HOW TO BE A LUCKY PLAYER

Matthew Thomson

♠   Matthew Thomson

As a 5 year old, I spent the best part of a year in hospital where I played cards daily. My hospital hi-light was mastering of the poker school. It didn't take much encouragement to join the newly forming Brisbane Water Bridge Club in early 1975, the beginning of my bridge career.

International Bridge Highlights

I first represented Australia in the 1989 Pacific-Asia Teams (Jakarta). John Roberts was my partner in the 1995 World Teams (Beijing) and in the 1996 Olympiad (Rhodes). I was a finalist in the 2000 Olympiad (Maastricht), beaten by eventual gold medalists Italy, and 5th in the 2003 World Teams (Monte Carlo), again beaten by the eventual gold medalists Italy.

After playing in the 2005 World Teams (Estoril) I took a break from competitive bridge. At the time, I was Australia's highest ranked international bridge player.   Returning to competitive bridge in 2012, in partnership with Avi Kanetkar, we won the right to represent the Australian Open Team in the 2013 World Teams (Bali).

I'm currently a World International Master. My partners when representing the Australian Open Bridge Team have been: Peter Newman, John Roberts, Bobby Richman and Paul Marston.

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Acknowledgments

Firstly, thank you to all my bridge partners who have all contributed to my understanding of what it takes to become a lucky player and a winner.

As I was completing this book I was saddened by the sudden death of Bobby Richman, one of our very best and "luckiest" players. I learnt much from Bobby.

When I first played with Bobby, many years ago, as dealer he opened a hand very similar to: ♠ A9872

                        ♡ A10943

                        ♢ 84

                        ♣ 2   with 1♠. When I questioned him why ? Bobby lent over, swaggering a finger towards my face and said, "don't tell your children". That was my first lesson from Bobby on how to become a winning (and lucky) player. Bobby recognised and executed at the bridge table, for many years, much of what I share with you in this book[1].

Thank you to Michael Wilkinson who read through the manuscript, picked up errors, and provided valuable feedback.

Finally to Cathryn, Jeremy, Stephanie and Dom, thank you for putting up for me whilst I completed the book. At times, only our Welsh terrier "Chubba" appreciated my company.

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[1] I've included a hand Bobby bid in his last game at the NSW Bridge Association, see page 44.

Contents

First Things

In this book I explain how to evaluate[1] the trick winning ability of a hand, and then how to apply (execute) the evaluation. And then illustrate with hands. All the hands included are from actual play, illustrating evaluation and execution in action.

The beauty of bridge is that even the best actions will founder sometimes. "The operation was a success but the patient died" - sometimes life is just like bridge. However the better your actions, the more successes you will have, and more of your patients will survive.

Remember bridge is about maximising your score over all the likely distributions of the cards, to achieve this you may need to risk being punished when the card gods are angry. The result of one specific hand proves nothing, however what you need to ask yourself is: was I really unlucky in this instance or could I have evaluated my hand better and taken a better action ?

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[1] I introduced "Evaluation" in my book "Bid More, Play More, Enjoy More, Win More". In this book I expand on how to evaluate and on executing your evaluation using hands from actual play.

Are you a lucky player ?

I have always said "it's better to be a lucky player than a good player". It is no co-incidence that the best players are lucky players. So if you feel you are unlucky at the bridge table, it is time to better engage with your bidding and play so that you become luckier.

You can become a "better" player by improving your bidding system with your partner and by improving your play technique, however this will not make you a lucky player. But the better you evaluate your hand's trick winning potential, and the better you follow through executing your evaluation, the luckier you will become. This is how to become a lucky player (and a much better player).

Hold on, "I always thought the key to becoming a better bridge player was to eliminate, or to at least reduce my errors ?" Yes reducing your errors will make you a "better" player, but again this will not make you a lucky player.

If you focus too heavily on eliminating errors, opportunities to score well will be reduced. Opportunities to induce errors from your opponents will be missed. The taking of calculated risks will be avoided even though you are a favourite to succeed. Your optimism, a great virtue, will be diminished if you always think what could go wrong and do not balance it against what can go right.

Winning players are first and foremost lucky players, and the best lucky players keep their errors to a minimum.

How to Evaluate

Bridge is about *winning tricks*, not counting high card points. Simply, the strength of a bridge hand is its trick winning ability.

"Evaluate" a hand's trick winning ability from its:
  o Points,
  o Shape, and the
  o Location of its honours.
This is your hand's strength. "Evaluate" to determine whether to bid more, or bid less.

Points
Based on the expected trick winning ability of a hand, counting an Ace = 4 points, King = 3 points, Queen = 2 points, and a Jack = 1 point, undervalues aces and over values queens and jacks ("quacks"). For balanced hands, points are a good guide in the bidding, however for shapely hands, points can be a poor guide.

Shapely hands that have a trump fit, especially a nine card (or longer) trump fit, will win more tricks than their points suggest, this is when you must "evaluate".

Shape
Shapely hands are unbalanced hands. Unbalanced hands have a higher trick winning potential. When a long suit of an unbalanced hand fits with partner, their higher trick winning potential is realised.

Tip
Any hand with two (or more) aces is a good hand.

Why ?
If partner bids more, it is likely they are bidding more because of their good shape. An ace opposite a singleton means control and no loser, however lower honours (K,Q or J) opposite partner's shortages are often worthless. An ace opposite partner's long suits are gold, partner can win when they choose and may use your ace to capture lower outstanding honours (eg: via a finesse).

ARE YOU A LUCKY PLAYER?

It is no coincidence that the best players are lucky players. You can become a "better" player by improving your bidding system with your partner and by improving your play technique, however this will not make you a lucky player.

HOW CAN YOU BECOME A LUCKY PLAYER AND A WINNER?

In this book, illustrated with hands from actual play, the author demonstrates ways to become a lucky player. Lucky players evaluate their trick winning potential to recognize and grab opportunities, maximizing their score over all likely distributions of the cards.

MATTHEW THOMSON is a current member of the Australian Bridge Team, and has been a finalist in both the Olympiad and the World Bridge Teams. A bridge professional and teacher, he lives in Sydney Australia with his wife, Cathryn, three adult children, Jeremy, Stephanie and Dominic, and with "Chubba" his Welsh Terrier.