

# BRIDGEWORKS

LEARNING FROM THE DEALS



## CLIENTS AND PROFESSIONALS

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A t a Regional tournament some years ago, I watched Petula Pro, as gifted a bridge player and pleasant a lady as any. She was playing with Clark Client, a rich old man who was nice enough but had little chance of ever becoming competent at bridge and knew it. Still, Clark liked his masterpoints.

This was one of the deals:

Matchpoints

South dealer

East-West vulnerable

WEST		SOUTH		EAST	
♠ Q J 7	♠ A J	♠ 4 2	♠ 9 6 5 3	♠ 10 6 5 3	♠ K J 5 2
♥ A J	♥ A Q 10 6 3	♥ Q 9 6 5 3	♥ 9 8 4	♥ 10 7	♥ K J 5 2
♦ A Q 10 6 3	♦ K Q 3	♦ 9 8 4	♦ 8 5 2	♦ 7	♦ J 6 4
♣ K Q 3		♣ 8 5 2		♣ A 10 9 7	

SOUTH		WEST		NORTH		EAST	
Clark	Petula	1 ♦	1 ♠	1 ♠	2 ♦	Pass	Pass
Pass	Pass	1 NT	2 ♣	2 ♣	2 ♦	Pass	Pass
Pass	Pass	Pass	2 ♠	2 ♠	Pass	Pass	Pass
Pass	Pass	3 ♦	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass
3 ♠	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass

With hearts splitting two-two, Petula had no difficulty making her contract,

and plus 140 produced a good score. One South managed plus 170 in two hearts (perhaps because East discarded a spade prematurely); several North-South's scored only plus 100 defending against three diamonds undoubled.

In theory, Petula bid her hand atrociously; she would have languished in a bad one-spade or two-club contract had her opponents not given her second and third chances to bid. But a normal takeout double of one diamond would make Clark declarer in whatever suit North-South owned on this deal. Clark was not paying her to be idle; he was quite content to be turning the cards as dummy while Petula declared.

Although Clark may have been happy to hire Petula and accumulate masterpoints, most clients would demand more. There is much pleasure to be derived from playing bridge with an expert, and many who hire partners have developed enough skill to obtain it. To hire Petula as Clark did is like hiring Magic Johnson to play on your basketball team with the understanding that he will always shoot even when you are open near the basket. Except for the result, that is no fun: you might as well sit in the stands and watch. In a bridge, each partner will be "the open man" about half the time; you don't

want your teammates to freeze you out, even if you are not the best shooter.

Clark admits candidly that he hires professional partners only to win; I respect such honesty. Sometimes, such clients improve anyway; if only from observing the actions of their partners. (However, when the pro distorts normal bidding, at Petula did on the deal shown, the client is much less likely to make personal progress.)

Nora Natural is in the category of an improver through observation. Partnering her at a recent tournament, as dealer I held:

♠ A K 8 6 ♡ 10 4 ♦ A 9 3 ♣ K Q 9 7.

Playing with Clark, I would open one notrump; almost regardless of responder's hand, the modern Notrump Engine, with its many transfer bids, makes opener declarer. But opposite Nora I opened one club, the technically correct bid despite a balanced hand in our one-notrump-opening range. Opening one notrump would miss a superior spade contract if Nora had four spades in a hand not quite strong enough for Stayman, and it would wrongside many contracts reached via Stayman or transfers. Opening one club was unlikely to produce difficult rebid problems.

As it happened, my opening bid led to Nora's becoming declarer in three notrump. She butchered the play, losing a spectacular four tricks against par. Afterwards, she was upset with me for not opening one notrump. However, she understood the explanation of my motivation and in the process learned something about bidding.

Sybil Systems, a wealthy woman and a near-expert in her own right, was ambitious to win a major event at a

National tournament. Each year—until the goal was finally reached—she hired a different world-famous expert as her partner. This incurred a cost: Each master had different ideas about bidding and required his clients, including Sybil, to learn his own pet conventions; furthermore, each lived in a distant state, a hindrance to partnership study and practice in pre-computer days.

Thus, Sybil needed a Los Angeles professional to practice with and to drill her in the rigid systems of, in turn, William Worldbeater, Thoroughly Modern Michael, and Innovative Izzy. And how different those systems were! Michael, for example, thought it imperative to use a three-spade response to one notrump to show a singleton spade in a hand worth a raise to three notrump (“Eise how can you stop in four diamonds making when they can beat three notrump off the top?”). Izzy thought that was crazy (“Why tell your opponents what to lead against the three notrump that you’ll almost always reach anyway?”); his idea was to use the three-spade response as a transfer to three notrump, either to play there or as a prelude to a slam-try with certain specific hand patterns. And so on.

As the local stand-in for the absent stars, each year I mastered a system, drew up a set of partnership notes, and sandwiched outings to a local duplicate club between practice sessions in which I quizzed Sybil about bidding sequences that figured to occur once every six months. None of the world-famous experts whom Sybil hired placed much reliance on her judgment (nor, most likely, on that of their other clients); each elaborate system virtually dic-

tated how she bid every hand. I trained Sybil to use these systems unerringly but had little time left to fill the gaps in her general understanding of bidding that had nothing to do with systems or conventions. One such gap cost Sybil a triumph in a national knockout.

Laura Lerner knows far less about bridge than Sybil but is equally ambitious. Not nearly as wealthy as Sybil, Laura cannot afford the high fees charged by William, Michael and Izzy. Laura wants to win a top event more cheaply—playing with me. Unfortunately, she is handicapped: partly by having taken lessons from Sybil (a much better player than teacher), and partly by the success Sybil enjoyed with Izzy. Laura, convinced that the path to success runs through a labyrinth of conventions, begged a copy of the system notes prepared for Sybil by Computerhead Hal, Sybil's current partner.

Hal's notes included roughly six good conventions and sixty-six bad ones. All appeared in tabular form, with definitions in terms of point-count and hand pattern, like the specifications for a computer program. They indicated what to do in various situations without saying why, offered the general principles, and required the user to memorize huge gobs of specific sequences unrelated through any unifying ideas.

Much of my work with Laura consisted of convincing her to discard Hal's bad conventions. That helped, because I could substitute more effective methods by explaining the reasons behind them, which in turn enabled the use of unifying principles to cut down on memory work. Even so, the

amount of time we devoted to special agreements was far out of proportion to their frequency of occurrence.

However, each shift in emphasis paid dividends. The less we needed to worry about conventions, the more time we spent discussing “bread-and-butter” situations: defensive carding, watching the spots, fine-tuning hand evaluation, knowing when to bid and when to pass, and so forth. Progress was slower than it would have been with someone less indoctrinated with misguided “rules.” It is a fundamental educational principle that unlearning is more difficult than learning, for old habits die hard.

Most successful bridge players don't hire professionals, but every partnership can profit from the lessons in these anecdotes:

*When the partners' skills are unequal, decide whether the stronger half is expected to play good partnership bridge or to do what seems best to improve the score.*

*Don't impose your favorite methods if it makes partner uncomfortable.*

*De-emphasize agreements that arise rarely. Instead, agree on underlying principles that make things easier to remember (and that can in a pinch be applied to undiscussed sequences).*

And what if you are contemplating hiring a professional? First, decide what kind of client you want to be. Shall you be like Clark or Nora, Sybil or Laura, or some hybrid of these types? Unless you have a clear idea of what you want, you may be wasting time and money on something of little personal value.