

NORTHERN LIGHTS

Selections from CANADIAN MASTERPOINT
bridge magazine

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John Gowdy	David Lindop
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Introduction

Canadian Master Point magazine was born in 1991 and was laid to rest with much regret (to make way for Master Point Press and a new focus on book publishing) in 1997. After every issue the editors would pronounce, ‘This is the best issue ever’ — and it was. In those years, we published several hundred pages full of original material, much of which was far too good to be lost and forgotten. Hence this book.

Canadian Master Point was born because we believed that Canadians should have a forum to share their bridge adventures and ideas; but while we always had a Canadian focus, we soon had an international set of writers. Contributions came from as far away as India and as close as the Toronto area, and everywhere in between. Certainly the reason that the magazine existed at all was the result of our volunteer team starting with our Editorial Board. The founding members included Shelagh Paulsson and Maureen Culp, and later members at various times were John Gowdy, Diane Bryan, Patti Lee, and Ron Bishop.

The magazine was a labor of love (which being translated, means that none of us ever got paid for what we were doing). This included our writers, many of them professionals, who nevertheless entered into the spirit of the thing and made their work available to us *gratis*. Without their work we wouldn’t have had a magazine at all, and without the support of our advertisers and sponsors we wouldn’t have been able to pay our printing bills. We were also lucky enough to receive unsolicited donations from individuals and bridge associations who simply loved the magazine. From a small start, we expanded to an estimated readership of more than 5000 across Canada, and even had subscribers as far away as Australia.

The magazine covered a wide range of subjects. There were puzzles and games, book reviews, editorials, letters to the editor, technical articles, humor, interesting bridge stories and hands and always something for beginners. In selecting the material for this book we tried to pick material from most categories and from a wide variety of authors. Our goal was that not only would the collection be representative of our best material, but it would also have enough in it for everyone to find lots that they wanted to read.

If you don’t play your bridge in Canada, you’re going to come across some unfamiliar names in these pages. But perhaps this will simply provide an even better adventure. We enjoyed doing this book, because we got to read all the magazines again, revisit our own favorite pieces, and relive for a little while the fun that we had putting the magazine together. We hope you have just as good a time.

Ray & Linda Lee
Toronto, October 2003

THE PLAY'S THE THING

Ah, declarer play, the one aspect of the game where we're completely on our own, to rise or fall by our own efforts. If only we were as good at it as we all imagine we are.



No Beer for Me

J O H N G O W D Y

Canadian international John Gowdy has spent many years coaching and mentoring junior players. This article came about through his experience as non-playing captain of a Canadian Junior team at the World Championships. If you've never heard of the beer card, here's an explanation. It's a neat device that gives you something to play for on those oh, so boring hands where the result is certain from a fairly early stage.

The 1991 NEC World Junior Championships produced a number of positives, not the least of which to these old bones was the invention of the 'beer card'. This was a fascinating way that the North American juniors found to liven up otherwise dull deals during practice sessions, and as a by-product to increase the attention paid to defense and declarer play.

The 'beer card' is the seven of diamonds (an arbitrary card), and it works as follows. If, while successfully declaring a non-diamond contract, you can win the last trick with the seven of diamonds, then your partner owes you a beer. However, if in an attempt to 'beer' your partner you drop a trick, you owe your partner two beers. Similarly while defending, if you can beat a contract and score the seven of diamonds at Trick 13, the same applies. You can, of course, substitute for beer the beverage of your choice, be it Scotch or coffee.

The concept is simple — in practice it can be a little more difficult. Let me give you a hand from a Regional Open Pairs.

	♠ K 5 ♥ Q 8 3 ♦ A Q 8 4 ♣ K Q 7 3											
♠ 9 8 6 4 ♥ A 10 6 5 ♦ K J 9 6 ♣ 2	<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 10 2 ♥ K J 7 2 ♦ 10 3 ♣ A 9 8 5 4	
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	♠ A Q J 7 3 ♥ 9 4 ♦ 7 5 2 ♣ J 10 6											
West	North East		South									
pass	1♣	pass	1♠									
dbl	redbl	2♥	2♠									
all pass												

West leads his stiff club to the ace, and East returns the nine of clubs (suit preference for hearts), which West ruffs. A small heart comes back to the jack, another club ruff, a heart to the king, and we have arrived at this position as East leads another club:

♠ K 5
 ♥ Q
 ♦ A Q 8 4
 ♣ K

	N	
W		E
	S	

 ♠ A Q J 7 3
 ♥ —
 ♦ 7 5 2
 ♣ —

The hand should by now be an open book. You must ruff high now, and draw three rounds of trumps, throwing a diamond from dummy. Now the last trump squeezes West in the red suits in this ending:

♠ —		
♥ Q		
♦ A Q 8		
♣ —		

♠ —		
♥ A	W ^N S ^E	IMMATERIAL
♦ K J 9		
♣ —		

♠ 3		
♥ —		
♦ 7 5 2		
♣ —		

But wait! Does the layout look as it is here, or did you throw away dummy's eight of diamonds, and keep the four? If not, when you cash your last trump, West throws his nine of diamonds, while you dispose of the now worthless queen of hearts; you take the marked diamond finesse, but you are stuck in dummy! You make your contract, sure, but your last trick is not the very valuable seven of diamonds, but the worthless eight!

As you've probably guessed by now, I missed this play at the table, and had to suffer an agonizing dinner as partner Geoff Hampson got to tell everyone about my heavy-handed declarer play.

Encounters with the ♥7

M I C H A E L S C H O E N B O R N

Michael Schoenborn ('The Shoe') is perhaps the epitome of S.J. Simon's Unlucky Expert, although arguably much more imaginative than that particular character. A talented bridge player, his career has been bedeviled by ill-health, ill-luck, and the vagaries of chance. Michael is also a fine writer, as you will discover in this book, and one day perhaps, we'll persuade him to let us publish a collection of his work. The Shoe has an immense natural ability for this game. Blessed with great imagination and flair, he is also possessed of extraordinary technical skill and card sense. Add that to a prodigious memory for hands, and a fascination with esoteric endings, and you'll see why the next piece is so typical of his writing.

It has always been one of the most fascinating aspects of bridge that you can play for a lifetime and still encounter brand-new situations. That was the case as the card gods readied themselves to eliminate my team from a CNTC in Vancouver; we were to finish seventh overall, one place lower than we had finished in the Bermuda Bowl a year earlier. Perhaps because we refused to believe in our demise and continued to wrestle with our fate, those same exasperating gods threw us a couple of hands to smile about. This was the first:

♠ K J 4 2	♠ 9 5					
♥ J 10	♥ Q 7 3					
♦ Q 5	♦ A 10 8 6 4 3					
♣ K J 10 8 5	♣ Q 4					
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> </table>	W	N	S	E	
W	N					
S	E					
	♠ A Q 10 3					
	♥ 9 5 4					
	♦ K J 9 7					
	♣ 9 6					
	♠ 8 7 6					
	♥ A K 8 6 2					
	♦ 2					
	♣ A 7 3 2					

You are South (me), and get to open a Roman two-bid showing hearts and clubs; this improves Harmon Edgar's two queens and his three-card fit for your heart suit (known to be at least five), so he makes a game try, and you reach the rather dizzy heights of a three hearts contract. Duncan Phillips finds the lead of the ten of hearts, Bill Crissey (East) looks at the dummy, Harmon leaves to have a smoke, and the kibitzer moves in to turn the cards. After you

finish berating the kibitzer for the lousy dummy, you have to figure out how to make this hand.

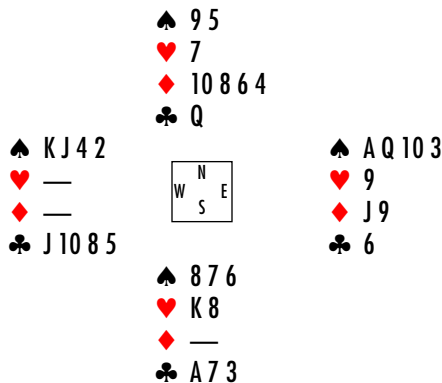
Superficially, it looks as though you're going to need to find the club king on the left, and still ruff a club in dummy (i.e. a 4-3 club split, or short clubs with short hearts), plus, of course, a favorable trump break. All that comes to about a 20% chance, and normally your analysis would stop here, but this is the CNTC, so you take the extra fifteen seconds to see how you are going to execute all this. Something like this:

You will win the opening trump lead and play a low club towards the queen; LHO will rise with his presumed king and return a trump, which you will win in dummy with the queen. After you cash the club queen, the only way back to your hand will be via the ace of diamonds and a ruff. Then you trump your low club with dummy's last heart and return with another diamond ruff. You can't afford any loser-on-loser plays because the opponents will probably be able to ruff out your ace of clubs, or maneuver an uppercut in spades. In short, the lofty 20% chance you gave yourself is further diminished by the need to find either the third heart or the short diamonds on your right, or a 3-3 diamond split. The club ruff in dummy is a one-in-six shot at best.

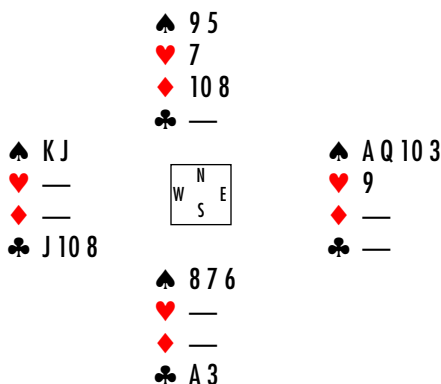
You know you are being unlucky in an event when you can analyze as beautifully as this, but your four-to-one shot finishes up the track. On the other hand, you can try for 3-3 diamonds, 3-2 hearts, and the club king on the left, a theoretical one-in-eight shot that seems more probable after the trump lead, and has some chances even against less favorable splits. Also, if it works you make an overtrick!

As you can see from the diagram above, the seven-to-one shot looks as though it, too, will run up the track, as diamonds are 4-2, so you are probably wondering for whose benefit I am going through this analysis. Meanwhile, back at the hand...

I won the opening lead with the ace of hearts, and led a diamond to the ace, followed by a diamond ruff. A low club produced the king on my left, followed by the jack of hearts, which was won in dummy with the queen. Suddenly, the hand was almost in a position to claim, as Duncan would never have led the heart ten from J-10-9. The position now was:



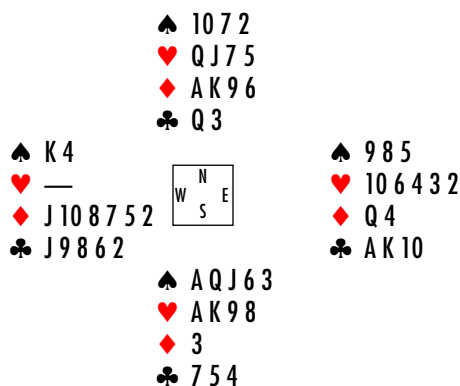
Do you see what has happened? The seven of hearts has become a very important card, as long as you do not become fixated on a 3-3 diamond split. Trump a diamond with the eight of hearts, then travel back to the club queen and ruff another diamond with the heart king! This sets up the diamonds, and also RHO's nine of hearts. When you continue with the ace of clubs, pitching a spade, this is the situation:



On the lead of the ace of clubs, Bill can't afford to trump, because that sets up the seven of hearts as an entry for the two good diamonds. A sort of trump winkle, as he has to pitch a spade. You didn't come all the way to Vancouver to miss a loser-on-loser play, and, needing only one more trick, you continue with the three of clubs to Duncan's ten, pitching dummy's remaining spade. Duncan has one more club to cash, but after dummy has thrown one of the good diamonds on it, it's finally time for spades in the two-card ending. Bill is known to be out of diamonds and clubs, so his last two cards are the nine of hearts and a spade: dummy can ruff the spade at Trick 12 in complete safety.

Is this a 'trump winkle'? Who knows? Who cares? It probably won't happen again in your lifetime. Partners, by the way, went for -100 in three spades, so +140 was worth a 1-IMP swing. 'How could we not bid on?' they asked. 'Three hearts was cold.'

Late in the event, we were matched against a team that was destined to beat us into the semifinal. We were 50 VPs behind them, and for practical purposes needed a blitz. This was the first board:

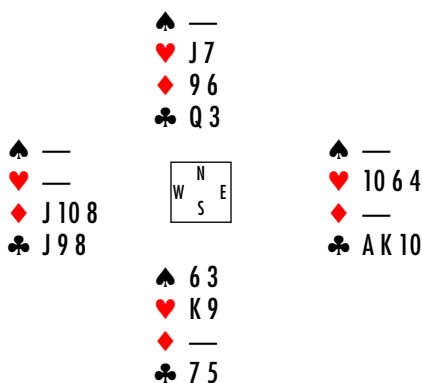


West	North	East	South
LHO ¹	Harmon	George	Shoe ²
pass	2NT ⁴	pass	1♥ ³
pass	4♥ ⁶	pass	3♣ ⁵
pass			pass ⁷

1. Name withheld to protect the guilty
2. Equally guilty
3. Canapé style, 11-16 HCP
4. Forcing heart raise
5. Exactly four hearts, longer suit somewhere
6. Minimum, no slam interest
7. Disciplined pass

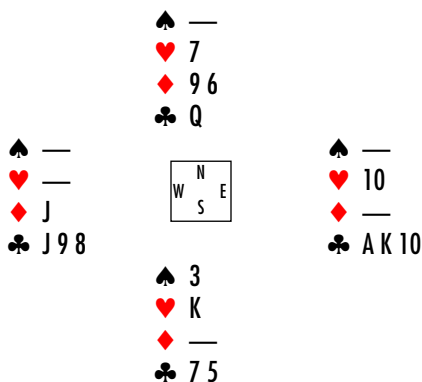
On the lead of a small diamond, I won the first trick in dummy, and thought it would be a good idea to take the spade finesse right away, my queen losing to the king. On the next diamond, I again opted for the mundane play, rising with dummy's other winner and pitching a small club. Now, after a heart to the ace (LHO showing out), I was in a position to claim by cashing two high spades (RHO showing in) and then ruffing back and forth in spades and diamonds, using high trumps from dummy for my good spades. In all, I would take two high spades, two high diamonds, two high spade ruffs, and four trumps in my hand. But... I didn't come all the way to the CNTC finals in Vancouver just to play George Holland, who had five hearts, to hold three of the missing five spades, even if that was the actual situation. I had a chance, after all, to execute a variation of the 'cigarette lighter coup' from *Bridge in the Menagerie*. I cashed the ace of spades, noting with satisfaction that LHO could not give any kind of count, having had to play the king last time. Then over to dummy with the queen of hearts, to bamboozle George with the ten of spades...

Not only was George not bamboozled, but he proceeded to show me the error of my ways by defending correctly. This was now the position, with the lead in my hand after overtaking the spade:



As I led the fourth spade, LHO pitched a diamond, and dummy released the ♣3 while George ruffed and returned a trump. I played the nine, and LHO thought I couldn't afford to overtake with the jack in dummy, so he pitched another diamond. One misdefense to one misplay, and suddenly we have returned to that place we had never been...

Overtaking the nine of hearts with the jack produces this ending:



Now do you recognize it? Trump a diamond with the heart king, as George pitches a club. The heart ten is set up for the defenders, but so is the nine of diamonds in dummy. Dummy's last club goes on the good spade, and George can't ruff as dummy's seven of hearts becomes the entry to the good diamond. He has no choice but to pitch a club, but he still has one club left in the two card ending, so dummy's heart seven scores the tenth trick by ruffing a club at Trick 12!

The hand was always cold, you say? I had to be one of the worst to try the 'cigarette lighter coup' on the wrong hand, you say? Surely you didn't expect two hands from a player on the seventh-place team, both about the seven of hearts, both to be flawlessly brilliant? Where would be the justice in that? This was definitely an event where we had to settle for average, so one of our worst hands back-to-back with one of our best was about par for the course.

The Road Not Taken

J O H N C U N N I N G H A M

John Cunningham is an expert bridge player whose very talent makes it hard for him to keep partners – a unique and incredibly imaginative approach to the game. John is well-known by Toronto players never to open a four-card major – he doesn't believe in them; five, yes, three, yes, but never four. A superb card player, he's not above pointing a wry finger at his own foibles, as you can see from the following:

With apologies to the memory of Robert Frost.

The accomplished card player very often is able to form an accurate picture of the opposing hands as the play evolves, so that what would be a guess for some can become a sure thing for the expert. Witness this hand from a recent Club Sectional tournament. Playing matchpoints, with no one vulnerable, I hold:

♠ A 8 7 2 ♥ 7 5 4 ♦ 6 3 ♣ A Q 9 4

RHO commences with a nebulous one diamond. I pass, LHO raises, and partner doubles. It's clear that I have a good hand for this auction, so rather than bidding three spades I choose to cuebid three diamonds with the intention of correcting a minimum heart bid to spades. Sure enough, that's what happens, and I'm left to play three spades.

A diamond is led to this disappointing dummy:

♠ 9 6 5 3
 ♥ A 10 9 2
 ♦ A K
 ♣ 7 5 3

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ A 8 7 2
 ♥ 7 5 4
 ♦ 6 3
 ♣ A Q 9 4

West

2♦
 pass
 all pass

North East

dbl
 3♥

1♦
 pass
 pass

South

pass
 3♦
 3♠

We have lots of tricks on defense, so I'm going to have to make this contract to get any matchpoints. How in the world can I avoid five losers? There may be a chance of an elimination: I can try for the hand with the long spade to have three hearts and short clubs. For this to work the club finesse must be right, the hearts 3-3, and the spades 3-2.

I lead a spade from dummy, East plays the ten, and I let this hold. He plugs away with diamonds, which doesn't hurt me. After a spade to the queen, ace, jack, and a heart to the nine and queen, East gets around to clubs, and my queen holds. Now if West has a hand like

♠ K J x ♥ J x x ♦ J x x x x ♣ x x

I can make this contract.

I continue with a heart to the ace and I'm at the crossroads. If East has the king of hearts, I must continue hearts, win the club return, and exit a spade in the hope of endplaying West. If West has it, I must first remove his hoped-for one remaining club since otherwise when I put him in he will cash the spade king and get out with a club. Of course, I expect to guess the position correctly, based on the bidding and play so far. Of course.

Well... sometimes not.

At this point, though, I realize that I have just taken a sure thing (given the position of the cards so far) and turned it into an expert guess! This particular crossroads could have been avoided altogether: all I had to do was play a heart to the ten instead of cashing the ace. If the heart ten wins I am home. If it loses, East is in and cannot get to West to cash the spade king; I win the return, complete the elimination and put East away with a spade.

The full deal was:

♠ K J 4	♠ 9 6 5 3	♠ Q 10						
♥ J 8 3	♥ A 10 9 2	♥ K Q 6						
♦ 10 9 7 4 2	♦ A K	♦ Q J 8 5						
♣ 10 8	♣ 7 5 3	♣ K J 6 2						
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td><td></td></tr> </table>	W	N	E	S			
W	N	E						
S								
	♠ A 8 7 2							
	♥ 7 5 4							
	♦ 6 3							
	♣ A Q 9 4							

The moral: it's bad enough that the opponents are always looking to make you guess, without imposing a guess upon yourself.

Would You Rather be Lucky or Good?

F R E D G I T E L M A N

As the old aphorism has it, 'it's smarter to be lucky than it's lucky to be smart'. The Spingold match that your editors lost ten years ago by bidding a 90% slam that went down still hurts a lot. But perhaps those are just the ones we remember, while we forget the 10% slams that somehow come home! Like Fred Gitelman, however, we are prepared to soldier on believing that in the long run, making the right bids and plays will pay off.

If you want to learn to win at bridge, you must also learn to lose. Bridge is a probabilistic game: no matter how well you play the game, the odds will eventually catch up with you.

Suppose you and your partner bid a good slam not reached by the other team. Trumps are 4-0, however, and you lose 13 IMPs instead of gaining 13. You lose the match. Unlucky for you: 90% of the time you would have won the match, but today is in that other 10%. Is virtue its own reward? What is more important to you, bidding to the right contract or winning the match?

The following hand from the fourth quarter of a Spingold match from the Summer Nationals provoked these questions:

Fred	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 40px; margin: 0 auto;"> N W E S </div>	Sheri		
♠ x x		♠ A J 9 8 7 6		
♥ A K J		♥ x		
♦ Q x x x x		♦ A K x x		
♣ A J x		♣ Q x		
<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> 1♦ 1NT 2♦ 2♠ 3♥ 4♣ 5♦ </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> 1♠ 2♣ 2♥ 2NT 3♠ 4♦ 6♦ </td> </tr> </table>			1♦ 1NT 2♦ 2♠ 3♥ 4♣ 5♦	1♠ 2♣ 2♥ 2NT 3♠ 4♦ 6♦
1♦ 1NT 2♦ 2♠ 3♥ 4♣ 5♦	1♠ 2♣ 2♥ 2NT 3♠ 4♦ 6♦			

The 1NT rebid showed 15-17, and Sheri's next five bids were relays, asking me more about my hand. I showed 2-3-5-3 distribution, 5 controls (A=2, K=1) and the ♥K and no other kings. Sheri knew that I had the other two aces and either the ♠Q or the ♦Q to make up 15 points, so 6♦ had to be an excellent contract. Trumps were 4-0, however, and the slam failed. We lost the match by 11 IMPs; had the slam made we would have won the match, as the other team bid to 4♠ on these cards.

Bob Hamman is perhaps the greatest player in the game today (he is certainly the greatest winner). After the match we had the opportunity to ask him over a (stiff) drink if he would have rather bid 6♦ and lost or not bid 6♦ and won. ‘A good slam is a slam that makes,’ said Hamman. ‘Winning is all that matters’.

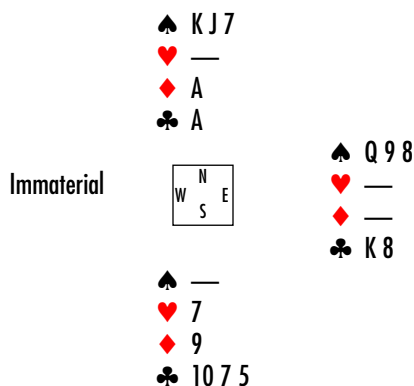
At first glance, this point of view seems philosophically unappealing, but it is very practical. Sometimes you will be lucky, sometimes you will be unlucky; it all evens out in the long run. If you want to be a winner, you had better start thinking like Hamman. Do not dwell on results like the one I am about to dwell on.

	Hampson							
	♠ K J 7 2							
	♥ A 6 5 3							
	♦ A 3							
	♣ A J 9							
Paul	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">W</td><td style="padding: 2px;">N</td><td style="padding: 2px;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">S</td><td style="padding: 2px;"></td><td style="padding: 2px;"></td></tr> </table>	W	N	E	S			Colbert
W	N	E						
S								
♠ 10 6 5 4		♠ Q 9 8 3						
♥ 10		♥ Q 4						
♦ Q J 8 5 4 2		♦ 10 7 6						
♣ 6 2		♣ K Q 8 3						
	Gitelman							
	♠ A							
	♥ K J 9 8 7 2							
	♦ K 9							
	♣ 10 7 5 4							

This hand is from the second-last match of the round-robin of the 1993 CNTC Finals. My team was desperately fighting to hold on to a qualifying position while the opponents (Team Cafferata) were in a more comfortable position. We lost the match handily, failed to qualify, and the Cafferata team went on to win the event. The above hand was critical in our loss.

Geoff and I arrived in 6♥, a difficult slam to reach, and one that was not bid at the other table. If Mary Paul had led a pedestrian ♦Q the slam is practically a claim: win the ♦A, draw trumps, cash the ♦K and ♠A, and duck a club to RHO. RHO is endplayed, forced to give up a trick in spades or clubs or to yield a ruff and discard.

Our auction, however, revealed that a diamond lead was unlikely to help so Mary turned her attention to clubs. Imagine for a moment that Mary had led a pedestrian ♣6. I might have concluded that both club honors were off-side and played as follows: duck the first trick to Dave, win the diamond or spade return in my hand and play all but one of my trumps:



On a diamond to the ♦A, Dave is trump-squeezed. A spade discard would allow me to ruff out the ♠Q using the ♣A as a re-entry. A club discard would allow me to cash the ♣A and claim without even needing the ♠K.

Well, Mary Paul is no pedestrian (and she is certainly not immaterial regardless of what the above diagram claims). Mary and Dave systemically lead low from worthless doubletons, and third and fifth from honors. Mary's ♣2 lead gave me no reason to think that she could not have a club honor, so I finessed at Trick 1 and, after drawing trumps and testing spades, finessed again later. Down one.

It didn't matter that we reached a better contract than the opponents on this deal. We were both good teams; either one of us could have won on a given day. This was their day.

My last sad story is the saddest of all. This hand was the very last deal in the 1993 Maccabiah Games for Team Canada (Fred Gitelman-Geoff Hampson, George Mittelman-Robert Lebi, Irving Litvack-Joey Silver). Canada had done very well in the round-robin and faced the home team Israelis in a 48-board semifinal. Canada started with a 17-IMP carryover. We added 2 more in the first sixteen boards, but lost 31 back in the next sixteen to trail by 12 IMPs with sixteen boards to play. The match ended in a dead tie; there would be an eight-board playoff to decide the winner.

The first five boards were flat. On the sixth board, Israel bid aggressively to a vulnerable 3NT, found a miraculous lie of the cards (playing for Israel seems to have its advantages) and made it. Robert and George properly played in a partscore and we lost 13 IMPs. On the seventh board, the Israelis overbid to another vulnerable game. There was no miracle this time: the contract went down two, and our team won 8 IMPs back when Geoff and I stopped in a partscore. We trailed by 5 IMPs going into the last board.

Fred		Geoff						
♠ K x x x		♠ Q J x						
♥ K		♥ Q 9 x x						
♦ A K Q x x x	<table style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 0 5px;">W</td><td style="padding: 0 5px;">N</td><td style="padding: 0 5px;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 0 5px;">S</td><td></td><td></td></tr> </table>	W	N	E	S			
W	N	E						
S								
♣ K J		♦ x x x						
		♣ x x x						
	1♦		1♥					
	1♠		2♦					
	3NT							

Our bidding was very aggressive and 3NT is a ridiculous contract. We needed to bid game, however, to have a chance to win the match (1♦ was passed out at the other table and Israel scored +130). If I made 3NT we would win the match and if I went down we would lose.

I was favored with the ♥2 lead (attitude) around to my ♥K. Six rounds of diamonds followed. LHO discarded a small heart, the ♥J, a spade and a club. RHO discarded a small heart, the ♥10, and two spades. I continued a spade, LHO followed and RHO won; a low club was returned. Do you play the ♣K or ♣J?

I had the good fortune to be in this position. I knew that if I guessed right we would win and if I guessed wrong we would lose. How absurd, I thought, that our ultimate fate in this event should come down to a guess at Trick 9 of the last board!

Was it a guess? It appeared that LHO had begun with four or five hearts to the ace-jack. If he had five hearts and the ♣A he would certainly have over-called 1♥. Thus, if LHO had five hearts it is right to play the ♣K. Unfortunately, I thought of what seemed a stronger reason for playing the ♣J: clubs were the unbid suit and seemed like the obvious suit for the defense to lead on our auction (in fact the contract would have no play on a club lead). The only reason I could think of for LHO not to have led a club was that he had the ♣A: he was afraid of giving me my ninth trick since I was marked with the ♣K.

So I played the ♣J, lost to the ♣Q and lost the match. LHO started with four clubs to the queen-ten and five hearts to the ace-jack. I don't know about you, but I would have led a club from that hand.

I guess the lesson of all of this is that whoever wins any given bridge tournament is not necessarily the one who plays 'best' on some absolute scale. The luck of the cards often contributes as much towards who will win as does the skill of the participants. Be grateful for your luck when you get it, but do not get too depressed when you don't. Luck does eventually even out.

The nature of bridge is that everybody always has a chance to win. The better you play, the more often it will happen to you.

Guessing the Trumps

R O N B I S H O P

In the fifties, a number of books were written to explain duplicate bridge to those who had grown up playing the money game. Perhaps now, it's time to do the opposite. For those who have never played rubber bridge, there are some major differences from the duplicate version. With ever-changing partnerships and systems that are kept simple, partner management is a critical skill; sometimes it seems as though there are three opponents!

Life at the rubber bridge table is, indeed, a much different game! The nature of the game — four Chicago-style deals with one partner before cutting again, the conversion of partscores, scoring for ‘honors’, changing vulnerability, and the degree to which psychology is paramount — makes the rubber bridge table an unfamiliar and uncomfortable environment for many tournament bridge players. That’s not to say that I am an expert on the rubber bridge scene — I’m quite the opposite: a relative novice interloper from duplicate bridge. But I do enjoy rubber bridge — the style of play, the infinite variety of characters one meets, the test of one’s ‘table feel’, the somewhat standardized (??) bidding with few specialized conventions, and the opportunity to put more than your master-point record on the line with each successive hand.

The characters of the rubber bridge world are at the same time its most interesting and its most frustrating aspect. In any club, you’ll meet the greats of the game, the used-to-be-greats, the hope-to-be-greats, and the never-have-been-any-good-at-all. You will learn to recognize the chronic overbidders, the sacrificers-at-all-costs, the hand hogs, and those who only raise your suit as a last resort. You’ll see bullies, cowards, idiot-savants, plain idiots, partner-berators, and self-flagellators; all inhabit the rubber bridge zoo, just as they do any arena in life. You quickly realize that your results have as much to do with the characters in your game as with the actual cards that are in play. A recent example comes to mind, involving some of the most interesting characters in our club.

You are playing for a reasonable stake: enough to reward a good session but not be too onerous in an unlucky one. (Note that rubber bridge players never have bad sessions, only sessions in which they were unlucky or didn’t hold the cards.) Your partner is an okay player, at times a bit of a ‘growler’, who has a tendency to overbid slightly and gets annoyed when he is not getting his fair share of the cards. His booming outbursts at partners who have done moronic things are legendary. He might be a little out of his depth on this occasion, but enjoys the company and the competition.

Your opponents are quite good players. LHO is one of the aforementioned idiot-savants, an absent-minded professor who can show real flashes of brilliance but occasionally has to be brought back to the table (sometimes physically). He truly enjoys playing the game, and is a friendly sort, although a chain smoker without equal. RHO is one of the club's psychologists; he knows the characters in the club and in this game probably better than anyone, and enjoys manipulating people into uncomfortable contracts almost as much as making a slam himself. Sometimes we won't see him for a week, and then he'll play for an entire day. I've named him 'the Caretaker', since he always seems to be in control, even when he's losing.

And you; you're just plain old you. You, unfortunately, have to be there.

After a few uneventful rubbers (no one's bid a grand slam or gone more than four down doubled), you get this collection on the last hand of a pivot (both vulnerable with neither side having a partscore):

♠ x x x ♥ Q x ♦ K x x ♣ A J x x x

The auction starts 3♥ on your right, and, after you pass, LHO bids 4♥. Partner thinks for a short time, bids 4♠, and everyone passes. Good, you think to yourself; it looks like 4♥ had a good shot, and partner will be happy with a moderate dummy — some trumps, a possibly useful king, and a side suit headed by the ace. Looks like a good time to give your hand to the kibitzer and go get a coffee.

Returning to the table, you see the other players cutting for the next rubber. Must have been a claimer. 'How did we do?' you ask, for practice.

'Not so well,' grumbles partner. 'I had to guess the trumps.'

A quick glance at the scoresheet gives you a shock: -800! Quickly, you point out that it wasn't doubled, but everyone confirms that the score is correct.

♠ A K Q x x	♠ J 9 8 x	♠ 10						
♥ A J x	♥ x	♥ K 10 9 x x x x						
♦ x	♦ A Q J x x x	♦ 10 x x						
♣ Q 10 x x	♣ K x	♣ x x						
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">W</td><td style="padding: 2px;">N</td><td style="padding: 2px;">E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">S</td><td style="padding: 2px;"></td><td style="padding: 2px;"></td></tr> </table>	W	N	E	S			
W	N	E						
S								
	♠ x x x							
	♥ Q x							
	♦ K x x							
	♣ A J x x x							

Partner had won the opening diamond lead on the table and played a spade to the nine and the ten. RHO was still slightly in the dark, and returned a deceptive low club which went small, ten, king. Partner, hoping to salvage something, led a heart to set up a ruff. RHO played the king, small from

dummy, and LHO unblocked the jack. Now came a diamond ruff, after which LHO drew trumps and the defense claimed.

It first appears that partner's statement about having to guess the trumps was correct (he guessed wrong — we should have been in diamonds), but further analysis shows that three rounds of spades (on which East throws clubs) against 5♦ doubled would have led to the same 800. So the end result (with opponents cold for a vulnerable heart game) is that partner's flight of fancy has cost only an extra point or two. No reason to get uptight or upset: just be aware that your partner on the next rubber will be either the madman who made a vulnerable preempt on king-empty seventh or the go-for-the-throat defender who ducked the A-K-Q of trumps.

So onward, ever higher (or lower), remembering that your most important pieces of equipment at the rubber bridge table are your ever-present parachute, a pillow for rough landings, and a hide as thick and tough as a rhino's.

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RAY & LINDA LEE were the founders and publishers of *Canadian Master Point*, which was Canada's national bridge magazine in the 1990s. Both have had long careers as bridge journalists, and their work has been published in magazines throughout the bridge world as well as in tournament Daily Bulletins at world and national championships.

