

Being a Better Bridge Partner

For most of last year, we've focused on improving our declarer play. To help round out our lessons, I think this year we should focus more on bidding. So, over the next few months, we'll cover such topics as useful conventions, bidding in competition and making decisions at the table. Before we kick that off, however, I thought it might be useful to spend some time focusing on part of the game that, in my opinion, gets far too little attention: our approach to the game itself. It's fun to learn a new convention or discover how to execute a squeeze. But, it's also important to focus on improving the softer aspects of the game. If you can't take your lessons to the table, then you're going to have a hard time becoming a better bridge player.

In that vein, here are some of the things I'm working on this year to improve my game. Feel free to consider them my Bridge New Year's resolutions.

1A. I want to be a better, more supportive partner.

1B. I want my internal approach to better match my calm external approach.

I find that I play better when I'm having a good time. One of the reasons we play this game, after all, is to have fun! On the flip side, when I'm mad at myself or at my partner, I often turn one bad board into several bad ones. When I make a mistake, I'm aware of it. So, the last thing I want is my partner pointing it out! When I turn that around to my partner, I think I can improve our results by avoiding creating these stressors as much as possible. Online (where they can't see my grimacing face) that's actually pretty straightforward: Whenever my partner plays a hand, I try to take the same approach. In a private chat—not publicly—I might type:

- glp (good luck partner) when the hand starts
- njp (nice job partner) when they make a hand—occasionally, gjp (great job partner) when they do particularly well
- ntp (nice try partner) when they don't

I'll even throw in a (now I can go public) wdo (well done opponent) when it's merited. I'm certainly not going to give them a "Why didn't you cash your good spade?" We can discuss that after the game, if necessary.

The harder part for me, both online and in person, is making my internal monologue match this calm external approach. Focusing on my partner's mistakes, just like focusing on my own mistakes, has the potential to turn one bad board into several. I'm getting better here, but it's still something I need to improve on to move my game forward.

2. Don't worry about being in the "best" contract at the table. Instead, focus on making the best of where I land.

In most bridge books, there's one "correct" way to bid a hand. But, in real life, there's often a couple of different options. That's true even at the highest level of the game. You just have to check out each month's "It's Your Call" column in the ACBL Bulletin to see that. As a result, a key part of building a strong partnership is understanding each partner's tendencies. If your partner rarely opens 1 NT with a 5-card major, then there's not much point in playing Puppet Stayman. On the other hand, if your partner will bid 1NT with two worthless doubletons, you may have to be a little more cautious in raising directly to 3 NT. That being said, once you're at the table, there's nothing you can do about it. Consider this hand that I recently played in an online robot tournament:

South

♠ A K Q

♥ A Q

♦ A K J 6

♣ A Q J 6

That's right, I was dealer with a 30-POINT monster. Naturally, my thoughts immediately turned to whether we'd be in 6 or 7. Unfortunately, here's how the bidding went:

North

South

2♣

2♦ (waiting)

4 NT (30 - 32 points)

All PASS!?

My mood didn't improve when dummy came down with this tasty morsel after the lead of the ♠J:

North

♠ 9 8 7 5 4 2

♥ 7

♦ 7 4 3

♣ 10 8 2

My first thought was "How are we NOT in 6♠?!" From either side, that contract is cold: Win the first trick, draw trump and drive out the ♣K. That will make the fourth ♣ in hand a winner to park dummy's third ♦ on. I was so focused on that issue that I messed up the play. I cleared ♠s

by cashing the Ace and King and then tried to establish an entry to dummy by leading the ♣Q and then the ♣J. My mistake became obvious when East won this second ♣ with the King and returned a third round of the suit. That let me reach dummy with the 10♣, but it was too soon. I couldn't run dummy's ♠s because I still had the Queen in my hand blocking the suit! While I was able to make the contract, I made only 4, instead of 6, dropping my score from 65% to 19%!

Afterwards, I went back and looked at the board and was even more annoyed with myself! First, the board was played 12 times: nine times in NT and three times in ♠s. It turned out that everyone in ♠s got bad results! One was in 7, down 1. The other two were in 4, but making 6 was worse than all the people making the same number of tricks in No Trump. Those who got top boards were the ones who blasted straight into 6 NT after dummy's 2♦ bid. While that worked on this hand, it fails one of the basic tenets of a good partnership—masterminding the hand. To make 6 NT, despite my powerful hand, I need at least 1, and possibly 2, tricks from dummy. While there's a good chance that North has that much in a random 13 cards, that's not the situation we're in here. Rather, I told him I had 30 - 32 points and he said "Pass." Would he do that with two Kings? No way! He'd almost certainly go to 6NT with a SINGLE King. With two Kings, he'd probably put me in 7. So, by bringing partner into the decision, we're pretty sure partner is sitting with a Yarborough! Now, how do you like your chances at 6NT? To see how dicey this contract is, just switch dummy's ♠s and ♥s. That's still the same "strong" Yarborough, but it offers close to no shot at making 6! So, not only did my bad attitude cost me half a board, it took calm analysis after the fact to realize that I was wrong in the first place!

3A. I will work on improving one aspect of my game this year in pursuit of my ultimate goals.

3B. I will use all the available tools out there to help me along this journey.

I've been playing bridge since I was about 12. So, I've always been pretty comfortable with the play of the hand. This has also led me to set pretty big goals for myself: I plan on becoming a Grand Life Master. Specifically, that means I'll need to win a NABC+ championship. My guess would be Fast Pairs, but I'm not picky! Not surprisingly, I'm not at that level yet.

So, trying to reach your goals raises a few interesting questions. First, how do you identify your weaknesses? Second, how do you improve those weaknesses? And, finally, how do you track that you're making progress?

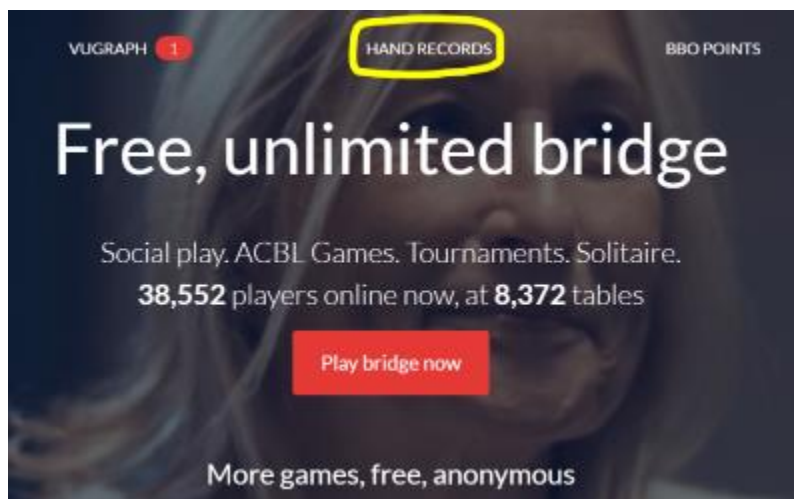
The second one is the easiest: If you know you're weak in an area, seek out help! That could mean reading a bridge book on the subject. You could be taking a Tuesday night class where you suggest topics to your grateful teacher! It could mean playing more bridge. It could also mean talking to more experienced players. The possibilities are nearly endless.

The other two questions are a little harder to answer. For me, there are two areas in which I feel that I need the most improvement: 1. defense and 2. slam bidding. When it comes to slam bidding, it's more about avoiding bad slams than missing good ones. I see too many zeroes when I'm the only

one in a failing slam. However, even with my aggressiveness, these boards don't come up often enough to make a huge difference in my typical results. Defense, on the other hand, comes up on about 40% of my hands. (Did I mention I'm aggressive?) So, even small deficiencies there can be a major impediment.

Back in the days of IRL bridge, finding out how good or bad you are at something could be a pretty tedious task. You'd pull out your log at the end of the session and compare your results to the other tables and the hand record. Even then, it would be very hard to discern patterns, since you might only be looking at 5-10 hands of the type you're interested in. However, now that we're playing on BBO, there's a whole new set of tools available that can help us do some real analysis.

For example, on the main BBO site, this link at the top of the site will take you to a record of most of the hands you've played during the last month. The only events it doesn't cover are large robot games. (Note: It'll be easier if you log onto the BBO site first.)



| HAND RECORDS BBO POINTS BB\$ | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|----------|------|------|--------|--------|---------|--------------|-----------|
| Main Bridge Club hands Tourney hands Team Match hands | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hands played by danbfinn since 2021-01-03 00:00:00 to 2021-01-06 00:00:00 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2021-01-04 | | | | | | | | | | |
| N# | Time | North | South | East | West | Result | Points | Score | Movie | Traveller |
| Instant Robot Duplicate - MP | | | | | | 2/15 | 0.42 | 70.09% | | |
| 1 | 15:19 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3♥N= | 140 | 67.86% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 2 | 15:21 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 1NS-2 | -200 | 14.29% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 3 | 15:23 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3NS+2 | 460 | 100.00% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 4 | 15:25 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3♥S= | 140 | 50.00% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 5 | 15:26 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3♥S+1 | 170 | 92.86% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 6 | 15:29 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 2NS-2 | -100 | 85.71% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 7 | 15:31 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3NS+3 | 690 | 89.29% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 8 | 15:33 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 4♥S= | 420 | 60.71% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| Instant Robot Duplicate - MP | | | | | | 8/15 | | 50.00% | | |
| 9 | 15:43 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 4♥E= | -420 | 21.43% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 10 | 15:44 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3NS= | 600 | 53.57% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 11 | 15:46 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 4♥S= | 420 | 89.29% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 12 | 15:48 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 6♠N= | 1430 | 53.57% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 13 | 15:49 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 4♠N+1 | 650 | 42.86% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 14 | 15:50 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 2♠E+1 | -140 | 50.00% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 15 | 15:52 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3♠S= | 140 | 42.86% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 16 | 15:54 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3NS= | 400 | 46.43% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| Instant Robot Duplicate - MP | | | | | | 5/15 | 0.12 | 65.62% | | |
| 17 | 17:06 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 4♥N+1 | 450 | 78.57% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 18 | 17:08 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3NS+2 | 660 | 71.43% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 19 | 17:09 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 5♠S-1 | -50 | 32.14% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 20 | 17:11 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3♠S+1 | 170 | 46.43% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 21 | 17:12 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 5♠S= | 600 | 64.29% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 22 | 17:13 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 4♠S= | 420 | 75.00% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 23 | 17:15 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3NS-1 | -100 | 92.86% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| 24 | 17:18 | GiB | danbfinn | GiB | GiB | 3NS= | 400 | 64.29% | Movie or Lin | Traveller |
| Instant Robot Duplicate - MP | | | | | | 6/15 | 0.10 | 53.12% | | |

Once you've got the list, like the one above, it's pretty easy to start filtering and sorting the hands to see patterns. For example, on all Robot Instant Tournaments, I average about 60%. But, when we look at just hands on which I was playing defense, that average drops to about 45%. By looking at averages like that, you help minimize the impact of one good or bad board. It also allows you to track the changes over time to see how quickly you're moving toward your goals.

4. I'll try something new this year. Hopefully, it will make me a little nervous, at least at first.

It's easy to fall into a rut at bridge. You play with the same partner in the same game against the same people. While that can be both fun and comforting, it also tends to restrict our growth. So, each year, I try to find something new to try. Sometimes it's a home run, like the year I found Instant Games on BBO: 8 boards in 12 minutes, what could be better! Sometimes it's less successful, like the time I tried regular open games on BBO: Rude people and bad bridge is NOT a good combination.

Last year, I had the pleasure of spending time with all of you in these Zoom lessons. In particular, when I took over creating the lessons, I realized how much effort Linda and the other teachers put into their work. But it's been a real pleasure. Specifically, it's forced me to go beyond what you *should* do to help explain why it's *the right thing* to do.

This year, I'm going to try something totally different. In the spirit of the HBC Board's recent offer, I'm going to try and play with as many HBC members this year as possible. If you or someone you know is interested, you can contact me at either Daniel.finn@conning.com or danbfinn on BBO and we'll set up a time to play. I can't promise that we'll do well, but I can promise you'll get a lot of "wdp's" and "ntp's."