



BRIDGE

AT

THE TOP

BEHIND THE SCREENS

SAMANTHA PUNCH

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Justin Lall, my first interviewee, who exemplified many of the key qualities of a top player discussed in this book. He sadly passed away at just thirty-three years old in August 2020 as the manuscript was being finalized. This quote from Justin's interview captures the essence of *Bridge at the Top* and reflects why many loved playing with him:

Being a good partner, getting the best out of your partner, is just very important, and having your partner know that you are not going to yell means they will not be overly cautious — they'll just play the game. If people are comfortable playing the game, then they will play well. Whatever level someone is at, you want them to play the best that they can.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my thanks go to the players featured in this book. Not only did they agree to the interviews being held during major tournaments when time is at a premium, they also took the time to review the transcripts and the edited selections prior to publication. Most importantly, I thank them for their insights and their candor. I thoroughly enjoyed every interview and each expert talked about something that none of the others had mentioned. The diversity of perspectives in the book shows how one question can provoke a great range of responses. I felt energized and inspired by the discussions each interview generated and, although common themes emerge across the interviews, there is certainly no consensus on many of the issues raised. I also thank, with apologies, the many players who have been interviewed since 2013, but do not feature in this book owing to space constraints. I remain grateful to them for their time and insights, which have been invaluable for the academic research.

I appreciate the support of many bridge players who have contributed to the journey of *Bridge at the Top*. One of Scotland's finest players, John Matheson, was a willing victim for a pilot interview in 2012. His enthusiasm encouraged me to develop the research project *Bridging Minds: Interactions and Dynamics of the Card Game Bridge*. John's impromptu donation, along with that of Bernard Teltscher, enabled the scope of the project to grow by covering some of the interview transcription costs. I am grateful to Professor Alison Bowes and the University of Stirling for supporting

Bridge: A MindSport for All and enabling it to become my research field. Special thanks to Stephen Peterkin and Moira Bain, who generously provided many voluntary transcriptions and to Christina Ballinger for her valuable input. I would like to thank Wendy Sullivan at the ACBL and Gordon Rainsford at the EBU for providing quiet rooms for the interviews during busy tournaments.

I have been very lucky to collaborate on this book project with a great team of volunteers who helped to edit down each interview transcript from twenty to thirty pages into a readable book chapter. These people, along with those named above and below, have made significant contributions to the development of this book for which I am extremely grateful: Tim Rees, Iain Taylor, Laura Woodruff, Alan Goodman, Liz McGowan, Alan Shepherd and Brian Short. I hope the time-consuming editing process may have provided some novel entertainment during lockdown.

This book would not exist without the invaluable support and work of Ray Lee and Sally Sparrow at Master Point Press, who have been an endless source of advice and guidance. I am particularly thankful to Peg Kaplan, Francesca Canali and the World Bridge Federation for allowing me to use many of their photographs, alongside mine and some of the players' own.

Lastly, I thank my non-bridge-playing parents and siblings for introducing me to whist, sowing the seeds for my late twenties when I encountered bridge for the first time. I hope this book reflects some of the passion and enjoyment I have derived from the complexities of the game.



Samantha Punch, 2020

At the Top of Their Game

This is a bridge book with no bridge hands. It is a book about some of the finest living exponents of the world's greatest card game. It is a book about people and relationships at and away from the table. The material is part of *Bridge: A MindSport for All*, which is contributing to the development of a new academic field, the sociology of mind sport. Its approach to understanding bridge includes an exploration of players' performance and emotions before, during and after play.

Bridge is a game that excites passion, and the beauty of the game lies in its combination of technique, communication and mental stamina. The human and partnership aspects of bridge are unique in mind sports and the game is one of the most intellectually demanding of all time. However, although there are countless books on the technical aspects of bridge, very little has been written about the social interactions that inform the world of international tournament bridge.

What does it take to make a champion? In any sport, how do top players hold their nerve when a world championship is at stake? What thoughts run through their heads at those moments when all can be won or lost on the swing of a racquet or the play of a card? Why do they put themselves through the toughest mental and physical training, the self-discipline and the sacrifice, when there is no guarantee of success? In every tournament there will be many competitors, but only one winning pair or team.

In this book, twenty-five of the world's most celebrated bridge players talk frankly about their lives at the top of the game. They explore the challenges they have encountered, their love of the game and the choices they have made to reach the highest level. This is a book about high performers, male and female, young and not so young, who have attained extraordinary success through skill, vision and dedication. They discuss what drives them to compete, the obstacles they have overcome and their reactions to achievement and setback. No one is born performing at the top of any game and the way to the summit is paved with defeats. As these interviews demonstrate, dealing with triumph and disaster at the highest level is the mark of a champion.

Partnership is a topic that the players return to again and again. Managing the partnership dynamic and being a 'good' partner is one of the keys to excellence. Empathy, effective communication and emotional intelligence are all integral to successful partnerships, yet extraordinarily difficult to maintain under pressure. Team dynamics, often underrated, can also be important, as well as coaching and captaining. These subjects are covered here, along with the friendships, relationships and shared interests that unite the global bridge community. Even for club and social players, this book has much to offer. Managing the human aspects of the game, staying calm and nurturing mental resilience are all essential qualities for success in bridge at any level.

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Sabine Auken

INTERVIEW: LAS VEGAS
NABC, JULY 2014

Sabine Auken (born 1965) is German but lives in Denmark. In recent years she has competed successfully in Open bridge events with regular partner Roy Welland, who is also her life partner. Arguably the most successful woman player of all time, she has won Open, Mixed and Women's events in World, European and North American championships.



Why do you play bridge?

I don't know. I just love it. It's just so much fun. It has so many different facets and it's not just one way of thinking, it's putting things together. To me it's a little bit like detective work. There are some clues out there. You don't know what they are and where they are, so you have to go and find them. Once you have found them you have to put them together like a puzzle and then draw the right conclusions, so it's really multifaceted. To me that's fascinating.

Is there anything you don't like about the game?

I wouldn't say anything major, really. I mean, I object to some people's behavior. And some say bridge can bring the worst out of you and some people behave really badly at the bridge table. But I also think it's extremely interesting why that is the case. For example, some players, especially when they feel that things are not going well for them, then they try to intimidate their opponents. I can fight back, but I think it's really a problem for less experienced players who want to come and enjoy the event when they get treated like that.

What would you say are the key qualities of a top player?

Discipline. I think it's important to have discipline at the bridge table — partnership discipline. Getting upset at the table, it doesn't improve your game, it doesn't improve your partner's game. I can get upset later and have discussions and get really upset, but while the play is going on I think it's important to just carry on. If you can't control yourself, you can be successful at times and you can win events, but I don't think you will be successful in the long run. As well, the most successful bridge players have a special talent

of combining things. In the US, a lot of top players were options traders, for example. It's really related — you very quickly combine things in your head and draw the right conclusion and then act on it. I don't know what to call it. Physical fitness, too — usually when I'm at home I do something every day, I go running or I go swimming. I just feel better. I feel clearer in my head. I have more confidence.

Why is confidence important at the bridge table?

It's a strange thing, really. Sometimes a person comes to your table and you can feel that they are really on a good run and you know they are going to have two tops against you and then they leave and they did have two tops against you. It's also possible the other way around.

But the worst thing you can do is to be arrogant and think that nobody can beat you, because at the bridge table, everybody can beat you. So that's bad. Very bad. No, I'm more thinking of a positive confidence. Thinking you can do it but at the same time knowing that there's no sure thing.

Is there ever a case where you do something different because you are playing a stronger or a weaker team?

Oh, definitely, we change our style from being more or less aggressive, for example, with our preempts. But those are also state-of-the-match decisions. If you feel like you need some points you tend to be more aggressive or try to do something, create something. And that's what one usually would do against really good teams where we feel we are the underdogs. Just by playing normally we probably won't win, so we need to do something.

Do you think any particular aspects of the game are more important than others? Like being a good partner, bidding, declarer play, defense?

Well I'm glad you started off by mentioning being a good partner. There hardly would be one example of success just as an individual. Usually you think of partnerships and if you want to be successful in the long run, that's a key element. I think the most important aspect is respect. You have to fully respect your partner. If you don't have respect, it won't work in the long run. Everybody is different, so trying to know and understand your partner and be empathetic and work together, to do the things that are good for your partnership. You can only do that really if you try to understand your partner as a human being. I mean, in some partnerships people yell at each other and it's fine because it makes them feel good, they like it, it makes them feel better. And if you are fine with that, I don't see any reason not to do that. But if you know that your partner doesn't like it, it would be very bad to do that.

Further Reading

Great reads that all touch on the non-technical aspects of the game that are so important but not often written about.

Auken, Sabine and Mark Horton. *I Love This Game* (Master Point Press, 2006).

Board-by-board excitement of winning a World Championship plus some discussion on team dynamics.

Brogeland, Boye and David Bird. *Bridge at the Edge* (Master Point Press, 2011).

Boye reveals the excitement of bridge if you are not scared to take calculated risks that sometimes fail.

Frazer, Kim. *Gaining the Mental Edge at Bridge* (Master Point Press, 2019).

A practical guide to developing the mental skills and positive mindset required for succeeding in tournament bridge.

Hamman, Bob. *At the Table: My Life and Times* (DBM Pubns, 1994).

An exploration of the importance of mental toughness from one of the best in the world.

Mahmood, Zia. *Bridge My Way* (Faber & Faber, 1991).

Provides insights into the 'three heats,' and on leading the Pakistani team to the World Championship final in New York in 1981.

Rosenberg, Michael. *Bridge, Zia... and Me* (Master Point Press, 1998).

Especially good on partnership dynamics and ethical issues in bridge.

Smith, Marc. *World Class: Conversations with the Bridge Masters* (Master Point Press, 1999).

Great players share their experiences of bridge at the highest level, including reflections on best and worst memories and memorable deals.

Samantha Punch is an international bridge player who represents Scotland on the Women's team (2008 to present, qualifying for the Venice Cup in China, 2019), the Mixed team (Lisbon, 2019) and the Open team for the Camrose (2013, 2016–18, 2020–21) and for the European Championships and World Bridge Games (2021). She has won five Lady Milnes, the Commonwealth's Transnational Teams in Glasgow in 2014 and narrowly lost to France in the semifinal of the World Bridge Games in 2016.

Samantha joined the University of Stirling in 1997, becoming Professor of Sociology in 2013. She has been developing the sociology of bridge and mind sport since 2013, exploring the social interactions and characteristics of the game. In 2019, she launched *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) to use academic research in collaboration with bridge organizations to transform the image of bridge, increase participation and enhance the sustainability of the mind sport.

BAMSA is grateful for all the donations from bridge players, clubs and organizations that make this bridge research possible.

Examples of academic papers using the elite interview material:

Punch, S., Russell, Z. and Cairns, B. '(Per)forming Identity in the Mind-Sport Bridge: Self, Partnership and Community,' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2020).

Punch, S. and Snellgrove, M.L. 'Playing Your Life: Developing Strategies and Managing Impressions in the Game of Bridge,' *Sociological Research Online*, (2020).

For more information about the BAMSA publications and research projects see the *Bridge: A MindSport for All* website: www.bridgemindsport.org



GENERAL INTEREST

In the course of her *Bridge: A MindSport for All* research project, sociologist Dr. Samantha Punch has been able to interview many of the world's top bridge personalities. The topics of these conversations are wide-ranging, including dynamics at the table, challenges, motivations, emotions, partnerships, teammates, skill development and gender issues. As a bonus, each subject offers their favorite bridge tip. Top players, coaches and even sponsors talk frankly about what life in the top echelons of bridge is all about — and give the reader a revealing glimpse of what it is really like 'behind the screens'.

The interviews make the names we see on VuGraph come to life. The tips are tricks of the trade that will be useful to players of all levels. It is a fun and informative read.

— Jill Levin

...intimate and revealing pictures of who these stars are, how they got to the top, and what keeps them there. The interviews are absorbing reading and the advice will help players at any level. The suggestions on partnership and mental toughness are of particular note. — Chip Martel



SAMANTHA PUNCH (UK) is a professor of sociology at the University of Stirling. A Scottish international bridge player, she is the driving force behind the 'Keep Bridge Alive' campaign, now renamed *Bridge: A MindSport for All*.

