



The Art of Becoming A Top Bridge Player



**Samantha Punch
with Tim Rees**



**Foreword by
Jeff Meckstroth**

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Dedication

The book is dedicated to Ciara Burns, a great player from Northern Ireland, who passed away shortly after her interview. She was an excellent example of a friendly opponent and tolerant partner who played hard but loved to have fun at the table. In her own words:

I'm never unpleasant at the table. I'm not that sort of person. Mary, who I play bridge with, when we finish a hand, we never say anything to each other at the table. I know she's made a mistake, she knows she's made a mistake or vice versa and she hasn't done it on purpose and I haven't done it on purpose. We'll maybe talk about it at the end, if there's a bidding misunderstanding, but if she or I misplay a hand we know it wasn't on purpose. So, just move on! A bad board is a bad board - it's not the end of the world.



Ciara Burns

Acknowledgements

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Foreword

This is a unique and intriguing bridge book as it contains no bridge hands. Sam Punch, as a Professor of Sociology, has interviewed many top players of the game. Her first book *Bridge at the Top: Behind the Screens* presented 25 interviews. This new book contains fresh material covering topics from across these and 35 additional interviews.

I was her second interviewee, and when she asked to interview me, I assumed it would be the usual 5-10 minutes that journalists request after a game. My eyes widened as she said it would be at least an hour, more if I liked her questions. We were in Atlanta at an NABC (North American Bridge Championship) so I agreed to an hour maximum. However, we lost track of time and I was happy to spend nearly two hours mulling over life at the bridge table.

As a result of these interviews, her research team *Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA)* have published a series of academic papers relating to the ‘Bridging Minds’ study. However, this book is not for the academic community. Rather it is for players who are interested in how the top level think. If you are a student of the game, this book is for you. It is an invaluable tool for international players and anyone aspiring to play serious bridge.

In this book, Sam and Tim offer an indepth discussion of the non-technical aspects of bridge from the perspectives of top players. It is an insightful and often entertaining read, as world class players reveal their rocky road to success. Even the best players make plenty of mistakes and may struggle to remain calm and focused in the heat of battle.

For top players, bridge is often played in an intense, high-pressure environment. The players in this book share their strengths and weaknesses, reflecting on how they respond to mistakes and manage their emotions. Delving inside the minds of top players, you will hear how we think about the game and our approach to forming successful partnerships. Each chapter ends with useful tips that will enhance your journey to winning bridge.

Jeff Meckstroth

Introduction

The road to success is always under construction.

(Arnold Palmer)

Bridge is a mindsport that attracts those who love challenging card-games, problems and puzzles. Once smitten by the bridge bug, a lifelong serious leisure activity is assured. It is a mesmerising and absorbing game, which can also frustrate at times. How do you play the mindsport to the best of your potential? What non-technical aspects of the game can you master to aid your path to success?

This book discusses findings from 60 interviews with top bridge players from Europe and North America. The players talk about how they approach the game and how they cope with the non-technical side of playing bridge at the top level. Their responses are clustered around the following themes: improving your game, coping with mistakes and emotions, how to become a good partner in a successful partnership, dealing with pressure and coping with loss.

Participating in top-level bridge demands specific skills that enhance both partnership and team interactions requiring dedication, discipline and practice. In particular, this book explores many different aspects of partnership dynamics as this is key to winning bridge. Are you the best partner you can be? How can you get the best out of your partner and yourself at the table?

The interviews took place at international bridge tournaments over a number of years. Three of the players interviewed have since passed away, but their quotations remain as their advice for potential top players is insightful. Interviews with world-class players, top-level sponsors and international juniors formed part of the Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA) research. The sociological study ‘Bridging Minds’ explored many non-technical sides of the mindsport (see *bridgemindsport.org*).

All the elite-level players have represented their country at junior level or in the women, open and/or senior categories. Note that the country indicated is the one they represented at the time of the interview. The interviews took place between 2013 and 2022. Given the book spans players from North America and Europe, we have included a broad reference to the younger generation (under 35 years of age) to indicate

potential differences between the experiences of older and younger players. This is the age they were when interviewed. The cut off at 35 reflects that younger players can be juniors until 31 and are often considered ‘ex-juniors’ for a few years after that. Some potentially sensitive quotations have been anonymised, but mostly players’ real names are used.

This book is aimed at aspiring international players, coaches, junior squads and those keen to develop their game. It offers advice and tools to improve partnership dynamics, enjoy winning and cope with losing at bridge. What comes across in the interviews is that a player’s motivation and focus are key qualities of a top player. Those at the top of their game have worked and trained hard to develop their skills, allowing them to expand their own limits and play their best game in highly competitive and stressful environments. By reflecting on the top tips provided by some of the best players in the world, this book can enable you to hone your partnership and team skills.



Samantha Punch

1. Player Development in Bridge

The more I practice, the luckier I get.

(Gary Player)

This chapter considers what top players think about self-development. It is important for serious bridge players to understand, analyse and manage personal, partnership and team decision-making and emotions. The players discuss how they improved their game in the early years of their careers and in what ways their game has changed over the years. They then go on to talk about their strong and weak points with regards to bridge and where they would still like to improve.

Early Game Improvement

The players describe how they improved their game when they first started. The most common topics that come up are:

- Read bridge books
- Practiced/played a lot
- Learnt from mistakes/going over hands
- Had a good teacher/training
- Played with and against better players
- Learnt from partner
- Hard work/dedication

Read books about bridge

Reading bridge books is the most common answer in relation to the early development of top players:

Played. Read. I was really intrigued by Reese's books, I thought they were just absolutely incredible.

(Bob Hamman, USA)

One of the best books I ever read was Mike Lawrence's book on hand evaluation. It cleared up an awful lot of things for me.

(Jason Hackett, England)

Players talk about the use of books as a way of getting ideas and better understanding of the dynamics of the game. Many players still read to improve their game or feel that to improve their game they ought to be reading books.

Practice and play a lot

In speaking about practicing and playing a lot to improve their game, players say:

I spent a lot of time in the 80s, 90s and beyond doing computer simulations and a lot of trial and error with bidding methods and stuff.

(Eric Rodwell, USA)

I played bridge 24 hours a day. You can ask anyone who knew me from when I was 16. I got on Bridge Base and I would play and play and play and play.

(Anam Tebha, under 35, USA)



Anam Tebha

GENERAL INTEREST

Dr. Samantha Punch has interviewed many of the world's top bridge personalities. The players discuss their approach to the game, including subjects such as improving your game, coping with mistakes and emotions, how to become a good partner in a successful partnership, dealing with pressure and coping with loss.

This book aims to show aspiring and expert players how they might develop their game and improve their partnership dynamics. It covers the non-technical aspects of the game, helping players and partnerships to become the best they can be. At the top level, these 'small gains' can make the difference between winning and losing.

Whether you are a top player, or an aspiring bridge player near the start of your journey, or, perhaps even especially, a non-bridge player, you will find Sam and Tim's insights absolutely fascinating.

Andrew Robson

The opportunity to read how so many great players approach different aspects of the game is not only interesting, but highly educational.

Roy Welland

Let Samantha show you how to not only win all the postmortems, but how to also be considered a true winner by your partners, teammates and even your opponents.

Sabine Auken



SAMANTHA PUNCH (Scotland) is a professor of sociology at the University of Stirling. A Scottish international bridge player, she is the driving force behind the project: Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA).

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