not lose our composure if there were any more bad luck.

On this second day the Americans were decked out in their best threads. It was possible that our immaculately attired opponents had put us at a psychological disadvantage the first day. Also, had it not been for Forquet's slip on the first hand, we might have believed that the Lancia Team was without nerves.

"Bad luck yesterday, Alan," Forquet said to me. "Buona fortuna today."

The American partnerships remained the same in the second afternoon session, but the Lancia Team switched. Garozzo was now playing with Forquet. Both suites were filled with kibitzers.

Forquet and Garozzo on the very first hand, playing North-South against Peter and me, bid a six-spade contract that had only a 45 percent chance of success. To make the contract they needed not only a successful finesse but favorable trump distribution. They got both.

The air conditioner was running full blast and it was freezing in the room, but I was soaked with sweat. I stood up from the table and walked over to the window, wondering whether I should jump or pray. We were in a lot of trouble. I knew Granovetter and Rubin would not bid six spades, nor should they. The result was down 39 IMPs with twenty-nine hands to play.

Forquet and Garozzo were smiling. So was Ed Wehle, who was thinking about those Lancias he would not have to give away.

I came back to the table and looked at Peter. His eyes blazed with determination. The room was very still. "Pass," Garozzo intoned, wanting to get on with the game, not wanting to interrupt the momentum his team had.

"One notrump," said Peter, his voice harsh and loud.

What occurred then was our auction to a sound vulnerable four-spade contract. We would have made it easily against most players, but this was against Forquet and Garozzo, and their defense was brilliant. At trick one Garozzo underled a side suit ace, a daring play and the best move he could have found. Each time he and Forquet led during the hand, they continued with the same suit.

Beginners are taught never to give their opponents a ruff and discard. Here, Forquet and Garozzo gave me two of them, weakening my trump holding to such a degree that in the endgame I had to guess the location of the diamond queen.

Usually I am a very fast player. In this instance I took ten full minutes before making the guess. I had to be right. If I was not, the slim chance we still possessed for a comeback would become no chance at all. In the other suite the Lancia Team made four spades easily. Rubin and Granovetter did not establish the sensational defense discovered by Forquet and Garozzo. Here is a diagram of that critical hand:

	NORTH (Garozzo)		
	♠ 5 3		
	♥ A 7 6 5 2		
	♦ Q 9 8 2		
	♣ Q 5		
WEST (Sontag)	<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">N</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">W</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">E</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 5px;">S</div> </div>	EAST (Weichsel)	
♠ K 9 7 4 2		♠ A J 6	
♥ 9 3		♥ Q J	
♦ K J		♦ A 10 5 4 3	
♣ A 10 7 6		♣ K 9 2	
	SOUTH (Forquet)		
	♠ Q 10 8		
	♥ K 10 8 4		
	♦ 7 6		
	♣ J 8 4 3		

East-West vulnerable. The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	pass	1NT	pass
2♦	pass	3♦	pass
3♠	pass	4♠	all pass

Peter's one-notrump opening bid showed 13 to 15 high-card points and balanced distribution. My two diamonds said I was interested in a game somewhere. Three diamonds by Peter denied a four-card major (spades or hearts) and guaranteed a five-card diamond suit. Three spades showed I had five of them and asked Peter to raise to game if he had three-card spade support, or bid three notrump if he had only two spades.

Garozzo began with the two of hearts, an imaginative lead. Forquet won with the king and returned the four of hearts, which Garozzo took with the ace. Not wanting to break another suit, Garozzo continued hearts, which I trumped in dummy, discarding a club from my hand. I then

reached my hand with the ace of clubs and tried a trump finesse which failed. Forquet won the trick and returned still another heart, the second ruff and discard they had given me on this hand, and I had to ruff in my hand. I played a trump to the ace, a diamond to the king, and drew the last trump. Leading from my hand, this was the position in which I found myself:

NORTH (Garozzo)											
♠ —											
♥ —											
♦ Q 9 8											
♣ Q											
WEST (Sontag)	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px;"> <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		EAST (Dummy)
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♠ 7		♠ —									
♥ —		♥ —									
♦ J		♦ A 10 5									
♣ 10 7		♣ K									
SOUTH (Forquet)											
♠ —											
♥ —											
♦ 7											
♣ J 8 4											

I had to take the last four tricks to make the contract. I led the jack of diamonds. Garozzo, in his normal tempo, played low. Now I was at the crossroads. Either I let the jack of diamonds ride, playing Garozzo for the queen, or I rise with the diamond ace and then trump dummy's five with my last spade. If I took the latter course I had to hope the queen of diamonds would fall on dummy's five, thus allowing me to reenter dummy with the king of clubs to cash the ten of diamonds. I deliberated for ten minutes and then rejected this course. I chose instead to let the jack ride, playing Garozzo for the queen. Because of Garozzo's unusual opening lead and subsequent defense, I reasoned that a club

play was unattractive to him, thus signifying, in my judgment, that he was likely to be long in diamonds. To my great relief, I was right.

The Lancia Team easily made four spades in the other suite. The opening lead was a diamond, making the declarer's job a cinch. We won no IMPs on this hand, but more important, we did not lose any. I hoped we had checked the Lancia Team's momentum. I thought it was an especially hard blow for them in light of the withering defense Garozzo and Forquet had thrown up against us.

The match slowly began to turn in our favor. With each succeeding deal I became more optimistic. On the third deal of the afternoon we won 4 IMPs. On the fourth deal we won 3. The Lancia Team's lead was cut from 39 IMPs to 32. Our showing was unspectacular but I could actually feel us gaining, picking up speed, measuring them.

We won 6 IMPs on the fifth deal. The lead was down to 26. I began to think of them as old and tiring. We were young and strong and charging. We were the future. Then I kicked myself and remembered who they were.

Neither team won IMPs on the sixth deal. On the seventh we picked up 2 and the lead was 24. I loved that eighth deal! Here was the bidding:

FORQUET: One spade.

SONTAG: Three clubs (a weak jump overcall).

GAROZZO: Three spades.

WEICHSEL: Four clubs.

FORQUET: Four spades.

SONTAG: Five clubs (ending the auction).

I went to five clubs believing it was an inexpensive sacrifice against their four-spade vulnerable game, which I thought they would make. I was wrong. They could not have made four spades. In fact, I was doubly wrong. We made five clubs!

It was good for 11 IMPs and their lead was cut to 13. I glanced over my shoulder at Ed Wehle and he looked stunned. His mouth was open. Now it was the Lancia Team's turn to get up from the table and take the trip to the window.

I had to fight to hold back my adrenalin. Adrenalin might help a football player by increasing his strength, but it restricts concentration and therefore is of no use whatsoever at the bridge table.

No IMPs were won on the ninth deal. We won 2 IMPs on the last hand when Belladonna went down two in three spades while Peter, in the same contract, went down only one.

The second afternoon session was over. We were 11 IMPs behind with the twenty-deal evening session still to come.

"You played very well," said Benito Garozzo.

"Go easy on us tonight," I answered.

"No. It is you who must go easy."

We went to a Japanese restaurant on the West Side and again were unable to eat. I did manage to swallow some dry seaweed. I love sake, the Japanese rice wine, but dared not drink any. I promised myself a celebration if we won.

My confidence was hardly buoyed at the restaurant by the argument Peter Weichsel was having with his wife, Nancy. Nancy Weichsel, an excellent bridge player and perhaps the best woman backgammon player in the world, was the non-playing captain of our bridge team. The moment the two chose to have a domestic spat seemed particularly inappropriate, and I did my best to tune it out and concentrate on what was facing us that night.

I expected that Peter and I would be pitted against Belladonna and Garozzo on the VuGraph. That would suit Peter fine — he loved to perform in front of crowds — but the noise disturbed my concentration, which is the single

most important attribute a bridge player must possess. On the first evening we decided which partnership we would play against. On the second evening the choice was theirs. I figured that Garozzo, who had become enraged the first night by the slow play of Rubin and Granovetter (at one point he demanded that the director do something about it), would insist on being paired against Peter and me. This made sense in another way: the Lancia Team, with a great deal of prestige in the balance, would want to match their strongest partnership against ours.

The crowd in the ballroom to watch on VuGraph was even larger than on the first night. It was standing room only. The two upstairs suites were packed and I had to edge sideways to reach my seat.

Some of the great names in international bridge were at the Hilton. Sam Stayman, developer of the most popular and widely used bridge convention in the world, was there. The great Al Roth was there, tough, a perfectionist, perhaps the most astute bidding theorist alive. Roth was surrounded by aficionados as he held forth on one of his many bridge inventions, the negative double. C. C. Wei, millionaire Chinese shipping magnate and the developer of the Precision Club bidding system, was on hand with his wife Kathy, a vivacious and charming woman. Many people had stayed away the first night believing we had little chance, but the news that we were only 11 IMPs behind going into the final session brought them out in force. There is a fascination to being present when there is a chance that great champions will lose.

Lea du Pont was one who attended all the sessions. She was in the suite to cheer on her friend Garozzo.

I had been correct in assuming that the Lancia Team would pair Belladonna and Garozzo against Peter and me.

Garozzo, usually a sophisticated continental, was grim and unsmiling. The bear-like Belladonna was growling; he was hunched over staring at a spot on the table and his massive shoulders seemed to extend its entire width.

I knew we were about to take part in the most important bridge evening of our lives, and for a moment I was angry with Peter for allowing himself to be drawn into a fight with his wife. The Lancia Team, I was sure, had not expended energy in such pursuits. Belladonna had probably attained his present state of mind — which seemed to be one of sheer hatred for Peter and me — by gargling razor blades.

A phone rang. An assistant tournament director was calling our suite from downstairs to tell us that the VuGraph apparatus was ready and we should commence play immediately.

The Lancia Team’s 11-point lead was unchanged after the first two hands. On the second hand Peter and I did bid six notrump — needing only a diamond finesse to succeed — and went down one, but the result was a standoff when Forquet and Sharif bid the same six notrump and failed by the same one trick.

We won 10 IMPs on the third deal! Peter and I made four hearts on a hand that was bid as follows:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
(Garozzo)	(Weichsel)	(Belladonna)	(Sontag)
pass	pass	pass	1♥
pass	3♥	pass	4♥
all pass			

In the other suite, playing the same hand, the bidding went this way:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
(Rubin)	(Forquet)	(Granovetter)	(Sharif)
pass	pass	pass	1♥
2♦	3♦	dbl	4♥
all pass			

Both teams bid four hearts, but Peter and I made our bid while Forquet and Sharif went down one. To understand why we were successful it would help to see the diagram:

	NORTH (Weichsel)	
	♠ A J 10 8 7	
	♥ 8 7 5 2	
	♦ 5 4	
	♣ K 6	
WEST (Garozzo)		EAST (Belladonna)
♠ 6 3		♠ Q 9 4 2
♥ K		♥ Q 9 3
♦ K 10 7 6 3 2		♦ Q 8
♣ A 10 8 4		♣ J 7 5 3
	SOUTH (Sontag)	
	♠ K 5	
	♥ A J 10 6 4	
	♦ A J 9	
	♣ Q 9 2	

At our table, neither Garozzo nor Belladonna bid; consequently Garozzo, with no information to go on and not wanting to lead from any of his high cards, chose a spade. I lost the obvious three tricks — a club, a diamond, a heart — and claimed the rest for plus 420.

At the other table, Rubin's daring two-diamond overcall enabled him to find the only lead that would defeat four hearts: a low diamond. After that low diamond lead it was impossible for Sharif and Forquet to make the contract. Granovetter's double of Forquet's three-diamond cuebid

was all Rubin needed to find the right opening lead. The 50 points Rubin and Granovetter won, added to the 420 Peter and I won, translated into 10 IMPs. After three hands we were precisely 1 IMP behind. Belladonna was talking to himself in Italian.

The match was exactly even after six deals. What originally had been a match of sixty hands was now a fourteen-deal shootout.

The next seven hands were disasters for us. Peter and I had the best of Belladonna and Garozzo, but Rubin and Granovetter, feeling the pressure, collapsed against Forquet and Sharif. Their relay system of bidding misconnected when Granovetter gave a wrong reply to one of Rubin's questions and they ended up in a game instead of a small slam in hearts. On the very next hand they failed to reach a game bid in diamonds that Belladonna and Garozzo arrived at with consummate ease.

We were behind by 22 IMPs with seven deals to go. It was an almost impossible deficit to make up. The air-conditioning system had stopped functioning and the room was terrifically hot. Clouds of smoke hung over the table. Even Garozzo removed his suit jacket and loosened his tie. Belladonna sponged his face with a silk handkerchief. He was awash with perspiration. Not one spectator had left, although it was miserable in that room.

We outscored them 47 IMPs to 0 over those last seven hands! The words "rout" and "slaughter" are inadequate to describe a score of 47 IMPs to 0 in just seven hands. The numbers border on the incredible when you realize that three of the opponents were members of the Blue Team. Rubin and Granovetter were nothing short of heroic during those final seven hands.

This was what happened: Belladonna and Garozzo bid a small slam in spades which had almost no chance and went down one (plus 13 IMPs for us — the Lancia Team led by 9);

Forquet and Sharif bid an aggressive three notrump and missed by one (plus 5 IMPs for us — the Lancia Team led by 4); Belladonna and Garozzo bid three diamonds instead of three notrump (plus 10 IMPs for us — we led by 6); Peter and I made three hearts, Rubin and Granovetter playing the opposite direction made three spades (plus 7 IMPs for us — we led by 13); finally, Rubin and Granovetter bid an optimistic vulnerable small slam in clubs and brought it home (plus 12 IMPs for us — we won by 25).

I was not really sure we would win until the second-last hand. It was then that Belladonna banged his massive fist on the table and shot a murderous look in my direction, a look that was almost regal in its anger. He was so unused to losing. Well, it's too bad, I thought, but what was it like twenty years ago when you beat another Belladonna?

The Lancia Team congratulated us warmly when the match was over. The four Americans, Garozzo, Forquet, and Lea du Pont had drinks together in a bar at the Hilton. Belladonna and Sharif did not join us. About a month later, however, at the awards dinner, Sharif did make a joke about being the "Number One Lancia distributor in the United States."

After a few drinks at the hotel, I took Kathy to Allie's for a steak and some good red wine. It was marvelous. Then we went to a discotheque.

"Something's wrong," Kathy teased. "What is it?"

"I can't figure out," I said, "how to divide five cars among four people."

GENERAL INTEREST

"If you want to read a great bridge book, this is it; but honesty compels me to tell you that the book has one fatal flaw — it ends."

- Eddie Kantar

THE BRIDGE BUM is on everybody's list of the top ten bridge books ever written, and it's not hard to see why. It has everything: history; stories about the great players; Sontag's own fascinating hands; cheating, hustling, gambling; the glamor and grind of the bridge professional's life; and most of all the game itself, which Alan Sontag describes with such vigor and eloquence that it's easy to understand why he loves it so much. This new edition brings back to life a classic that has been out of print for twenty years. It's revised and updated with new stories, new insights and perspectives, and the drama of Sontag's first world title win over the Italians in one of the closest matches of all time.

ALAN SONTAG has won three World Team Championships and numerous National titles, and has also written a number of technical books on bidding and play. He will nevertheless be remembered in bridge history as the author of *The Bridge Bum*.



MASTER POINT PRESS