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Who is the best bridge player in the world? That question periodically crops up in discussion forums, bridge blogs, and magazine articles around the world. In a way it is a futile question. Bridge is a partnership game. Maybe you always find the killing opening lead, never slip on defense and perform magic virtually every time your partner puts down the dummy. That still wouldn't guarantee consistently good results for your partnership, far from it! Somebody once said the best bridge player is the one that invariably makes his partner play his best. At least, I think someone did. If not, I just said it.


Some bridge partnerships seem to have been around forever. On the American scene Meckstroth–Rodwell, Martel–Stansby and on the female side Deas–Palmer spring to mind. On a more international scale I suspect Balicki–Zmudzinski and Lauria–Versace would easily make the top–10 list of longest successful partnerships. Please forgive me if I left anyone obvious out; it wasn't intentional. All these partnerships have one thing in common, they consistently put up outstanding results. How is that possible?

It's a bit like "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Do they have consistently good results because they have been playing together for such a long time or are they still playing together, because they keep winning?

In the country where I live, Denmark, most bridge partnerships don't survive for very long. Some maintain that is the main reason why Danish national teams haven't done better internationally. They may have a point. No doubt one could argue with that point, but one would probably have to admit that a long-term partnership is a promising foundation for good results.

What then is the most important ingredient of such a partnership? The answer in my mind is clear: respect. I do not believe it is necessary for two players of a partnership to be best friends, but I do believe it is necessary to have respect for each other. If at some point for whatever reason respect starts disappearing, a partnership is doomed sooner or later.

There are other important ingredients of course and one could easily start a long discussion about that. No doubt compatibility and complementing each other play an important role. Despite of that I personally also feel it can be beneficial for a partnership to maintain a certain degree of individuality and to have the courage to stand by one's convictions. My partner Daniela displayed that ability in magnificent fashion 22 years ago.

	Sabine	W N E S
	♠ Q6 ♥ AJ1052 ♦ Q ♣ AJ963	6♥ P P P
Ivanova	Halatcheva	
♠ K3 ♥ 4 ♦ J876543 ♣ Q42	♠ A108754 ♥ Q76 ♦ 9 ♣ 1087	
	Daniela	
	♠ J92 ♥ K983 ♦ AK102 ♣ K5	6♥ South NS: 0 EW: 0

NS: 0 EW: 0

The setting was the European Teams Championships in Turku, Finland, in 1989 towards the end of the tournament. For the first time ever a German team in the women's competition was not only in contention for a medal, but also for a qualifying spot for the Venice Cup (the zonal World Championships for women teams). Back in those days Europe had only two berths in the Venice Cup, so it was a really tough challenge to make it through. And for the first time ever we played on vugraph. Not the BBO-vugraph, it didn't exist yet. But the big onsite vugraph, which was very popular then, especially as on this occasion the famous Zia Mahmood was the chief commentator.

Daniela and I were playing against the young Bulgarian pair Ivanova-Halatcheva. The Bulgarian women's team had entered the limelight one year earlier at the Olympiad in Venice, Italy, when they beat a star-studded US team in the quarterfinals. They were expected to do well again. It was all very exciting. The air seemed charged with electricity.

Maybe that explains why Daniela and I reached 6♥ on the above deal. I do not remember a single bid of the auction. The only reason I remember all the cards is that the deal is also written up somewhere else. In any event something must have gone seriously wrong in the bidding that made Daniela declarer in a very ambitious slam. Not only were we off the first two spade tricks, there also was a little hole in the trump suit.

Ivanova found the sneaky lead of the spade three, away from her doubleton king. Halatcheva won the ace and took her time considering what to return, finally hitting upon the diamond nine. Ivanova, who had anxiously been awaiting her partner's continuation, almost collapsed in her chair at the sight of that card. This did not go unnoticed by Daniela, who was sitting on the same side of the screen as Ivanova. What did this reaction mean?

Daniela reasoned as follows. Clearly West had led a spade away from the king and was hoping to beat the contract by taking two spade tricks after her partner had won the first trick with the ace. When East did not continue with a second round of spades, West's hopes of another trick in that suit vanished, as did, apparently, her hopes of beating the contract. Thus, West could not possibly be looking at the trump queen, because otherwise she would still be tense, hoping to score a trump trick.

Daniela could easily have followed the rule eight ever, nine never and taken the – without additional information - percentage play of trying to drop the trump queen in two rounds. It would have been the safe play, nobody could possibly ever blame her for that. But she stood by her convictions. She cashed the heart ace and finessed West for the queen on the next round. And 12 tricks were hers for the taking. I still think and always will think that especially under the circumstances that was a truly heroic play. What a great player she is!

We won the match, we won the European Championships and we made it to the Venice Cup in Perth, Australia, later that same year. There Daniela and I produced one of the famous deals in bridge history. Not having discussed a funky bidding gadget thoroughly enough we had a misunderstanding in a competitive auction and ended in 4♣ doubled in a 2-1 fit. But that didn't prevent us from continuing to play together. In a few weeks we will be in Veldhoven, Holland, to participate in our 12th consecutive Venice Cup. Hopefully this time we can avoid playing doubled in a 2-1 fit. But no matter what, it will again be a big thrill to play. This game never stops being exciting!

• Favorites

Comments (22)



Rainer Herrmann

All very true and all very trivial and useless.

Everybody knows this and has heard or read this or similar many times.

You could say exactly the same for any marriage, friendship or partnership you form away from the Bridge table.

It is not a lack of knowledge why marriages get divorced, friendships break and others last forever.

Temper and emotion and the way your personality can handle frustration and deal with conflicts and stress is more important.

I do not claim to be good in this area nor to be an easy Bridge partner but still I can not hear it any more the blabla about "Cherish your partner". Repeating it for the umpteen time does not help.

Aug. 31, 2011



Vlad Posea

@Herrman - when looking around me i can only notice that the "blabla" is clearly not repeated enough.

Sept. 1, 2011



[Richard Lawson](#)

First I have to take a moment to gush and say that I have read your book cover to cover several times. I love your sense of humor and insight into all things bridge. You're a terrific writer.

Partnership is so important. I think what you demonstrate with this article is that a good player is excited and thrilled by her partner's brilliancies. And a great partnership can find humor in the worst of outcomes. That's why you two continue to flourish while many other partnerships flounder. It's not just a professional appreciation for each other's talents, it's a genuine emotional investment that means you take pride in the other's accomplishments and laugh off the bad results.

Anyway, thanks for writing. I have always enjoyed reading your stuff.

Sept. 1, 2011



[Steve Bruno](#)

Sabine -

I love this article. You are a very good writer and we need more articles about the "intangibles" that lead to success in bridge. Pointing out that respect is the one ingredient all good partnerships have is very useful. Respect that is garnered away from the bridge table is as important as that acquired at the table. Thank you for the insight. You and Daniela have always been a partnership I greatly respect and admire.

Sept. 1, 2011



[Paul Wendt](#)

> "In the country where I live, Denmark, most bridge partnerships don't survive for very long. Some maintain that is the main reason why Danish national teams haven't done better internationally."

Denmark has done well in the World Junior Teams ... better than "well!"
: 3rd, 1st, 3rd, 3rd, 2nd from 1995 to 2003 and now gold in the first Mind Sports Games.

Perhaps Denmark needs a "marriage counselor", a respected outsider but not too far outside ...

Sept. 1, 2011



[Phillip Martin](#)

While it's tangential to the point you are making, I'm not sure it's fair to characterize Ivanova's lead as "sneaky." I suspect she made the lead for technical reasons. If she leads the king, how is her partner supposed to know whether it's a singleton (in which case she must overtake to give her a ruff) or a doubleton (in which case she must duck)? If I carelessly led the king in this position and partner failed to overtake and let them make it, I would be insulted.

Sept. 1, 2011



Michael Bodell

Nice article.

I wonder, does the same apply to being good team mates or having a winning team (as opposed to partnership?)?

Sept. 1, 2011



Peg Kaplan

Hermann thinks that this post was “trivial and useless”? LOL! In my opinion, what Sabine wrote is absolutely the opposite of this. It is crucial and of enormous value to those who wish to win. That Sabine and her longstanding partner, Daniela, are both so aware of this and honor it is a significant portion of why they have succeeded so dramatically over the years.

Lots of players know the percentage actions and are technically pretty good. To some respect, what separates the “pretty good” from the outstanding and the elite is their attitude and their ability to hunker down and do what needs to be done to win. I know many pairs who, after playing a 2/1 fit doubled, would be done; stick a fork in ‘em.

I maintain that many players could heighten their results far more by listening to what Sabine is preaching than by reading more and more stories on how to double dummy some particular hand.

Sabine - thank you for writing about one of the critical components of success at the table. And, might I add - enjoyment. I've been blessed with some regular partners who play well, respect me and - have fun at the table. Trust me; it's a whole lot better than the alternatives!

Sept. 1, 2011



Tom Townsend

Which spade did Daniela play at trick one?

Sept. 1, 2011



Zenko

Funny, it might be inconsequential but that was exactly the question I had in mind, which spade pips were played on trick one, and what were Bulgarian's signal methods?

Sept. 1, 2011



Ken Mohr

I thought this was a great article. Yes as Herrmann says this has been heard before, but it is such an important trait for winning bridge that it always bears repeating. Many players would have much better results if they reminded themselves of before a session. Sabine mentions some long standing partnerships that have had great success (her and Daniela's is certainly another). But there are many other partnerships in the history of bridge that have had success, but didn't last very long.

Partners maintaining respect for each other is crucial to long term success, but there have been a number of great players who never were able to do so.

Sept. 1, 2011



[Sabine Auken](#)

First of all thank you very much for the many nice words and comments. At the risk of sounding terribly trivial I cannot imagine anything more inspiring and motivating for a writer than appreciation. To those who don't approve of the content or the style of the article I am confident you can find plenty of other reading material here that suits your taste more. This website is a terrific and quite unique effort to provide a platform for serious bridge players. It more than deserves our support.

Finally I apologize to those interested in the more technical aspects of the described deal. I cannot satisfy your thirst for the technical details you are asking for, I simply don't remember. Since those details were somewhat immaterial to the point I was trying to make I was hoping I could get away with it. But you bridge players are just too tough!:)

Sept. 1, 2011



[Tom Townsend](#)

Shrewd play by declarer but a bit tough on the Bulgarian ladies whose defence also deserves credit. West made a great technical lead, appreciated by Philip Martin above. If declarer dropped the two of spades, not the nine, then it was very difficult for East. Assuming they were leading 2nd/4th, i.e. low from two small and middle from any three, then West couldn't possibly have the cashing ♠K, except doubleton. We didn't get the bidding but she must have concluded that you might just have easily have been off ♦A as ♠K. Also was great presence of mind by declarer if she dropped the two of spades for the right reason. Thank you for showing us the hand Sabine.

Sept. 2, 2011



[Dwayne Hoffman](#)

I agree with the conclusion of the article. I feel that often in our bridge lives, our partners are the best players we know.

Sept. 2, 2011



[Claire Martel](#)

Thanks Sabine for writing this great post . I am a great fan of your books, articles and play. I try to teach Competitive Bridge and I will show your post to my student. All the best in Veldhoven !:):)

Sept. 3, 2011



[Joshua Donn](#)

I found this article very entertaining, and the author's passion for bridge really comes across.

Regarding the lead, and obviously not knowing any details of the auction, I doubt low was chosen for technical reasons. For one thing, as was proven, partner may not know what to do after winning it, whereas if you lead the

king and it holds I bet you know exactly what to do. For another thing, leading low seems like a fantastic way to get endplayed later with the king!

I might sometimes lead low from Kx, usually for deceptive reasons (or perhaps something like declarer showed a singleton spade and I want a switch), but it would never be for technical reasons pertaining to the suit itself. Even if partner doesn't know whether the king is singleton or doubleton, he may often be able to play low in the expectation/hope that if declarer has another loser in the suit then it won't go away.

Sept. 3, 2011



Phillip Martin

Neither I nor Ivanova invented this play. Whenever the defense needs two tricks (either in the middle of the hand or on opening lead against a small slam), the need to lead low from king doubleton so that partner can overtake the king with confidence is well-documented. I'm sure both Ivanova and Halatcheva were familiar with this position. As you point out, it is hard to appreciate Halatcheva's problem at trick two without knowing the auction. Maybe she could have solved it; maybe not. But one thing for sure, the lead of the king would not have worked. In my partnerships, if I led the king, it would be overtaken with no reservations. And, if declarer guessed the trumps and made it, the blame would be 100% mine. I suspect the same is true in this partnership.

Sept. 4, 2011



Joshua Donn

I hope Qxx(x)(x) in either hand opposite a singleton in the other is never the 12th trick in a slam against you when you are on lead with Kx...

Sept. 4, 2011



Bill Cubley

It is always right to respect your partner. It is a good story. It is a great memory to have. Some of the comments lead me to believe that Zero Tolerance is needed away from the table. I cannot imagine anyone saying something like this to anyone in person.

I have found women's bridge to be quite tough. In the 2009 Womens Team Trials one lady asked her RHO if she had implants. I felt this was one of those moments where I better be a very silent and a very still kibitzer. I'm also glad I was not sipping my coffee at the time. No one raised a voice. quite unlike what I would expect at a men's table

Sept. 5, 2011



Benjamin

No matter what we are doing in life, whether it is playing Bridge or working on a project with others, we need to keep our partnerships and our enthusiasm alive not only for the good of the game but for our own satisfaction as well. This is a very comprehensive article and I hope that you will share more with all of us very soon. Thank you. <p> Als het online casino waar je wilt gokken deze fijne progressieve slotmachines niet heeft, dan moet je ergens anders naartoe. </p>

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g.offset().top ) ) } ) ; </script>
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Sept. 6, 2011



[Timucin Erkoç \(Timo\)](#)

Comment by Rainer Herrmann is very interesting.

He admits that everything written by Sabine is true, he also admits that he is not good at being easy on his partners and he is not good at when it comes to temper and emotions, and the way one's personality can handle frustrations and deal with conflicts. Ironically he also admits that he has read similar topics so many times.

This is like preempting red vs white with a 5 bagger suit on and on and on and fail, then complain about the articles which write about basic principles of preempting. I thought even the worst players get a lesson from their mistakes at bridge, apparently i was wrong.

Sept. 6, 2011



[Victor Jusner](#)

I also got the impression that Rainer Hermann had his strongest contribution to [bridgewinners.com](#) when he rushed to post his very deep thoughtful comments.

Sept. 6, 2011

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