

How To Play Bridge
With Your Spouse...
And Survive!



Roselyn Teukolsky

Foreword by Dorothy Hayden Truscott

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*At a recent tournament, a man slipped his arm around my waist and said,
‘Tell me, how married are you?’
‘Well,’ I said, ‘My husband is my bridge partner, and you can’t be more
married than that.’*

How To Play Bridge

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Contents

1. In the Genes:	11
Hereditary Bickering	
2. Premarital Bridge:	19
Budding Partnership	
3. Newlyweds:	25
Already Experts	
4. Postmarital bridge:	31
The Problems Start	
5. Expecting Perfection:	41
The Problems Continue	
6. The Man is the Captain:	51
Real Conflict	
7. Bridge With Another Couple:	61
Not Always Fun	
8. On the Beach:	69
Time to Revamp the System	
9. At the Supermarket:	79
Bridge Among the Broccoli	
10. A Dozen Roses:	89
Disaster Relief	
11. Bridge Orphans:	97
The Children	
12. Couple's Caper:	109
Romantic Bridge Weekend	

Contents

13. Between Sessions:	117
Postmortems and Indigestion	
14. Green Shirt, Blue Pants and Man Smoking Behind Pillar:	127
Distractions	
15. Ode To Joy:	139
The Long Ride Home	
16. Only a Game:	151
Midlife Crisis	
17. Separate Beds:	159
The Breakup	
18. Extramarital Bridge:	167
After the Breakup	
19. Happily Ever After:	181
Together Again	

To my husband Saul, who inspired this.

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Roselyn Teukolsky July, 2001.

Foreword

I laughed all the way through *How To Play Bridge With Your Spouse...and Survive*. If Jean Kerr had been a bridge player, she would have written this book instead of *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*. Roselyn Teukolsky certainly writes a very funny story. Frankly, I wish I had written it.

And it's all so true. Tournament bridge is like a roller-coaster, where partners rocket up and down together from 'euphoria' to 'you-idiot.' Unfortunately, when a married couple play bridge together, they tend to drag the marriage along with them, for better or for worse. Roselyn deals with everything from premarital bridge to bridge after the breakup. In any bridge event there is one winner and a whole bunch of losers, which bumps up the divorce statistics considerably.

What is the solution? How can a married couple play together and keep the marriage out of it? For answers, fasten your seat belt and read on.

Dorothy Hayden Truscott

*In the Genes:
Hereditary
Bickering*

**HOW TO MAKE A SERIOUS BRIDGE
PARTNERSHIP WORK IN A MARRIAGE.
IS THIS A REALISTIC EXPECTATION?**



One of my earliest memories: I am about two years old, and perched on my dad's shoulders as he paces around the room. He and my mom, who is sitting and knitting, are involved in an intense, not entirely unfriendly, bridge argument. Every time he disagrees with what she's saying, which is often, he either whips around at 90 miles per hour to emphasize his point, or stops short in his tracks, to regroup. The experience is thrilling for me, like being on a defective rocking horse.

This, then, was my heritage. My parents' verbal bridge battles permeated my childhood, and became part of my family folklore. I was transfixed. Soon after they were married, my father started teaching my mother how to play. Our apartment overflowed with bridge lessons. Many years later, when she had overtaken him in ability, he continued to mastermind the bidding and hog the hands. The following was typical:

	Mom					
	♠ A K J 7 4					
	♥ 7 2					
	♦ A Q J 3					
	♣ A 2					
West	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	East	
N						
W E						
S						
♠ 3 2		♠ 10 9 5				
♥ J 10 6 5 3		♥ 9 4				
♦ 10 8 7 5		♦ K 9 4 2				
♣ 10 9		♣ J 7 5 3				
	Dad					
	♠ Q 8 6					
	♥ A K Q 8					
	♦ 6					
	♣ K Q 8 6 4					

West	Mom	East	Dad
pass	1♠	pass	2♣
pass	3♦	pass	4NT ¹
pass	5♠	pass	7NT

1. Fails to show spade support, masterminds the auction and hogs the hand all in one bid

West led a low diamond, and my father, reluctant to sink at Trick 1, rejected the finesse and played the ace. He now played the three top clubs,

hoping they would break 3-3, but this was not destined to happen on the actual layout*.

‘I am the unluckiest player alive,’ he lamented.

‘Seven spades is cold,’ my mother said, ‘and you are senile.’

Every Saturday night they would have Couples Bridge, four couples who played teams-of-four, with husband-wife partnerships. The arguments would start early and gather steam as the evening wore on. I perceived that this was what my parents did for fun. One time neighbors in our apartment complex sent in the police to investigate the commotion. I remember everyone’s utter astonishment when the embarrassed policeman came into our living room — they were, for goodness sake, just having a normal bridge game!

When I was older, and could accompany my parents to kibitz at the club, my observation of sparring couples was broadened. Not one married partnership that was amicable stands out in my memory. What hope, then, for me? There was never a time, while I was growing up, that my parents didn’t fight at the bridge table. Their married friends, playing at our house, fought at the bridge table. Their married acquaintances, playing at the club, fought at the bridge table. I grew up steeped in the tradition of conjugal bridge discord, and was never given any reason to believe that things would be different for me.

The major question, then, is this: is it possible, in the same life, to have a happy marriage and successful bridge partnership with your spouse? I look at the problems that are unique to marital partnerships and I wonder...

Bridge and Marriage

When I tell people that my favorite hobby is bridge with my husband, the reactions range from pity to incredulity, followed, invariably, by ‘How can you stand it?’ or ‘Don’t you want to kill each other?’ or ‘My parents used to play bridge together, until...’ The stereotype of husband-wife bridge partnerships is universal.

When you choose a bridge partner from the general (i.e. non-spousal) population, you tend to pick someone with comparable bridge skills. A major source of strife in husband-wife partnerships is a large disparity in

* You may notice that on the actual deal, East will be squeezed in diamonds and clubs, if the spades and hearts are played first. My dad had to guess how to play this hand and he guessed wrong.

abilities. This leads to tension: more frustration and heightened irritation in the better player and increased nervousness in the weaker player.

The potential for discord escalates when one spouse teaches the other how to play bridge from scratch. What if the learner has no flair? What if the learner has all too much flair and surpasses the teacher in ability? What if the lessons continue without abatement long after the learner perceives the need for them? And what if the learner starts giving lessons back in self-defense?

The setups as described are doomed to failure unless there is a conscious commitment on both sides to make them work.

On the part of the stronger player, exceptional patience and consideration are called for, qualities not often attributed to serious bridge players. Boorish behavior, distasteful at all times, is especially disgusting when aimed at a beginner. If you want to turn your spouse off bridge (and you) then signal your displeasure by any or all of the following:

- Slam your cards on the table during defense.
- Laugh at partner's declarer play.
- Share the correct line of play with the whole room.
- Sigh with exasperation.
- Roll your eyeballs heavenward.
- Beseech the heavens (loudly) for guidance.
- And (of course) seek commiseration from your opponents at the table.

If you want your partner to learn fast (and who doesn't), then offer encouragement and praise, without being patronizing. Note partner's mistakes for later discussion. Constructive criticism is fine, but don't be overly critical. Don't show off your expertise — 'Too bad you couldn't find a spade switch, darling...'

Remember, you too were once a novice, and you didn't acquire your know-how overnight.

On the part of the weaker player, exceptional commitment to the game is called for. If your spouse is a serious player and you are serious about making this partnership work, the most important thing that you can do in self-defense is improve your bridge in a hurry. Study your bidding system with the same dedication that you studied your college courses. Make notes, read books by the experts and, yes, take note of what your partner says. Learn your agreements and stick to them. Be gracious in accepting criticism and, if sometimes it gets to be a bit much, remember

that you are lucky to have a partner who is stronger than you. This will surely speed your progress along.

When husband and wife are roughly equal in ability — at least in the eyes of beholders — there are still many problems that are unique to married partnerships. For one thing, if you are having a bridge-related problem with your partner, who also happens to be married to you, then you bring the problem home. What started off as merely a bad bridge evening escalates into an unpleasant drive home and culminates in an icy rest-of-the-night. No one wants to snuggle up to someone who spent the evening overbidding. On the other hand, that same bad session, played with a different partner, ends when the game ends. You can ponder the evening's tribulations on your own, reflectively, without the emotional trauma of continuing argument.

Another source of problems is familiarity with your spouse. We feel free to say things to one another at the bridge table that we would never say to a casual partner. We also know what words are especially hurtful to our spouse; therefore the hurt lasts longer. Long after the game is over, the lingering emotion is often remorse over how we fought, rather than regret for how we played.

Then there is the fact that any weakness in the marriage tends to be exacerbated at the bridge table. Think of these stereotypes: the hen-pecked husband; the know-it-all wife; the male chauvinist pig and faint-of-heart wishy-washy wife. Now picture these people playing bridge with their spouses! Not a pretty sight.

Finally, there just seems to be much more invested in a serious marital partnership than a non-marital one: huge chunks of time, energy and emotional involvement. Therefore, when things go wrong, there's much more to lose.

Making It Work ---

The problems have been posed, and the pictures painted are bleak. Can a conjugal partnership succeed? I believe that the answer is yes, if at least one member is committed to making it work.

Ann Landers used to receive scores of letters from women who were disenchanted with their husbands. Everything from dirty socks to pampered mistresses invaded her columns; and Ann's advice was always the same: 'Ask yourself whether you'd be better off without him,' she would say, 'and then take the appropriate action.'

What I'm suggesting is this: if bridge with your spouse has been choppy for a while, to the point of your not enjoying it any more, perhaps you should ask yourself the Ann Landers question with respect to bridge. If the answer is yes, you would be better off without him or her as a bridge partner, then do your marriage a favor and start playing with other people. New bridge partners are easier to find than new spouses!

If the answer is that despite your spouse's poor play, lack of judgement, free lessons, obnoxious behavior, insensitivity, etc. you'll still be better off with him or her as a partner, then adjust your attitude to make things work. Consider this: if you simply refuse to engage in argument, the argument will wither on the vine. Think positively. Take time to reflect on the reasons why this partner remains desirable above others. Is she a steady, dependable bridge player? Don't knock it — there are many poor players out there. Is he your best friend? It's great to share the thrills and spills of this roller-coaster game with one's best friend. Is he sexy? Face it, it's fun to have a sexy bridge partner.

The conclusion, then, is yes, this kind of bridge partnership can succeed, but it takes effort. Bridge need not tarnish your relationship; in fact, it may enhance what's positive in your marriage. By the way, after the next session of bridge with your spouse, don't flagellate each other over the bad hands. Snuggle up and talk about the good ones. Surely there were some?

*Premarital Bridge:
Budding
Partnership*

**HOW TO CONCENTRATE ON BRIDGE
WHEN YOUR MIND IS ON SEX**



Very soon after meeting the guy I would marry, it became apparent that he was ideal: played his hands out well, generally returned my suit on defense and was flexible in the bidding. He also shared my passion for the game and got that fiery glint in the eye when discussing it. I won't say that it was love at first sight. However, after our first big win together at rubber bridge, his fate was sealed.

'Do you remember those outrageous college games?' I asked him recently. 'When every hand seemed sexy?'

'You're crazy,' my husband replied. 'There's no such thing as a sexy bridge hand. In fact, some of the stuff you pull at the bridge table — take last night for instance — well, sexy is not exactly the adjective...'



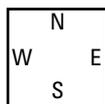
'Don't marry a bridge player,' my mother had said. 'They're impossible to live with.' However, I had simmered in a bridge stew all my life and my future course seemed inevitable. I have wonderful nostalgic memories of bridge and courtship intertwined. With hormones and brain juices flowing in those early days, it was a heady time to learn bridge together.

Make no mistake, the bridge was always serious. Our foursome in college, disdaining more mundane activities like seminars and outdoor sports, would play for hours on end, punctuating the hands with long and ardent discussions. We tried to inject sense into the bidding. We insulted our opponents raucously. We dissected one another's plays with the ruthless precision of surgeons. We bandied about words like 'squeeze' and 'end-play' as if we knew what we were doing. They were delicious on the tongue.

Those early bridge dates with my future husband were fun. And yes, the hands were sexy.

North

♠ J 5
♥ 9 4 3
♦ A Q J 9 8 3
♣ 6 3



East (Me)

♠ Q 9 7 6
♥ K Q 7
♦ 6 5 2
♣ K J 10

Opening lead: ♥5

I would like to believe that several years down the pike, when the sexual fog had somewhat cleared, and I had become less worshipful, that I would have defended this hand correctly for the right reasons. That I would have given the intimidating diamond suit in dummy at least a nervous glance. The beauty of the hand lies in realizing that if declarer has as many as two diamonds, the heart continuation is a disaster, but if he has fewer than two diamonds, the diamond suit cannot be brought in and the trump return is the killer.

Mike Lawrence, in his book *Dynamic Defense*, leads the reader, who is in a defender's seat, through the play of a hand. Clues are piled up, until, at some crucial stage of the hand, one of the defenders has the lead, and it's make or break time for the defense.

For the sexy hand described, the moment of truth comes when I win the jack of clubs. At that time I have complete information. Using the Lawrence method (as opposed to the Adonis method), I might reason as follows. Rather than bidding a suit, partner balanced with a reopening double, which suggests support for three suits. He must have three or four spades, and he has echoed in clubs showing an even number — four, to be consistent with the bidding. Further, the one-heart bid by declarer places at most two hearts in my partner's hand. Conclusion: partner has at least three diamonds and declarer no more than a singleton. The trump return is therefore right.

Notice that with the jack in dummy, a spade shift away from the queen is fraught with danger — South may duck it to partner's ace. Declarer can gallop home with his contract if partner thinks you know what you're doing and leads a second round of spades to your presumed king. Declarer can maneuver a spade ruff, a club to his ace, a successful diamond finesse, a club discard, a diamond ruffed in his hand, and the last club ruffed in dummy. Making four.

A very sexy hand.

Bridge and Sex

Those were the days, when sex was the major feeling flowing between us at the bridge table. It was a time of shrugged-off disasters, cursory discussions and fleeting, superficial arguments that didn't matter. And all criticisms were delivered without the rancor that was to develop in later years. In retrospect I see that it was during those rosy days that we laid the foundations for future problems.

The sexual glow that embraced us at the bridge table created a buffer zone in which bad bridge habits could thrive. We were sexy and alluring. When either of us did something wonderful that worked, we became even sexier. We were loud and effusive about our brilliance. When things went wrong we gave instant lessons at the table. Usually it was he giving me lessons, since he was the more experienced player. This became an early feature of our relationship. The lessons in those days were delivered in a serious, polite, student-of-the-game manner. Perhaps in a subconscious, Darwinian sense he had figured out that being a boor at the bridge table was not going to make me swoon over him. The impressions we made on one another were still important. Being desirable at evening's end was still paramount.

Making It Work _____

How should you tackle the blood-tingling problem of concentrating on bridge when your mind is on sex? Some purists may argue that you should channel the energy into counting the cards. As I see it, there is just one sensible approach: enjoy the feeling while it lasts!

GENERAL INTEREST

Even social bridge can be like a roller-coaster, where partners rocket up and down together from euphoria to 'you idiot' — while club and tournament bridge are worse still. Indeed, when a married couple play bridge together, they tend to drag the marriage along with them — for better or worse. For the answer to the social dilemma of how to survive bridge games with your spouse, read this book. You will learn to deal with such situations as pre-marital bridge, bridge with another couple, disaster recovery, romantic weekends, mid-life crises and even children as the critical phases of a bridge marriage are subjected to Ms. Teukolsky's witty and engaging analysis and advice.



ROSELYN TEUKOLSKY teaches math and computer science at Ithaca High School in upstate New York. She is married to her favorite bridge partner, and they have two daughters, but she has not yet suffered through all the crises in this book. She is a regular contributor to various bridge magazines.



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