Why You Still LOSE At Bridge

Julian Pottage

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Master Point Press • Toronto, Canada

Master Point Press
331 Douglas Ave.
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M5M 1H2 (416)781-0351
Email: info@masterpointpress.com
Websites: www.masterpointpress.com
www.teachbridge.com
www.bridgeblogging.com
www.ebooksbridge.com

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Pottage, Julian, author
Why you still lose at bridge / Julian Pottage.

Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-77140-000-8 (pbk.).--ISBN 978-1-55494-602-0 (pdf).--
ISBN 978-1-55494-488-0 (epub).--ISBN 978-1-55494-739-3 (mobi)

1. Contract bridge. I. Title.

GV1282.3.P676 2014 795.41'5 C2013-908660-9
C2013-908661-7

Editor Ray Lee
Copyeditor/interior format Sally Sparrow
Cover and interior design Olena S. Sullivan/New Mediatrix

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Introduction

I suspect that some 65 years ago when S.J. ('Skid') Simon wrote *Why You Lose at Bridge* and *Cut for Partners,* he had no idea people would still be enjoying his books today. His advice about playing the people rather than just the cards has stood the test of time very well indeed.

What has changed since Simon's day? For one thing, the standard of bidding has improved a great deal. Many tournament players today can bid as well as the world champions of the postwar years. For another, most bridge buffs these days play more duplicate bridge than rubber. If you do play rubber, you probably play Chicago, the four-deal kind. This can save you a great deal of time and expense if you should happen to cut Mrs. Guggenheim or Futile Willie!

Yes, by popular request, the 'Famous Four' make their long awaited return. I have reserved the second half of the book for you to enjoy and perhaps learn from their antics.

In the first half, I deal with the issues that Skid Simon might have discussed if he were around today — notably those that arise from the changes referred to above. To avoid boring you I have not gone over old ground or sought to include material well covered elsewhere. Instead, I have tried to talk about the losing bids and plays that still occur despite, or in some cases because of, what others have said or written.

I have taken the liberty of assuming that you are more likely to have picked up this book as a fan of Skid Simon rather than of me. You may thus notice a few departures from my usual style to match better with his. I would like to thank all those who have helped to make this a fitting tribute to his memory. These include Ron Garber, Nick Smith, Roy Hughes and Graham Allan, as well as Peter Burrows and Maureen Dennison, who have as usual studied the manuscript with their fine-toothed combs.

Julian Pottage, Porthcawl, Wales, 2014

THE FAMOUS FOUR

Just in case you have not come across them before, let me tell you about the four stereotypical players you will meet in this book.

Following tradition and taking the lady first, we begin with Mrs. Guggenheim. She is a generously-proportioned woman, well turned out, with a smart coat, rings on her fingers and a bulging handbag. She tries hard to be good at the game. She never goes anywhere without a set of the bridge *Pocket Guides*. She has been attending lessons for as long as anyone can remember. Despite this, she remains a hopeless dummy player and is prone to forgetting basic things about the game. Her saving grace is that, unlike the other protagonists, she is well aware of her limitations, being only too happy to let her partners take control.

Mr. Smug is an authoritarian man, used to getting his own way both in business and at the bridge table. Over the years he has lost most of his hair and gained a gaunt look. He does not like to use many conventions. If he bids 3NT, he does not expect you to take him out. He rarely gives signals as a defender or watches for what signals you might give. Making a plan as declarer also seems to be beyond him.

Futile Willie has a gentler look, with a rounded face and still a decent head of hair. He is a great scientist and likes to adopt all of the popular conventions — whether his partner wishes to or not. His main failing as a bridge player is a lack of judgment. This causes him to lose almost as much as Mrs. Guggenheim.

The Unlucky Expert wears a smart suit and rests his glasses halfway down his long nose. Although his bidding and play are impeccable, he never seems to win. The problem is that he never makes the slightest allowance for the other players. He sees suit-preference signals and cuebids that his partners never intended to make. Likewise, he watches the actions of his opponents and assumes that they would bid and play as he does — when of course they don't.

PART 1

HOW NOT TO PLAY BRIDGE

The mistakes are all there, waiting to be made.

Savielly Tartakower, chessmaster.

CHAPTER 1

Showing Shape You Don't Have

Playing a strong notrump, what do you open with this hand?

♠K7 ♥Q986 ♦KJ942 ♣AQ

I suspect you say 1NT. Despite the two doubletons, this seems the best bid on the hand. It describes the strength of the hand, it protects various tenaces and it more or less describes the shape. If you open 1♦, you have no sensible rebid over a 1♠ response. 2♦ is an underbid and 2♥ an overbid; 1NT is an underbid and 2NT a serious overbid.

What's the relevance of this to the topic of 'showing shape you don't have'? Consider this hand:

♠Q973 ♥Q98 ♦K109 ♣AQ8

Playing five-card majors and a strong notrump, you open 1♣. What do you rebid if partner responds 1♦ or 1♥? I hope you say 1NT, which is the correct bid. Would you believe that some people would rebid 1♠ on this hand and yet open 1NT on the previous hand? The idea that bidding 1NT is a good idea, because it shows the shape and strength of your hand and simplifies the late auction, has suddenly gone out the window. Players are too paranoid about missing a 4–4 spade fit. Why weren't they worried about missing a heart fit on the first deal? Surely, a fit is more worth finding when you have a couple of doubletons and the partnership figures to have game on if such a fit exists.

On this second hand (as on the first), 1NT need not end the auction. If partner has enough to look for game, he can check for a spade

fit on the way. There are various conventions in common use to help you do this. In any event, if you do miss a 4–4 spade fit from time to time, does it really matter? Whether the choice of contract lies between 1NT and 2♠ or between 3NT and 4♠, you will be a level higher if you play in spades. Since you have no ruffing value, you will often find that you can make the same number of tricks in a notrump contract.

Playing with the Futile Willies of this world who open 1♣ and rebid 1♠, what does responder do with, say, 8 points and five hearts? Facing a black two-suiter — with which a 1♣ opening and 1♠ rebid are consistent — he will probably want to give preference in the black suits; rebidding the five-bagger in hearts is unlikely to work. However, if opener might turn up with this type of hand, he will want to rebid 1NT or 2♥.

Suppose Futile Willie does get a preference to 2♣. Does the idea of playing in a 4–3 or even 3–3 club fit worry him? No, it's not his problem. He goes back to hearts. He has now bid three different suits, first clubs then spades and now hearts. He has given a perfect picture of his hand — five clubs, four spades, three hearts and an above minimum opening. Alas, this isn't what he holds!

If Futile Willie were the only one to bid this way, I might not have written this chapter. Sadly, even players who think of themselves as experts bid in this way. I can think of one former World champion who suggested the 1♠ rebid in his column. I can also recall a book in which the author thought a number of bids as awful as this were quite normal. Apart from the 1♣ opening and 1♠ rebid, he featured another hand on which the opener bid hearts three times without any support. It didn't occur to him that this sequence might suggest a seven-card heart suit.

Unless fate deals you an awkward 4–4–4–1 type, the normal message of opening in one suit and rebidding in some other suit is this: 'I hold at least five cards in the first suit and at least four cards in my second.' With a flatter shape than this, you should either open or rebid 1NT or 2NT depending upon the strength of the hand. A very important message to convey to your partner is whether you are balanced or not.

You only make an exception to this on two hand types. If your values are nearly all in two four-card suits, you can show your second suit. If you have a good three-card fragment in partner's major, you

can raise him. Now we look at the position from responder's point of view:

♠ 7 3 ♥ Q 9 8 5 2 ♦ 10 9 ♣ A Q 8 2

OPENER	YOU
1♠	1NT
2♦	?

I have seen players here bid 2♥ on the off-chance that their partner has three hearts. While I admit that partner might have three hearts, the odds are somewhat against it. When he bids two suits, he implies a minimum of nine cards between the two suits. If he has exactly nine cards in those suits and his short suits are equal in length, he will hold two hearts. More likely, his short suits divide 3–1 in one way or the other or he has more than nine cards in the long suits. In this case, where do you expect his singleton to lie? Correct — in your longest suit. You don't fancy playing in 2♥ on a 5–1 fit, do you?

By the way, if you do bid 2♥ then you expect your partner to pass if he is 5=1=4=3. He has already bid his shape. Bidding 2♠ because he doesn't fancy playing in 2♥ would overstate his shape.

A good rule of thumb is this: when partner shows two suits you may try to play in your suit at the two-level if you have six cards in it and you may try to play in it at the three-level with seven cards in it. You should manage to remember the six and seven limits because they tie in with the length expected for weak twos and three-level preempts.

Talking about preempts, consider this hand:

♠ K 3 2 ♥ K Q 10 8 3 ♦ A Q 9 6 ♣ 8

Suppose partner opens 3♣. What do you respond? I hope you say 'Pass'. This is the correct call. For 3NT to be on you would need to find partner with ♣AKJxxxx and hope for one or two cards to sit right. Thankfully, I don't know anyone who would bid 3NT. However, I can think of one or two who would bid 3♥. They argue that partner might hold three (or these days even four) hearts. In this case, they would rather play in 4♥ than watch their partner declare 3♣.

If partner opens at the three-level, he tends to have a 7–3–2–1 shape. In which suit is his singleton likely to lie? You are right — in your longest suit. If a singleton is the expected length in responder's

longest suit, opener can regard a doubleton as a good holding, one worth a raise. It follows that responder needs a fair six-card suit — one playable facing a low doubleton — for it to be worth a mention. If you start bidding five-card suits, you are lying about your shape and asking for trouble.

The risks of looking for but failing to find a heart fit are twofold. For one, you are likely to end up in 4♣ instead of 3♣ and so be much more likely to get a minus score. For another, you warn the opponents to stay out of the auction. With the misfit, you would love to hear the opponents come in over 3♣ and hang themselves somewhere.

My next example I also regard as a case of showing shape you don't have. If you just want to consider it as being chicken, I couldn't object to that. You hold this rockcrusher:

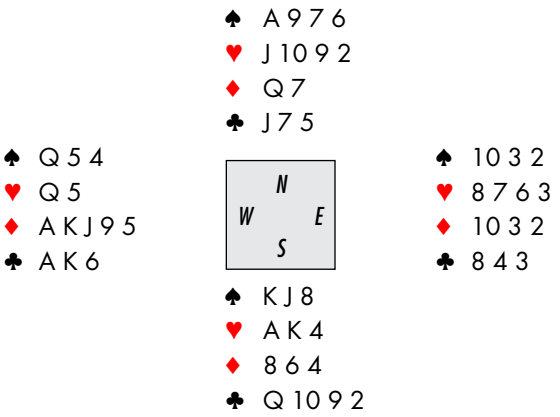
♠ 10 3 2 ♥ 8 7 6 3 ♦ 10 3 2 ♣ 8 4 3

LHO opens 1NT, partner doubles for penalties and the next hand passes. What should you do?

I admit it. The problem isn't fair. You want to know the range of the 1NT and who is vulnerable. I don't think the range of the 1NT is relevant. Let's say for the sake of argument that it's weak, 12–14. Who is vulnerable has a bit more bearing. Let us say that only your side is.

In this case, any call other than pass is highly suspect. If you do bid, partner will place you with five cards or more in the suit you bid. If someone doubles, he's not going to rescue you. You could try an SOS redouble but won't know whether this will improve the contract. I have seen players bid 2♥ on this kind of hand on the basis that the opponents will be reluctant to double you into game. I have also seen players bid 2♣ in the hope that their partner will have a long suit and can bid it. While either strategy *might* work, the odds are strongly against it.

As explained at the start of the chapter, you are heading for trouble if you describe a balanced hand as shapely. Here, there's no need to do any describing. Partner's penalty double doesn't ask you to bid. If he is minimum and balanced, you are in trouble anyway. While 1NT doubled will make, any rescue attempt may well cost 300 or so, even undoubled. If he is shapely or has extras, maybe he can lead his long suit and defeat 1NT without any help from you. If you lose 180 or 380, it isn't the end of the world. It isn't even game. Here's the full deal:



In a duplicate pairs, the East players who called 2♣ played there undoubled and lost 400. They were some of the luckier ones! Those who bid 2♥ often went for 1100. The East players who enjoyed the deal were those who let West cash seven tricks against 1NT.

In the examples so far, partner has not promised a fit. You must still take care not to overstate your shape when he does. Unless he has jumped, he may have expressed support with an imperfect holding.

YOU	**PARTNER**
1♥	1♠
3♦	3♥

Partner may have given false preference with a doubleton heart. If you go on to 4♥, you should have a six-card heart suit. With only five hearts, you should look for another bid: 3♠ if you have three-card spade support, 3NT if you have clubs stopped or 4♦ if you hold five diamonds.

YOU	**PARTNER**
	1♣
1♠	2♠

Here partner may have raised you with three-card support. What else can he do with a 3=4=1=5 or a 3=1=4=5 shape? He cannot reverse with a minimum opening and he hardly wants to repeat his clubs when your side probably has a spade fit. If he has a balanced hand

but a losing doubleton in one of the red suits, again the three-card raise may well describe his hand better than a 1NT rebid. If you rebid 3♠ or 4♠, you imply a five-card or longer spade suit. With four spades and the values to go on, you should look for another bid: 2NT or 3NT if you have the red suits stopped or some number of clubs if you have club support.

Remember the main object of bidding: you and your partner want to tell each other about your hands so you can reach the best contract. Beware of telling the same story twice. If your previous bidding promises a set number of cards in some suit, beware of bidding the suit again unless you have extra length or are certain that your side has a fit.

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INTERMEDIATE

You CAN be a better bridge player!

S.J. Simon's classic *Why You Lose at Bridge*, dispensing advice to the improving player through archetypical bridge characters such as Futile Willie, the Unlucky Expert, and Mrs. Guggenheim, is regarded as one of the best books ever written on the game.

In this follow-up book, Julian Pottage uses the same characters and approach to discuss common failings of modern club players — misdescribing your shape, overvaluing your hand, bidding the wrong slam, playing a flawed system, giving the wrong signal, making losing leads, and many more.

Even if you just eliminate one or two of these basic errors from your game, your scores are sure to improve!

JULIAN POTTAGE (Wales) is best known as a bridge problem constructor, and his many awards include IBPA Book of the Year. His most recent book for Master Point Press was *Defend or Declare?*

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