

Meckstroth and Rodwell

Most readers of this Bulletin would have heard of USA Bridge professionals Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell, whose bridge partnership began in the late 1970's. They won the World Championship (Bermuda Bowl) in 1981 and subsequently numerous other major events (in USA and Europe) including world championships. They won the 2003 Bermuda Bowl held recently in Monaco. Very few Australian players have had the opportunity to play against them. This article is intended to give interested readers of this Bulletin some information about them. The ACBL web site discloses:

“**Jeff Meckstroth** was born in 1956 in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, and now resides in Tampa, Florida, with his wife Shirley. He has two sons from his first marriage. He was one of the first recipients of the “King of Bridge” scholarships when he was eighteen. Golf became a passion when he was young, and is still a favorite leisure activity.

A WBF Grand Master (currently ranked 3rd overall), he is one of only eight players to have won the Bermuda Bowl, World Teams Olympiad, and World Open Pairs – a special Triple Crown. In 1998, he won the IBPA's Charles. J. Solomon Award for the year's best played hand. His partnership with Eric Rodwell, known collectively as *Meckwell*, is widely acknowledged as the toughest in the world today”.

“**Eric Rodwell** was born in 1957 in West Lafayette, Indiana, but, like his bridge partner, has moved to Florida, where he lives with his wife Donna and Eric's two children from his first marriage. A graduate of Purdue University in the seventies, Eric is an accomplished pianist and enjoys composing music for relaxation. Ragtime music is a special favorite. He is a professional player and writer, the main creator of the vaunted Meckwell system “*R-M Precision*,” and the inventor of many popular bidding treatments, including Support Doubles. He is constantly tinkering with their system, looking for the elusive perfection”. Readers who own a recent “Official Encyclopedia of Bridge” can find details of these two champion players in the “Leading Bridge Personalities” section. As well, perusal of the lists of previous winners of major tournaments in USA and overseas from 1979 onwards listed in the Encyclopedia will disclose numerous wins and runners up for “Meckwell”. Readers who are so inclined can search on the Internet using a search engine (such as Google) and discover a huge number of items on Meckstroth and Rodwell.

What are they like at the table?

In 1996 Champion USA bridge player Zia Mahmood co-authored with David Burn a bridge book called *Ask Zia* (subtitled “Your Top 50 Bridge Questions Answered”). Question 2 in that book was ‘Is it bad etiquette to discuss a bridge hand after it has been played?’. As part of the answer, Zia said: “If you watch the great American pair Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell at the table, you will not hear them utter a word to each other during the entire period of play. They don't say ‘Thank You’ when the dummy is displayed, they don't say ‘Sorry’ on the rare occasions when they make a mistake, they don't even say ‘Well played’ on the less rare occasions when they do something well.

Meckstroth believes that this policy can give them a competitive edge. He says if your opponents hear you apologising to one another, it gives them strength and reinforces their sense of well being after they have obtained a good result. Or if your opponents hear you congratulating one another, it will increase their determination to do well on the next deal, just to knock the smiles

off your faces. By saying nothing, you can build an aura of omnipotence and invulnerability around you which can only work to your advantage”. Here is a recent deal where Meckwell extracted the full penalty from their opponents.

This was board 28 from the semi final of the 2003 Bermuda Bowl USA I Vs USA II. After 48 boards in the semi final USA II were only 17.5 IMPs behind. USA I pick up several good swings and then came this body blow for the USA II team.

Dealer: W

Vul: NS

N

A 10

10

A 8 6 5 3

A 9 8 7 4

W

K Q 9 8 5

J 5 4

Q 2

K 10 6

E

7

R862

RV107

DV53

S

J 6 4 3 2

A Q 9 7 3

9 4

2

At one table, USA II (Adam Wildavsky) passed, Bob Hamman, North, opened 1K, Doug Doub passed and over Paul Soloway’s 1P response, Hamman bid 2T Soloway’s 2K bid was passed out. Doub led 6H and Hamman rose AH and played carefully for +90.

This looks like a peaceful deal. . . . but there was action at the other table. West, Rodwell, opened 1P and Bobby Wolff bid 2NT (unusual for minors). Meckstroth doubled 2NT and soon Dan Morse (South) became declarer in 3K Doubled. As stated in the Daily Bulletin Issue #12 :

“ The defense was brutally accurate”. Rodwell led 2K.(*Ed- PJ- the }2 is the only lead that will, against best declarer play, set the contract three tricks*).

Sue and Richard Grenside live in Perth nowadays. Sue always travels with her husband Richard when he directs at World Bridge Championships. In recent years Sue has been a regular ‘recorder’ for Meckstroth and Rodwell. She is present at every session they play. I asked Sue to make some comments for this Bulletin :

“ I have been the recorder for the USA Open team for the past 2 Bermuda Bowls. In the 2003 event held in Monte Carlo I was the recorder for every match the team played, (all 656 boards). Both times the team was headed by Nick Nickell playing with Dick Freeman and teamed with Jeff Meckstroth, Eric Rodwell, Bob Hamman and Paul Soloway. Meckwell, as they are affectionately known are the anchor pair of the team and it has been very interesting to sit beside them and observe both the play and mannerisms at the table. Meckstroth always sits east and

south. They play a system of relays, which they modify according to their opponents, and from the advice of the Coach who is an integral part of the team. The Coach provides each team member with an overview of every other team along with suggested defensive bidding especially targeting “multi’s” and the like This overview took the form of a new book for each day of play running into 10’s of pages.

At the commencement of each match they would always discuss their defence methods and often made small changes in line with their Coach’s suggestions. I have been impressed by the courtesy they extend to opponents, especially the weaker teams. They are much focused at the table with Rodwell being the more intense of the two, he takes more time in working out the opponents hands and best line of defence. During play they claim at the first opportunity thus saving time for the difficult hands. I am sometimes surprised at their stopping in successful part score contracts when we lesser players would leap into higher contracts, thus proving that hand evaluation is one of the most important aspects of the game. This hand evaluation is very noticeable in both their light openings and overcalls. Sometimes wrong but their results speak for themselves. The team made a comment to me at the Victory Dinner “we don’t always play our best for the Vu-graph”, remember they have been playing for two weeks straight and by the final there is a lot of pressure and exhaustion.”

This next section is aimed mainly at keen tournament players who may be interested in an outline of the Meckwell system.

Here is an extract from a recent World Championship book where Eric Kokish summarized their system that year (1997)

“Jeff Meckstroth/Eric Rodwell, in addition to a highly sophisticated strong club system (really sliding towards 15+ HCP unless unbalanced) , feature a full array of destructive and competitive gadgets to annoy their opponents. They employ a 9-12 HCP no trump at favourable vulnerability, first and second position (13+ to 16- HCP) otherwise), eccentric patterns permissible. In first and second position 2K is a fairly loose weak two bid in a major, 2♥ a three suited Precision 2K bid, 2♠ a weak pre-empt in clubs or any pre-empt in diamonds, making 3♣ a no trump oriented pre-empt. 3K is a heart pre-empt, 3♥ α ♠ pre-empt and 3♠ any solid suit.. In third and fourth position, however, all these bids revert to something akin to standard. Many fit showing bids and competitive transfers, takeout NT bids. Comic NT overcalls at favourable vul. Their trademark is their tendency to open and overcall very light and consistently play routine partscore deals in game, making a far higher percentage of these games than the odds would suggest. Some intermediate jump overcalls (Unfavorable vul) and a no-fear two-suited overcall style.

Over enemy strong NT, double is one minor or both majors, 2m shows that suit and a major, 2M is natural. Over weak NT, double shows values, 2♣ shows spades and a rounded suit, 2K shows diamonds and a major, 2M are natural plus 2NT shows a different sort of 1 suiter and 3 level bids show defined 2 suiters. They play a complete transfer method over enemy takeout doubles, and some tricky forcing pass agreements at high levels in some situations. Negative doubles through 3♠, responsive doubles thru 4K, higher doubles showing cards rather than perfect patterns. Their ‘carding’ arrangements are: some Rusinow (ie underlead) and third highest from even, low from odd against suits. Rusinow, strong king leads, and fourth best against NT”. Their signals are generally reverse with some special exceptions. So if ever you get to play against Meckwell you will know something of what to expect !

by *Peter Jamieson*.(with thanks to Sue Grenside for her comments)
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