



AN HONORS eBook FROM MASTER POINT PRESS

Dennis Dawson  
Charlie Wilkins

Introduction by Zia Mahmood

# Bridge Outside the Box with Val Kovachev

"A refreshing and fun read for all levels of players.  
I thoroughly recommend it."

Zia Mahmood

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Master Point Press  
214 Merton St. Suite 205  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M4S 1A6  
(647) 956-4933

[info@masterpointpress.com](mailto:info@masterpointpress.com)

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## ***Introduction***

In these days of COVID, time has occasionally been a heavy burden. It is the bridge lovers and players who have been able to assuage the boredom by unabated participation in our ever-enthralling game.

With the internet on which beginners and experts alike can play to their hearts' content and literature of all sorts available to fill the void, it is even possible to say we are the "lucky" ones. Into this background comes an exciting new addition, *Bridge Outside the Box with Val Kovachev*.

Rarely does a book attack this game from a totally new angle, but this one certainly does. The reader will soon get caught up in the original material and Val's exciting style.

Like me, you will be soon trying to guess the action that Val is about to take, and when you find the same action, you may be unsure as to whether you are now a genius or a bit crazy... or maybe a bit of both!

I can promise that you will not find any hands that don't touch new depths in your imagination, and you will often smile spontaneously at his crafty cheek and originality.

I'll admit to borrowing a few ideas for future use. I'll admit that the style is not one that all can adopt. But I will also advise you that this is a refreshing and fun read for all levels of players.

A bit like *Jaws*, "Just when you thought it was safe to go in the water. . ."

Full of danger and laughter. I thoroughly recommend it.

***Zia Mahmood***



## *Foreword*

I first met Val in 2005 in the finals of a Regional Knockout in Denver. My partner was Clem Jackson, and we had just won the North American Bridge Championship Senior Knockout Teams and a bronze medal in the World Senior Knockout teams. I was impressed by Val's sophisticated bidding methods on several difficult hands. Little did I know he was a member of the Bulgarian national team!

Our paths continued to cross on the professional bridge circuit, and we gradually became friends. We had a lot in common despite our very different backgrounds. Beyond his expertise, I admired his ethics, his impeccable manners with his partners and opponents, and his hard work (his BBO profile says 8 days a week, and that says it all).

When COVID caused bridge to move online, my tournament partner Charlie Wilkins and I started playing against Val twice a week. To give you an idea of what that was like, here's a problem faced by one of Val's opponents from the Life Master Pairs of a North American Bridge Championship.

<u>West (You)</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South (Val)</u>
	Pass	Pass	2NT
Pass	3♥	Pass	3♠
Pass	3NT	All pass	

2NT showed 20-21 HCP, and 3♥ was a transfer to spades. It's your lead with:

None vul	<u>West (You)</u>
North dealt	♠ K J 10 9
Matchpoints	♥ A Q 5 2
	♦ 9 8
	♣ A 4 2

East must have 0 HCP, so it seems reasonable to lead a passive diamond and not give the declarer any help. Unfortunately for you, Val opened 2NT with eight solid diamonds and nothing else! -430 was a terrible matchpoint score. You'll remember Val the next time you play against him! The whole deal:

None vul	North		
North dealt	♠ A Q 6 5 4		
Matchpoints	♥ 9 8 4		
	♦ 10 5		
	♣ Q 8 6		
<u>West</u>		East	
♠ K J 10 9		♠ 8 7	
♥ A Q 5 2		♥ K J 10 3	
♦ 9 8		♦ 6	
♣ A 4 2		♣ K J 10 9 7 3	
	South (Val)		
	♠ 3 2		
	♥ 7 6		
	♦ A K Q J 7 4 3 2		
	♣ 5		

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
	Pass	Pass	2NT!
Pass	3♥	Pass	3♠
Pass	3NT	All pass	

The idea of writing a book developed gradually from the discussion of the hands. Val talked, and Charlie wrote while doing a marvelous job of ferreting out hand records of fascinating deals with few clues to go on. He handed this off to me to edit.

## **Пас къща не храни !**

Bulgarian bridge proverb

Loosely translated, this is "pass does not feed the house." It means if you want to pay the bills, don't pass at the bridge table! Remember it as you read the book - it will explain a lot.

***Dennis Dawson***

### ***Answers to Frequently Asked Questions***

Only well-known top-level opponents are identified. Val Kovachev is identified as "Val" and his regular partner Vladi Isporski as "Vladi."

If the year and location are not specified, Val played the deal on the internet in 2020. Many were against Dennis Dawson and Charlie Wilkins, who play Santa Fe Precision (see Dennis's book by that title, available from Masterpoint Press).

4-4-3-2 refers to that shape but does not identify the length of any individual suit. 4=4=3=2 means precisely four spades, four hearts, three diamonds, and two clubs.

Some of the deals were rotated to make Val South when he was the declarer. In the discussion (but never in the deal diagrams), x's occasionally represent spot cards that aren't relevant to the play.

The bidding is as it occurred. Explanations of artificial bids are in the text. "Precision" denotes the Precision 1♦ opening bid. It shows 11-15 HCP and may have only two diamonds, or very rarely, possibly even a singleton ♦A or ♦K.

### ***Thanks***

Thanks to Suzi Borgo and Sally Sabo for their editing and suggestions to make this book better, and to Harold Paul for his title suggestion. And to Kathy Adelsheim, Larry Bertholf, Hugh Hughes, Neil Hunter, Dean Panagopoulos, and Randy Thompson.

## *Acknowledgments*

Bobby Wolff reported Deal 3 in his newspaper column on January 14, 2020.

Mark Horton reported Deals 85, 87, 115, 116, and 126 in *Bridge Magazine*.

Mark Horton reported Deal 91 in *International Bridge Press Association Bulletin* 511.

Bobby Wolff reported Deal 100 in his newspaper column, March 3, 2012.

Mark Horton and Eric Kokish reported Deals 113, 118, and 123 in *The Rabbi's Rules*.

Philip Alder reported deal 114 in the *New York Times* on August 6, 2007.

Barry Rigal reported Deal 120.

The Bulgarian newspaper *24 Hours* published Deals 121 and 122.

Email Charlie Wilkins [cwilkins@compassgroup.net](mailto:cwilkins@compassgroup.net)  
for sources of other tournament deals.

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# *1. Meet Val Kovachev*

Val's life has spanned studying mathematics in Bulgaria to running successful small businesses to coaching national bridge teams throughout Europe to being a highly respected bridge professional in the United States. How did he get to where he is?

## *His Early Years*

Val was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, long before the fall of the Soviet Union. Athletics helped him make friends growing up because he was a good soccer player. He graduated from high school at the top of his class in mathematics, and he was also the school's fastest sprinter.

## *The 1990s*

Val won academic and athletic scholarships to the University of Sofia and a scholarship to study agricultural engineering with a contract to work for a farm after graduation. However, he did so well on the final math exams that he had an opportunity to pursue mathematics, his first love, after graduation.

College athletics trained him to become part of a team, develop team spirit, and help the team reach its potential, which helped him later in his bridge career.

He learned to play bridge when he was 22, relatively late for a world-class player.

Unlike other young bridge addicts, he did not spend his days in the bridge clubs after graduating. Instead, he ran a successful business selling children's toys, and he spent his leisure time playing bridge. He says with a smile that it took him three years to learn not to grab the ace immediately in a notrump contract with ♠Axx opposite ♠xxx!

Maybe so, but he was on the Bulgarian national team by 2000. He must have been a fast learner once he got started!

His first wife was also a bridge player. They have two exceptional children, Stephanie and Konstantin.

In 1997 he began a serious partnership with Vladi Isporski, who has some deals of his own later in this book. In the early years, they spent thousands of hours bidding hands and sharpening their partnership.

Vladi and Val became friends, a rarity for partners in the world of top-level bridge where superegos abound. Vladi still lives in Bulgaria but comes to the United States three months every year to play professionally. They remain quite loyal to each other.

### *The Early 2000s*

Vladi and Val joined the Bulgarian national bridge team in 2000. The national team covered their travel expenses but didn't pay them a salary. That didn't matter because they loved the game, and they were always happy to hop in the car and drive to the next tournament. Whoever had money in their pocket paid for the gas.

They were "the kids" on the team, but they soon developed a reputation for consistently strong play. Their first major international tournament was the 2000 Olympiad in Maastricht in the Netherlands.

Val remembers being intimidated the first time he played against great international stars such as Larry Cohen because he was such a fan of Cohen's books. But Val quickly learned he could hold his own provided he played his best game. And that meant taking risks, creating problems for the opponents, not being intimidated, and maintaining focus and concentration over long matches.

He believes the only way to beat the best players in the world is by playing "bridge outside the box," playing at the edge, and pushing every decision to the limit.

In 2003 Val started M Bridge, a bridge club in Sofia sponsored by the Bulgarian mobile operator MTel. It quickly became the largest bridge club in the Balkans, awarding ACBL masterpoints. There were games at least twice every day, usually around twenty tables.

Val found running a bridge club was not easy because there were always people problems to solve; it was still a wonderful experience. He helped several talented young bridge players establish themselves. Val closed the club in 2009 because he was traveling so much.

2003 was a busy year because he was also hired by Croatia, Turkey, and The Netherlands to coach and train their national teams.

### *Welcome to America*

In 2004 Val spent a month in New York City playing in the summer North American Bridge Championships and at local bridge clubs. He got a very swift education in the way bridge is played in the United States. He was pleasantly surprised by how friendly the players were and how quickly he was accepted, despite speaking only a few words of English.

From 2004 to 2006, he came to the United States twice a year to play professionally. Val found the top American players were much friendlier than in Eastern Europe, where they tended to be quite harsh and critical of each other, and trash talk was typical.

Val likes the American style, preferring to honor his opponents and keeping in mind that today's opponent may be tomorrow's teammate. From 2006 to 2013, he alternated two weeks in Bulgaria with two weeks in the United States, living mostly in Chicago when he was in the U.S.

Unfortunately, top-level bridge can be bad for marriages. Constant travel meant Val was rarely at home, and his first wife left him for another bridge player. (Five years later, she left that fellow too for still another bridge player.)

Val met his current wife, Billiana Raikova, in 2011. They were married in 2013 and moved to the United States. Billiana, who is the love of Val's life, does not play bridge, but she gives Val the freedom to play as much as he needs to. He feels his game has improved as a result and that today he is playing the best bridge of his life.

They live in Las Vegas, Nevada, where they enjoy the many sunny days, and Val likes the airport's convenience. These days the two of them travel once or twice a year to Bulgaria.

Val consistently finishes in the top twenty in the Barry Crane 500 list of top masterpoint winners in the American Contract Bridge League. He has won championships in both Europe and the United States.

## 2. VAL'S KEY PRINCIPLES

Val takes many unusual actions at the table. Most players think his style violates every rule they ever learned. They are right. Val violates these rules regularly because he believes you will win more often if you follow your logic rather than blindly following rules, which are not iron-clad but are guidelines. Although this style works in the long run for Val, it does not work on every deal, as you will see.

### *Getting the Best Opening Lead*

Everyone knows the opening lead is essential, but Val thinks it is even more so than other experts do. He will go to great lengths to help his partner with the opening lead, especially when Val has strength only in one suit.

#### Deal 1: Choice of Weak Two Bids

Neither vul     South (Val)  
North dealt     ♠ Q 9 6 4 2  
IMPs             ♥ 6 2  
                      ♦ A Q J 10 2  
                      ♣ 2

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South (Val)</u>
	Pass	Pass	?

"Two passes to me. Simulations show these two players will have about 14 HCP combined when I have 9 HCP, so expect West to have about 17 HCP. We probably will be on defense, so I want to get in their way by opening a weak two-bid, not a one-bid.

"Partner is likely to be on lead, so it's appealing to bid 2♦, the suit I want to be led. A counter-argument is that we may be able to outbid them in spades, which suggests opening 2♠.

"But I may be able to bid spades later. For example, if I open 2♦ and West overcalls 2♥, and it is passed back around to me, I could now bid 2♠. The bottom line is to open 2♦."

Bet you've never thought about which suit to open with a weak two-bid before!

## *Turn Up the Heat with Pressure Bids*

Good players will achieve good results if left alone. If you push them out of their comfort zone, they will make more mistakes. Val does this by getting the bidding to a high level more quickly than his opponents are comfortable with. He also bids more often at lower levels in situations where their opponents usually pass. Here's an example of bidding higher more quickly.

### **Deal 2: Pedal to the Metal**

Both vul            West (Val)  
 North dealt        ♠ 9 3  
 IMPs                ♥ J 9  
                           ♦ A K 10 9 8 6 2  
                           ♣ A 8

<u>West(Val)</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u>
	1♠	Pass	2♥
4♦	4♠	Pass	5♣
Pass	6♠	All pass	

"3♦ is the normal bid to get a diamond lead and to suggest a sacrifice. But 4♦ is the Pressure Bid. 4♦ paid dividends when the opponents bid a slam off two cashing aces. 3♦ would let North bid 4♣, and they would have landed on their feet. But over 4♦, North had too much to pass, and South invited slam. Oops."

	<u>North</u>	
	♠ A Q J 6 5 4	
	♥ —	
	♦ 4	
	♣ Q J 10 9 4 2	
<u>West (Val)</u>		<u>East</u>
♠ 9 3		♠ 8 2
♥ J 9		♥ 10 6 3 2
♦ A K 10 9 8 6 2		♦ J 7 5
♣ A 8		♣ K 6 5 3
	<u>South</u>	
	♠ K 10 7	
	♥ A K Q 8 7 5 4	
	♦ Q 3	
	♣ 7	

## ***The One Who Knows, Goes – Now!***

"The one who knows goes" is excellent advice. Even better advice is to do it right now. When you know the most likely contract, just bid it, without giving the opponents any more information. Val believes you will win in the long run by having shorter auctions and by broadcasting less information.

As you advance in bridge, you learn to take the unlikely into account more often, especially in the play of the hand. Bidding contests, like *It's Your Call* in the *ACBL Bulletin*, are popular because they attempt to find solutions to problems that are improbable but possible. You will see many examples in this book of careful play and defense catering to unlikely possibilities. But you will *not* see any such bidding examples.

Val may ignore potentially unstopped suits. He may open two or four of a suit when it's normal to open with one of that suit, he may not mention a side suit at all, and he may make a misleading bid to avoid a damaging lead. These risky and unscientific bids lead

quickly toward the most likely spot while giving the opponents little information or the wrong information.

You will have fewer misunderstandings. There will be occasional losses, but the gains will outweigh them. It's proven to be a winning style for Val.

Another aspect is that you should give misleading information to the opponents when your partner is not involved. Everyone is familiar with the need for false-carding as the declarer or the defender. The same is true in the bidding.

This deal shows the price you can pay for over-describing your hand.

### Deal 3: Too Much Information

2007 NEC Cup in Yokohama, Japan

Both vul	<u>North</u>		
West dealt	♠	9 6 5 2	
IMPs	♥	Q 8	
	♦	Q J 4 3	
	♣	5 4 2	
	<u>West</u>		<u>East</u>
	♠	J 8 7 4 3	♠ A K 10
	♥	—	♥ K J 10 9 5
	♦	A 9 8	♦ 10 5
	♣	Q J 10 9 3	♣ A 8 6
		<u>South (Val)</u>	
		♠ Q	
		♥ A 7 6 4 3 2	
		♦ K 7 6 2	
		♣ K 7	

<u>West</u>	<u>North</u> <i>Vladi</i>	<u>East</u>	<u>South</u> <i>Val</i>
		1♥	Pass
1♠	Pass	2♠	Pass
3♣	Pass	4♠	All pass

Val's bids are sometimes outrageous, but he always bases them on logic. He believes in following his logic wherever it may lead, not in following a bunch of 'rules'. Val takes more risks than most players. His goal is to push opponents out of their comfort zones and help his partner find the best lead, even if at some risk. He makes as few bids as possible to reach the final contract, never describing his hand more than necessary.

You will find yourself trying to guess what action Val is about to take next, and you'll wait for the outcome with bated breath. Your imagination expands as you gasp, then smile at the sheer audacity and cheekiness of some of his bids.

Add some spice to your bridge game by choosing a few of Val's approaches to incorporate into your own game. Learn how to be the lion in your bridge jungle!



**Valentin Kovachev** has been playing professional bridge since 2003 and has won all the major Bulgarian bridge championships. He has won the Schapiro Cup in England, placed second on two other occasions, and has two North American championships to his credit. He now lives in Las Vegas with his wife, Billiana, and their two children.



**Charlie Wilkins** is a bridge enthusiast. Now retired after a long career in commercial real estate, Charlie and his wife Leah live in Greensboro, North Carolina.



**Dennis Dawson** is a professional bridge player and teacher, and an ACBL Grand Master. He is the author of *Santa Fe Precision*.

