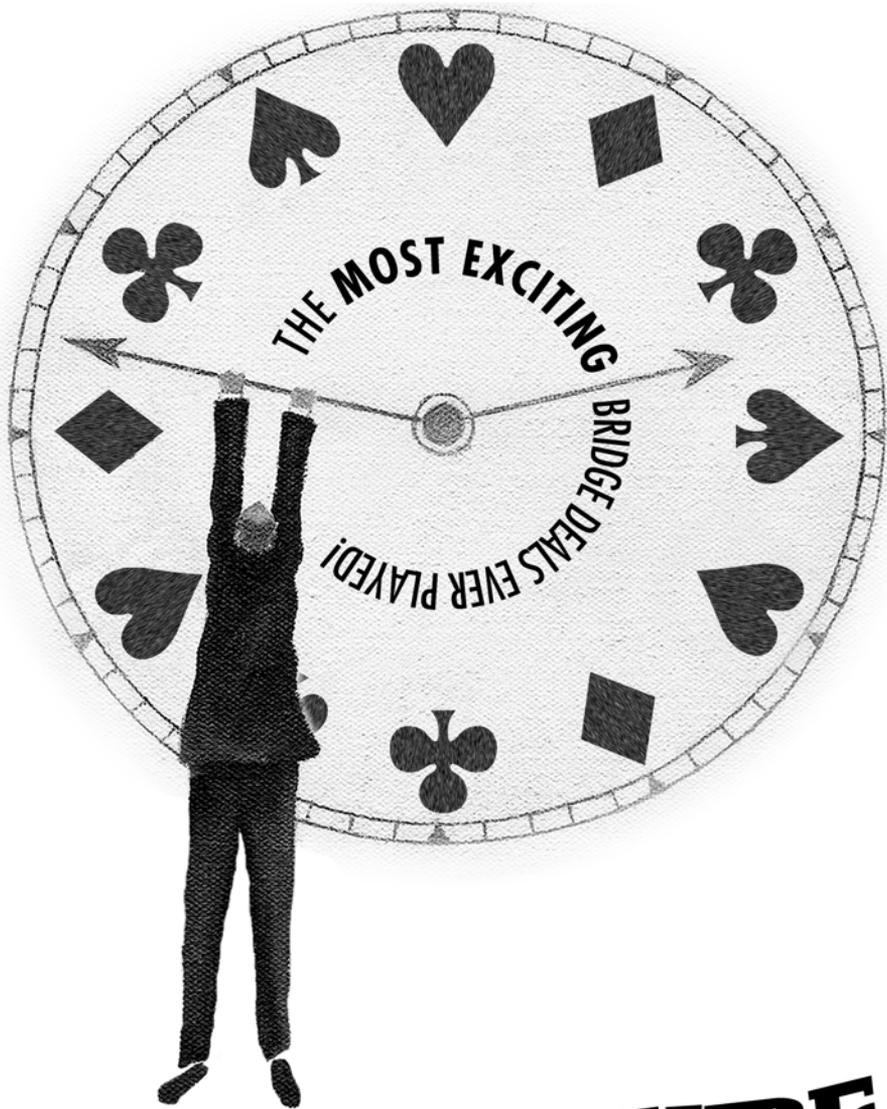
A stylized illustration of a man in a dark suit hanging from the hands of a large clock. The clock face is white with black playing card symbols (hearts, diamonds, clubs, spades) arranged around the perimeter. The background is a vibrant red with a subtle pattern. The text 'THE MOST EXCITING BRIDGE DEALS EVER PLAYED!' is written in red, curved letters across the clock face.

THE MOST EXCITING

BRIDGE DEALS EVER PLAYED!

The **HANDS OF TIME**

**MARK
HORTON**



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FOREWORD

*Still with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
Came on the following feet...*

Francis Thompson

What is it that separates winners from losers? At the top level of any sport, the differences in technical skill are usually small, and there are many instances of the underdog overperforming or the favorite not quite measuring up. In such cases, the reasons for the upset have to be sought in the psychology of the players: their preparation, their mental toughness both in adversity and prosperity, and most of all, their ability to do what it takes to be a winner and to finish off their opponent. And surely the strength of will required for a physical sport like golf or tennis must apply even more ('in spades' perhaps?) to a mind sport like bridge.

In the relatively short history of our game there have been an extraordinary number of encounters at the highest level where one could feel great sympathy for the losers — matches where the two teams have remained inseparable until the very end or where one team has overcome a seemingly insurmountable deficit to take the crown at the end of the day. What was it in the winners that enabled them to remain resolute to the end while the losers somehow failed to take that final hurdle? Is it easier to stay focused in a match that has always been balanced on a knife edge? Is it somehow worse if you have been relaxing in the lull of an apparently unassailable lead, only to have your opponents suddenly close the gap?

These are not easy questions to answer. There is, however, something practical we can learn from such matches, particularly those where one team is playing catch-up (and they form a considerable part of this book). From time to time we all find ourselves in apparently hopeless situations and it is worth looking at the type of strategy most likely to succeed, even when the opposition is of the highest caliber.

As you read this book, you will no doubt conclude as I did that the right approach is one of controlled aggression, combined with the hope that your opponents, believing that the finish line is already in sight, will slightly relax their guard. You will not see outrageous psyches, nor wild overbidding (well, not too often!), but rather a gradual attempt to gnaw away at the opposition's advantage. As with each IMP you draw closer, so the pressure on the opponents mounts and, as in a fifth-set tiebreaker at Wimbledon, it becomes a matter of nerve as much as ability.

The Hands of Time is full of drama, tension, great plays, stunning triumphs and devastating falls from grace. Does anyone out there still believe bridge is not a sport?

Mark Horton
November 2004

INTRODUCTION

I want to start this book by asking a simple question: is the play of today's bridge experts better than that of the players who have participated in the great Championships down the years? As a corollary, what progress have we made in the areas of bidding and play during the nine decades or so that the game as we know it has been in existence?

In every sport I can think of, the level of performance by top competitors improves steadily over time. Faster, higher, stronger. In the vast majority of cases, an objective comparison is possible because we have accurate methods of measurement. Humans are running and swimming faster than they ever have, they are lifting heavier weights, and they are throwing javelins and discuses further every year. Even in sports where such assessments are more subjective, such as soccer or tennis, it is at least safe to say that the level of technique has improved.

Have you ever stopped to consider what 'technique' in bridge actually is?

The clear answer is that technique is mastering something that can be learned, where true 'mastery' also requires one to have the ability to apply what has been learned to situations that arise during the game. For example, every bridge expert understands the principles of elimination play and will usually recognize when they should be applied. If I were to discover a new type of elimination position, I would not be hailed as a great inventor: it would merely be another application of an already well-known technique. In a lesser sense, the choice of an opening lead can also be described as a matter of technique.

It is clear that technique in bridge has advanced over the last eighty or ninety years. To understand this statement, however, you have to compare the level of play in a championship match today with that in some previous contest — say, for example, one of the matches from the famous era of Ely Culbertson.

Look at this deal from the ‘Bridge Battle of the Century’ in 1931, which appears again on [page 14](#).

	♠ A K 2											
	♥ Q 8											
	♦ J 7 3											
	♣ K J 8 7 5											
♠ 7 5	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; 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></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		♠ Q 10 9 8 6 4 3	
	N											
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	♥ K 9 3											
	♦ A K 5 2											
	♣ A Q 9 4 3											

South became declarer in six clubs, and it was assumed by most reporters that a spade or club lead would have defeated the contract. (East actually led the ace of hearts out of turn, and in those days you could call for the lead of a specific suit in that circumstance, so South asked West to lead a diamond and was home when dummy’s jack held.)

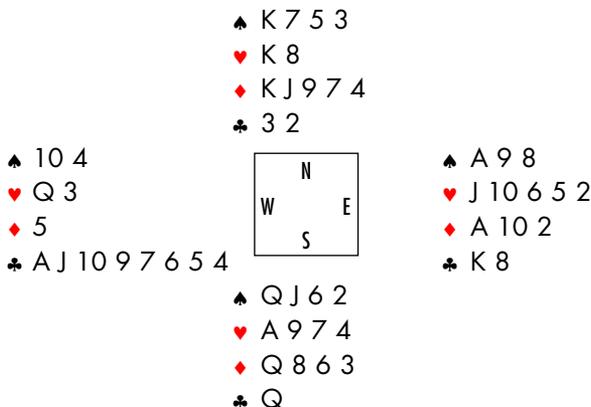
However, a modern-day expert would doubtless overcome either the spade lead or the club lead: win the first trick, draw trumps and lead a low heart from the table. East must duck, so declarer wins, discards a heart on the second spade, ruffs a spade, cashes the ♦ A-K and exits with a heart, forcing East to concede a ruff and discard (a line of play first pointed out by a young man named Terence Reese). The technical name for what declarer does is a Morton’s Fork Coup followed by a partial elimination and throw-in. Similar deals were posed as problems in a book on elimination play published in 2004 and aimed at *intermediate* players.

You might argue that the great Oswald Jacoby would have found the winning line of play at the table given the chance, and that in any case one example proves nothing — and you could be right on both counts. Perhaps this deal only suggests that the bridge reporters of the day were more accident-prone than the modern generation (who have

computers to assist their post-mortem analysis!). Nevertheless, I think we can all accept that today's players possess far more technical knowledge than their predecessors — but do they have any edge in creativity?

I suspect the answer is no. Creativity is not influenced by study or precedent; it is something to which any player may have recourse when faced with a new and difficult problem.

This is a famous modern example, which occurred in the World Championship in 1997:



Five clubs looked hopeless on any lead, as West (the declarer) must surely lose a spade and two hearts. However, North led a diamond, and without pause Jeff Meckstroth played dummy's ten! South won and unsuspectingly returned a diamond. Now declarer was able to win the ace, discarding a heart, and play a heart to the queen and king. That set up a ruffing finesse position against South's ace of hearts and in the fullness of time declarer could dispose of his losing spade.

It is perhaps easier to be creative during the bidding than in the play. Every country can name some number of current or former top players with a certain reputation for imaginative bidding. For example, any list of English players would surely include Adam 'Plum' Meredith, who had a penchant for psyching in spades, Irving Rose and John Collings. Canada would undoubtedly name Eric Murray, and so on. Of the modern generation, the name that most readily springs to mind is that of Swedish star Peter Fredin. However, I doubt any of the older generation would come off second-best in a discussion of that area of the game.

GENERAL INTEREST

As the game of bridge enters its ninth decade of existence, it is fascinating to look back at the best and most exciting moments that have occurred at the bridge table. You'll find it all in this collection: the brilliance, the blunders, the amazing triumphs, and the inexplicable falls from grace. The great players of this last century can be found here too, from Culbertson to Kantar, from Reese to Rodwell, from Harrison-Gray to Hamman and Helgemo, as well as the legendary teams like the Dallas Aces and the Italian Blue Team.

Open this book anywhere, and we bet you can't put it down!



MARK HORTON is a distinguished international bridge player and journalist, who is currently editor of England's BRIDGE magazine. His previous books include *The Bridge Magicians* (with Radoslaw Kielbasinski) and *For Love or Money* (with Brian Senior).

