

An Interview with Eddie Kantar

By Maggie Sparrow, Ontario



Eddie Kantar

Maggie: Eddie, we heard about your 100 Magic Hands in the last issue of the Quarterly, they sound great. Can you tell us more about your teaching techniques?

Eddie: For openers, I have recently switched to a simple format that is working like a charm. I used this to teach intermediate to intermediate plus players. I now use exclusively the 100 hands I am offering in the latest ABTA Quarterly, but the method works equally well with most any lesson. My classes average 12-20 tables. The hands I use do NOT have a central theme. Instead they have key points in bidding, play and defense **with each player involved in every hand**. I do NOT lecture for even one minute before they begin to play. After all, there is no one subject to hone in on. I do explain the format, of course. My teaching comes AFTER each hand is played. **I have found that lecturing before play begins is counterproductive**. I plan to address each major point after the hand has been played. In my opinion, overlecturing is one of the worst things a teacher can do. This is a fault I have tried very hard to correct. Now in my classes the students play more hands, have more fun and learn just as much if not more.

Think of taking medicine in small doses rather than all at once.

The objective is to try to teach them how to **think bridge**. This isn't easy because most students haven't been taught how to direct their thinking, mainly because they have been taught to memorize. Not good. The students love it when they see how problems can be solved in bidding, play and defense without overextending the memory. A few apropos jokes or stories thrown in never hurt. I do make that a part of my classes without turning it into the Comedy Hour thanks to Yvonne, the beautiful wife. Also, Yvonne fills in when there is an empty seat and gives me the buzz from the trenches.

Once the cards have been distributed they are told who the dealer is and the vulnerability. Then they bid the hand. As they finish the bidding, I write the final contract with the opening lead where it can easily be seen. For example: 4H by West. Opening lead: C10. They must play the hand at that contract from the designated direction with the designated lead, duplicate style. After they finish, the cards are placed face up on the table as if each player was putting down the dummy. When all four hands are clearly in view, I go into my act. I go over the bidding, the play and the defense pointing out what they should have been thinking about, hopefully anticipating possible questions. It is then that I allow for questions, never before. It is disruptive and frequently the questions do not refer to the topic. In addition, I tell them beforehand that I will field questions before and after the class plus they can e-mail me questions at any time.

When I think an important point has been

brought up in one of the hands, I have them put a somewhat similar example on the table to reinforce the point. The teacher should keep in mind that there is only so much that a student can absorb. After all, the important points are covered in the lesson sheets. For that reason I prefer that they do not take notes during the lesson. Too much clutter on the table is not good. As an aside: Early on in my teaching career, a lady approached me after a class and said, "Eddie, you can't possibly teach them all you know about a subject, so please don't try." I try to keep that in mind, and if I ever slip up Yvonne is right there to remind me.

I have found another technique worthwhile. Some of these 100 hands are decided early on—as early as the first few tricks. There is no point in playing these hands out. It wastes time. Either declarer has the rest, or the hand has been defeated with good defense and now the declarer has the rest of the tricks. When I see one of these hands coming up, I tell them to stop play after maybe four, five or six tricks. Nobody complains. After the number of tricks requested has been played, play stops and they put all 13 cards face up on the table as if they were putting down a dummy. Then I go over the hand. This shortened version makes it easier for both me and the students to hone in on the important points.

Maggie: Some students will always 'get it' right away, for other is seems quite a struggle. How do you help the ones that struggle?

Eddie: You can only spend so much class time with strugglers. It's not fair to the others. I try to give them extra help before or after the lesson. Using this format a "struggler" is seldom too embarrassed mainly because many of the others are making mistakes as well. Even though the hands

are not hard or tricky or anything like that, it's just that most players, even the stronger ones, have not yet learned to 'think bridge.' My job.

Maggie: Is it possible to teach card sense or at least improve it a little?

Eddie: To me card sense is something you either have or you don't. I have never seen anyone actually acquire it. Of course it helps if you have played other card games when you were younger. I spend an inordinate amount of time discussing card combinations. I think that is a good way to get a feel for the cards.

Maggie: What is the best way to teach card play?

Eddie: By example, I'm big on 'tricks': how to count tricks, the difference between fast and slow tricks, etc. But mainly I use the lessons hands, particularly if there is something interesting in the play. For example if the key to a hand is entry management, after the hand is over I give them other examples of entry management with the cards.

Maggie: Let's move on to beginners. Do you recommend teaching card play first? Since beginner classes often are a mix of those who have played a little bridge and true beginners, how do you hold those who know about bidding back and keep them from trying to bid hands when we haven't taught that yet?

Eddie: Well, you are looking for trouble when you have players of different levels in the same class. Big trouble. I would avoid that by forming separate classes. Also, **I do not** believe in teaching the bidding before the play. It is far easier to understand bidding

after one sees which cards take tricks, particularly length tricks. The method I am proposing here works best with 1-3 tables but can be used with more.

What I do is start them playing a few 'War' hands. No dummy, no partners. After the cards are distributed, the dealer leads any card, and the play goes as in a bridge hand. Nothing is trump and the high card takes the trick. Once you can talk about tricks, you have something to work with. The second step is more War, but this time with a partner. Now they learn not to take partner's tricks! Then you can show them ways (cards face up on the table) of developing extra tricks by losing a trick to set up tricks. KQJ combination is a good example. And KQJ2 is an even better example. Arrange the cards so that the suit is divided 3-3-3, the opponents having the ace and show them how the deuce morphs into a trick. The concept of length is important to emphasize. Eventually you explain the principle of the finesse (leading from weakness toward strength). I have many, many diagrams of this in the *Bridge for Dummies* book.

The next step is explaining that the partnership that has more strength (high card points) figures to take more tricks. So you teach them how to count high card points. Just aces, kings, queens and jacks. No short suit and no long suit points! When the next hand is dealt each player announces aloud how many HCP he or she has. The team with the most HCP divides their total count by 3. Say that team has 24 HCP. Divide by 3 and the answer 8 tells how many tricks are needed 'to win.' (If the total is 23, when divided by 3, the nearest multiple is still eight. Once again they play, but this time, finally, a dummy goes down. Still no-trump. The player who has the most HCP is the declarer and the concept of the opening lead is introduced plus leading from length, etc.

Not too much more than that. Less is more. Now that the dummy is down they get the idea of the declarer playing both hands.

Eventually the teacher must introduce the concept of trump (or wild cards). The teacher shows how aces can be trumped, etc. once again emphasizing that you have to follow suit. Now, finally the students are taught how to count high card points. When the cards are redealt each player starts by announcing their point count aloud. But this time something new has been added. The team with the most points also announces their distribution aloud. For example: "I have 3 spades, 5 hearts, 2 diamonds and 3 clubs". After both players have announced their distribution, it can be determined whether an eight card fit or longer exists. If it does, that suit is designated as the trump suit and the requisite number of tricks +1 for the fit are calculated. So this time if the team with the most points has 24, they have to take nine tricks because of the upward adjustment for the fit. This gives them an appreciation of an eight card or longer fit. If more than one eight card fit exists, the hand is played in the major suit fit. This will be explained later when scoring is learned. At the end of the hand the teacher tries to point out one or two simple techniques in play and defense. Perhaps third hand high, perhaps showing how trumping in the short hand gains a trick, etc. Also constant mention should be made of distribution being just as important as points. They go hand in hand. Inevitably there will be those who are impatient to get to the 'real' bidding. (They have probably played before.) Once the teacher thinks the students have 'got it' it is time to discuss the bidding. You will tell them that they are going to be telling their partner exactly what they have been telling partner aloud only this time in 'bridgese,' not in English!

I do not believe in teaching students to

count extra points for length or shortness before the bidding starts! This concept can be introduced as the bidding progresses. It is counter productive to teach students to add points for distribution and then have them subtract those points when they are obviously not working. Why not wait to see if there is a fit (then add points) or if the hand is a misfit (subtract points)? This is the way it is in the real world. Nobody likes to learn something and then have to unlearn it.

I would like to talk a little bit about teaching the students to add (or subtract) points for distribution. Keep in mind I am assuming that the bidding is being taught LAST, not first. This means that the students have played quite a few hands using the method I have suggested. A good teacher will point out during the play the extra trick taking potential of long suits that have been (and vice versa) and the advantage of shortness when having support for partner (and vice versa). But nothing about distributional points yet.

In no time they will be ready to start counting points and perhaps opening the bidding. We start with this example hand:

S: 4

H: A873

D: Q86432

C: K6

How many points is this hand worth?

Some teach to count extra for short suits, others extra for long suits. Clearly, both short and broken long suits can be quite valuable or totally worthless! Why not listen to the bidding and then decide?

Say LHO opens 1D. At this point the 5th and 6th diamond, (forget the D:Q) are unlikely to be worth the cardboard they are printed on. Students who count for length will surely think they have a better hand than they actually have. Subtraction time. Say partner overcalls 1S. Now the singleton spade is also

worthless, it's actually a minus! Those that have been taught to count for shortness will once again be off base. More subtraction. Too many subtractions and class size will dwindle. No subtractions and they will not learn how to accurately evaluate a bridge hand. I know. Too many come to my classes for the first time adoring every singleton or void they have-no matter what. Get the picture?

I realize that this method is not a cure all. Obviously reevaluation on fitting hands will be necessary. However, if the student (anyone) wants to become even a half-way decent bidder eventually he or she must learn to develop some bidding judgment. I think this is a good way to start.

As for opening the bidding, I would start by telling the student to open all 12 HCP point hands (forget the exceptions), any 11 HCP hand that has a six card suit, two five card suits or any 5-4-4-0 pattern. Period.

This is what I believe. Let the letters start pouring in. let's talk about it.

Maggie: What percent entertainer are you versus one who imparts knowledge?

Eddie: I do tell stories and a few jokes. As mentioned, Yvonne reminds me if I start getting carried away. Hearing them laugh is a great aphrodisiac and they seem to love stories. The problem is that they often remember the stories and not the lesson! Incidentally, most of the stories are concerned with some hand I played and got egg on my face. They love it when teacher makes a boo boo. Love it. To answer the question about percentages, Yvonne says 80-20. I think more like 85-15. Oh yes, the imparting knowledge is the bigger number!

Maggie: Can you share with us a funny story or two? Are there jokes that you use in class?

Eddie: I have about 150 stories/jokes that I know by heart. Some are such sure-fire winners that I can't resist telling them. I have had students come up to me before class and beg me to tell such and such a story even though they have heard it a zillion times. Clearly the best time to throw in a story is when something comes up in class that is apropos. Here's one I tell when we discuss conventions: When I first started my partnership with Mike Lawrence he graciously said he would play my methods rather than vice versa. As a result I got a little carried away and started sending him what he called "dreaded Manila Envelopes" loaded with my favorite treatments. He got so fed up that he finally told me he was going to bid 3NT as quickly as possible and hope it wasn't a convention! Then he insisted I play a convention he thought was worthwhile: When one of us opens a major, a jump to the three level of the other major is artificial, shows opening bid values, promises at least four card support, and has an UNKNOWN singleton. Opener bids the next step to find out the singleton. It sounded good (many, many, experts use this now) and I agreed to play it. Fast-forward a few months to the National Men's Pairs in Houston where we are ringed with kibitzers. Please keep in mind that this convention has never come up in the interim and I had been weaned on strong jump shifts. Now that excuses are in place, here are our hands:

Mike (opener)	Moi (responder)
S: AKQxx	S: - -
H: 10xx	H: AKJ9xxxx
D: QJ	D: xx
C: xxx	C: AKx

1S	3H*
4S	5H*
6S	7H* All Pass

Little did I know what I had done-until Mike alerted my bid! 3H was alerted as showing spade support with an unknown singleton. Mike then bid 4S because he didn't care where my singleton was. He just wanted out. 5H was alerted as showing a void (you see how clever Mike is, I did have a void-in SPADES, but he thought it was in HEARTS!) With that useful information, Mike bid 6S. What else could I bid - 7H. This also was alerted. When they asked, Mike said: "Cancel all previous alerts" and passed. They led a club and I made it! Every kibitzer left. We didn't have one kibitzer (the word must have gotten around) for the rest of the session. Who can blame them?

Incidentally I have seen this convention scenario take place over and over again even with experienced players. **That is why I don't think 'convention overload' is the way to go with intermediate players.**

When I discuss Signaling vs. Notrump in my class, I lay out this diagram as an example hand:

North(Dummy)	
xxx	
West	East
QJ10xx	Kx
South	
Axx	

The idea, is for East to overtake the lead of the queen with the king to be able to drive out the ace. This goes against the grain. After carefully explaining why this should be done, I asked one class: "So who is going to overtake the queen with the king?" Silence. Finally, one lady piped up: Well, I wouldn't, but I know you would, you're so tricky"

Maggie: Do your students continue to take lessons from you for years? Do many students repeat a course?

Eddie: Not years, decades! To this day I don't know if they are coming back to learn more or hear the jokes. I had one lady who was in every class I taught for at least 10 years. For some reason she always wound up playing this same lesson hand (one of my favorites) in 6NT. It was a hand from the Notrump Play lesson. I noticed she went down for 10 straight years! The gist of the hand was that declarer was supposed to duck a heart holding Axx facing Kxxx and then test the suit to see if it broke 3-3. If it did, there were 12 tricks and no side suit finesse would be needed. If it didn't, a club finesse would be necessary. The way I set up the hand, hearts broke 3-3 but the club finesse didn't work. I wanted to reward declarer for proper technique (testing long suit establishment before taking a finesse in a shorter suit). For 10 years she took the club finesse and went down. I couldn't stand it any longer. The following year I put the club finesse onside and had the hearts break 4-2 so she would make the hand. And what do you think happened? She didn't take the club finesse, she played the ace-king and a heart and the player with four hearts cashed two tricks! I tried.

Maggie: *What are your favorite topics to teach? Are there any topics that you avoid?*

Eddie: I guess I like defensive lessons, counting lessons and inference lessons the best. I try to give lessons that the class probably hasn't had much of before. I'm hoping I can show them new techniques to help them in these areas. I shy away from teaching bidding for several reasons. For openers, if they take lessons from someone else, or have ever taken lessons from someone else, chances are most of those lessons are bidding lessons. Mainly I want to instill good thinking habits in the limited time I am with them.

More reasoning less memorizing is my motto.

Maggie: *What advice would you give our members to improve their teaching?*

Eddie: I have tried to do that in what I have written above. To sum up:

(1) Preparation; don't go to a class until you have carefully looked over the hands you plan to present.

(2) All explanations with cards face up on the table. Literally no exceptions to that rule.

(3) Not too much consecutive teaching at any one time (4-6 minutes max).

(4) A little humor, keep it light.

(5) Most of the class time spent letting them play. Chances are you not working with would-be experts, more likely students who don't want to embarrass themselves in class or when playing with friends. Playing with spouses or significant others is another ball game altogether. I have some great husband-wife stories. Most of your students want to play respectably and perhaps do well at the club level. Serious students with potential I would talk to privately.

Maggie: *You sell your teaching materials. What level of student are these appropriate for? Do your lessons teach a topic in depth or give an overview of a topic?*

Eddie: Thought you would never ask. Most of my materials are designed for intermediate to intermediate plus players. And yes, they do go into depth (within reason). I think the best lessons for teachers are Kantar Lessons Books 1 through 4. The lessons in those books can be used with the same format I have described. The difference is that the hands in each chapter zero in on a particular topic. The feedback has been very positive.