

Interview with Roy Welland

One of a Series of Bridge Encounters by Samantha Punch

2001	Cavendish Invitational Teams
2001	Reisinger Trophy
2003	European Mixed Bridge Championships
2003	Spingold Master Knockout Teams
2005	Cavendish Invitational Teams
2005	Victor Mitchell Open Board-a-Match Teams
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2007	Vanderbilt National Knockout Teams
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2016	Moscow Invitational Slava Cup
2016	South American Bridge Championships
2016	Spingold Master Knockout Teams
2016	World Bridge Games Open Pairs Championships

Just to get us started, why do you play bridge?

OK, well I used to play a lot of different games and I found it to be the most challenging. Some games like Chess are a little bit more scientific in terms of definitively determining a course of action in some instances, but bridge really has a unique combination of mathematical analysis combined with a sort of a psychological element, or an element of the unknown. So you really have to use probability more than science.

Not that probability isn't a science in itself, but there's no certainty. So most games have too much chance or too much skill. Bridge is a perfect

combination of both, I think. Plus, it never really repeats itself. You play Tic,Tac,Toe it's the same thing over and over again. Bridge is at the complete other end of the spectrum from my perspective.

What was it that hooked you in?

I have always found games interesting and challenging. I studied a lot of mathematics when I was young and I suppose the analytical element appeals to me in this and many other games. I just found this to be more appealing. There is a drawback in some sense that you are required to play with a partner or in a team so you don't always get to freely implement all of your ideas although you usually have to.

So do you mean that sometimes, because of your partner or team mate you can't really do what you would do if it was just up to you?

I think the best example is the stylistic view. I tend to try to do whatever I think is the best percentage action most of the time. Of course, that's not always the most sensible decision at that point in time. I mean, if you are ahead 50 with a few boards to go, then it might not make that much sense to make a very aggressive pre-empt, even if it is, in isolation, the best percentage action. But, I guess, more so if you're playing in a team, if you come back with unusual results, which I do, they start to wonder – gee what happened on that board? So, I guess it's because I go about bridge a little bit differently from a lot of people, so I am perfectly willing to take risks and assume that if I'm right two-thirds of the time, then that's fantastic. Of course, it also means that you have a result that nobody else has about a third of the time for whatever reason.

An example you gave there is the aggressive pre-empt – would you still take that action?

Well, you shouldn't in some situations, and in some situations you should. I don't let my team mates or the opinions of other people prevent me from doing what I think is correct generally speaking.

Would you still do that if you were something like 50 up?

Well then I think you should take that risk, I intentionally didn't do that on the last day in Croatia and the results were bad. Because we probably didn't need many Victory Points in the final day to qualify for the top six, which is one of the primary objectives really. But we thought, if we just get a few under our belt in the first match it would be nice and then we could do whatever we want to try to win a medal. But that strategy didn't work very well for us. I guess it's just not our style at least for me, it's to play aggressively.

How did that feel, going into that day 1st and coming out 6th. Obviously 6th was still great as you qualified, but how did that—going from 1st to 3rd and then to 6th—feel?

That happens all the time in Swiss Teams. When you are in anything that's run in a Swiss format, often you are playing the leaders in the last round, if you lose a couple of matches you are obviously going to drop several places. We lost all three of our last matches, some of them quite badly and so, it's always disappointing but it's something you get used to if you are a games player. If you play bridge all the time and it's a knockout match every match has a loser. So you have to get used to that.

But how do you get used to that?

By going through it enough times. I mean, in that specific example, I had played in the US Trials for many, many, many years hoping to earn a place in the Bermuda Bowl and never did.

I think you said in an interview in Croatia that you are quite famous for your come-backs. How do you manage to come back?

Well, it's the same style of playing that we have that it's very easy for us to not replicate the result of the other table. So the bidding is almost guaranteed to be different and we also have a very aggressive style, so sometimes we have team mates and they say well our opponents played really well. That almost never happens to us. That's not to say that we don't make mistakes or get caught speeding or we are more prone to accidents than some pairs as a result of this style, but it's also true that our opponents make a lot more mistakes than they normally do because uncertainty is created during the auction.

I'm afraid I don't actually have a feel for your system but I have heard that it

is quite unusual.

It is unusual, yes. That's been mentioned. Some people are adopting some parts of the system, for example, a lot of people have started to play transfer responses to a one club opener and that whole style has a lot of benefits and I think most people who don't play it don't realise what they are missing. Like the ability to let either hand decide that they don't want to be the Declarer or the Dummy depending on the make-up of their cards. There are a lot of advantages like that.

When you say you're creating uncertainty for your opponents, is that because of your unusual methods or is it because of your style of play?

There are some conventions that are intentionally designed to cause confusion, like the multi for example. We don't play multi, but there were many hands in Croatia where the strangest things happened as a result of somebody opening a Multi and both sides attempting to play in the same major—both sides. I mean it looked so stupid!

But how do you feel if some people are a bit critical of playing unusual methods? I think it's fair to say here in the US, some people are particularly anti playing something so different that your opponents don't know what is going on and they don't necessarily think it's fair?

Well, there are a lot of methods that are permitted so some of the methods that we play, I mean, we pre-empt a lot, so that causes problems for your opponents. I am a big believer in the more space of your opponents you take up, the better off you are. You take away a lot of their options and a lot of their science. So we do have some conventions that we play, but we are only permitted to play them as a defence to an unusual convention, Precision or something like that. So you don't get to do that stuff all the time. Technically it's a defence, just as a convention over a No Trump is considered a defence to their 1NT opening. So those people who don't wish to play against methods like that, all they have to do is play more standard methods themselves then they won't encounter them. They'll still encounter aggressive pre-empting, but to me that's all a part of bridge. I think you're giving money away when you don't pre-empt when you could have.

You said at the beginning that you recognise that you play a bit differently from other players. How did that come about?

Well, because I think it's an effective style, I don't like to give my opponents a free run in the bidding without any interference, so I overcall pretty aggressively. That's a lot of the style. Also when we are having a constructive auction, we try to make sure that they know as little as possible about the Declarer's hand. When we are bidding in an uncontested auction, one hand is describing itself to who is usually the Declarer and the Declarer doesn't say anything about their hand. So I am a big believer in that because it makes defence much more difficult. So, a lot of our system is geared towards intentionally not disclosing information about our hand that might be valuable to our opponents when we think it's our hand, and when it's their hand to try to interrupt their bidding best way we can.

And you don't really mind when it goes wrong—is that correct?

Well, you never want it to go wrong, but it's just part of the game, it's risk and reward. That's what some people don't like about bridge. They don't like being at the other end of a coin toss, which they perceive. I don't think it's a coin toss, I think I'm going to win 60% or whatever the percentage is. That's the way I view it, as an action that's more likely to win than lose and, yes, it's random. But it's probably less random for us than it is for our opponents.

Do your opponents or team mates ever get cross?

Sure, of course they do.

How do you cope with that?

I mean, we haven't had any trouble with any team mates for a long time. Of course you just know that your team mates are going what the Hell, was it a bidding misunderstanding when you're minus 600. Like we did in one of those matches. One of the unfortunate aspects of playing an extremely complex system is that sometimes there is an uncertainty in the auction. We have discussed and discussed our system and we have a lot of agreements, but that's the beauty of bridge, something comes along that you haven't discussed and that's one of the things we try to do to our opponents, make sure we introduce them to a situation that they haven't discussed.

What would you say are the key qualities of a top player?

Initially I think it's the same as almost every single thing in life which is that those who desire to learn and improve will always garner better results

than those who think that they understand and just play. There are a lot of bridge players today that play the same system they played that they learned 30 years ago. When it's their turn to lead if they have a Queen and a Jack in the same suit they lead the Queen of that suit. So I don't do that. I think, well what suit should be led? It doesn't matter what I have in my hand. I don't just lead the Ace King because I have it. I decide which suit will be the most effective lead and then, if I have a dilemma with respect to say the Ace King of clubs, sometimes you do that and sometimes you don't 'cos you're giving away information. So the people who continually try to evolve their bridge game or continue to learn will have a much better chance of being a great player some day. And then, if you add to that obviously you need some talent—I'd like to say that people have a talent for bridge, but sometimes people have a talent for analytical things. Doing things that are analytical and skills of evaluation, both of those are very important for bridge.

So if you have those elements combined with the desire to improve and educate yourself, if you want to phrase it that way, then I think the most important factor is the ability to focus and concentration. Because you see that all the time. Some players who are just real wizards, but don't necessarily do the best with their abilities as a result of that, and then there are some players who work really hard at the table and have to work amazingly hard because they don't play that much or they don't really have a real natural sense. I've played a lot of card games so I'm not saying, I think I'm above average and I could play without thinking and be OK, not that, of course I would make a lot of mistakes but I would just play a diamond and often it's right. And there's some players who don't really have any of that and they have to work really hard, and those that work really hard can still achieve a super high level of success. So, I think concentration has got to be right at the top of the most important.

Is that something you have to work at, concentration?

Yeah. Focus I'm good at. Focus and concentration I don't necessarily think of as exactly the same.

Can you explain what you mean by that?

When I say focus, OK, maybe I'm using the wrong word, maybe I should have used ambition instead of focus. I have always been very ambitious and have had a very strong desire to win and have no trouble focussing myself

on trying to give myself the best chance, but I am prone to a lapse in concentration during the play. Sometimes I play too quickly, or call a card from the Dummy that I shouldn't. So that's a weak spot for me. One of my old partners said that there are a few dozen players who just really seem to have a natural talent for bridge, and then there are also many players who are extremely studious and cautious. There are only a couple that are both and those are two of the best players in the world – Zia is an extremely talented and slow and careful player; Bob Levin is another, an unbelievably natural player who really takes his time. It shows in their phenomenal results over their careers so far. So I'd like to be more like them. I've always thought of myself as a fairly talented card player, but if I could just improve my concentration, take my time, I would do better.

And do you know how to do that?

I think I have been progressing. I've read recently a book called "Blink". I don't know if you're familiar with it. It was written by Malcolm Gladwell who is also more known for a book called "Outliers", but "Blink" was a very interesting book. I've always felt like, OK, it's true, if I take a long time at Trick 1 I'm more likely to come up with a better line of play and my opponents will be more likely to come up with a better defence. So it is a trade-off. I have always thought that my playing quickly often my opponents make more mistakes than I do than they would have otherwise. I might lose a little bit in my play, but I think that my opponents would lose more than I do in sometimes playing too quickly. So, there is a trade-off, so I can rationalise my own shortcomings in that manner if I so choose. But the book "Blink" was very interesting and it's exactly something I always sort of felt was true, the point basically that it makes is cognitive analysis doesn't necessarily improve evaluation of something. Often your brain has already, perhaps subconsciously, analysed something accurately. One of the best examples they gave is if you've witnessed a crime and you are asked to point out the criminal in a line-up, people, with a great degree of accuracy, are able to do that, but if before doing that, they are asked to describe the perpetrator, that pollutes their vision. If they have to try to translate a vision of what is in their brain first into words, then when they go to try to pick the person out of a line-up they are less likely to because their thought process has been perverted in essence. So what they started with was the vision

and then they tried to translate that into words. So that happens in a lot of media, I think, where sometimes you have a perfectly good evaluation of something and then if you try to over analyse it doesn't necessarily do it.

That relates to playing a hand, for example?

Well, sometimes, let's say you're trying to find the queen of trumps. It could be that your brain has noticed that your right hand opponent was fidgety a little bit or trying to behave normally and you didn't really consciously recognise that, but you might feel like he's got the Queen over there, and even though you couldn't count the hand, you'd go, he's quite likely to have three and you can talk yourself out of making the play that you would have otherwise made. So I don't like to do that to myself.

So you stick with the first ...

If I have an instinct to make one play, I usually do that, unless I have a really firm analysis of why it's wrong. After reading that book I'm more likely to do it than I was beforehand.

Where does bridge fit in your life?

Right now? It's always been a dream of mine to play more bridge, so I used to play in most of the US Nationals and a couple of International events and I was working fulltime for a lot of the time. I always hoped to be able to travel a bit more and play a little bit more bridge and so, in that respect, I am fulfilling a dream of mine to play more often and with people from different parts of the world and at a higher level.

So if you had your time all over again, would you want to be a bridge pro from a young age?

No. I wouldn't want to be a professional. I think it spoils the game a little bit. I think I have more fun playing bridge than any bridge professional. Often as a professional you're playing for a team sponsor or partnering a team sponsor and it's hard to compare the enjoyment of that. I mean, there are a lot of pairs who get to play with their regular partner and there are several sponsors that are quite good players and very successful, so I don't mean this as a knock on them, but we play with whomever we want to play with. We play with people that we like, and where we think we have a good chance to win and that's a luxury that not many professionals have.

What was your goal at that time?

I wanted to play in the Bermuda Bowl. I wanted to win a World Championship. We did win all three of the US Nationals and we played internationally in the World Championships in Istanbul in 2004 and lost in...that was a tough match.

What is the preferred term for a sponsor, are there any negative connotations – I've heard lots of terms?

Most people use the word “sponsor”, some people say “client”. I don't know, some people consider some of those negative connotations and some people don't. I'll tell you a story. I worked in a pool hall when I was a kid and it was a very, I'm not going to say fancy in that it was elegant, but there were some of the world's best players there and they would sit around and wait for a 'sucker' to come in and they would win most of their money from suckers.

So I saw this one guy. He came in about every three months. Very nicely dressed, sometimes with a date. He would play for two or three hours and lose a bunch of money, and then he would go off for a dinner reservation at 8 o'clock and I kept wondering, who is the real sucker? This guy comes in, he knows he's gonna lose, he enjoys playing pool with some of the best players in the world and a couple of hours go by, he's had a nice time and now he goes on with his life. So he is really just spending some money. They called him a sucker and I'm thinking they have it backwards. They're standing in a pool hall every day of their whole life waiting for that guy to come in and hoping he comes in and he is having a great life. They have a crappy life. So to me in that respect the sponsor is the person you want to be. That's the person with the better life. A bridge professional – I don't want to say anything bad about being a bridge professional, but they are waiting for a sponsor sometimes although some are good enough so that people are beating down their doors, but to me being a sponsor is a luxury, if you can afford it it's fine. I don't think it has to have a negative association with anything.

Can you explain a bit more about that conviction, why you think a sponsor has a better life.

I mean financially they have a better life which gives them flexibility. They play bridge, or don't play bridge, a bridge professional pretty much has to

play bridge. Maybe they can have another job and they are electing to do this but that's not the case with many people. I am sure a lot of them enjoy it a great deal, but if you have to play 330 days a year I think it takes a lot of the enjoyment out of it. For the people who really are full-time bridge professionals, if you ask them, “Hey, you want to play a few hands of bridge?” they're like, “Are you kidding?” They're not really looking forward to doing that in their spare time.

Can you describe the procession of the transition in you from going from being a sponsor to not being a sponsor?

I think it's really difficult. Brad Moss warned me about this before we ever played our first event. He said, once you sponsor a team you are forever a bridge sponsor and I said I didn't care. I don't really care about other people's perception. I mean, I do to some extent, but not about things like that. I don't care if people think I'm a bridge sponsor. But it was a goal for me to earn the bridge community's respect as a real bridge player and I think my successes have done enough to do that at least.

But you can choose whether to sponsor or not?

Yeah, but I don't want to do that. I don't really have any interest in sponsoring a bridge team. Because, firstly, it's really annoying – I want to be a member of the community, I don't want to be a sponsor. I want to be a world class bridge player, playing – I don't want to be playing as a sponsor. I always thought when I first started sponsorship who wouldn't, let's say you really loved tennis, and they said you could go play Wimbledon with John McEnroe in the doubles and actually play in Wimbledon and maybe get to the finals. If you really loved tennis and you could afford it, who wouldn't do that? Everybody would probably do that. So why is bridge any different? In bridge, it's even easier – practically speaking, you couldn't probably play with John McEnroe in the finals of the doubles, but in bridge you can actually do that. You don't even have to necessarily be a great player.

Do you mind, though, that inevitably some people still perceive you as a sponsor?

If they don't want to see things, what do I care? I mean, the facts are the facts, but I've had an extremely good record with several different partners with several different teams, and a record that is difficult for even the best players to match. I won the Player of the Year Award in 2007. I played with

five different partners. The list of winners is Meckstroth, Zia, people like that almost every year. And I played with somebody I had never played with in the first pair event and won that. I played in the Vanderbilt on a team with my wife at the time and we won, so I played most of the year basically ahead of the professionals. Crystal was on the Vanderbilt Team and the Spingold Team, she didn't play in the Reisinger, but we were playing on a team all year. And I played in pairs events with four or five different partners.

Why do you personally think that men, on paper, are better (statistically win more) than women?

I think it will evolve, but I think it probably begins from a social level. My belief has always been that bridge is something that you have to dedicate a lot of time to and when I decided to take up bridge that's all I did. I spent all day long at the bridge club.

In 1985, it wouldn't really be socially acceptable for a female to just hang out at a card haunt all day and all night or to play cards all night. That's not to say it doesn't ever happen, just that the pool of people from which you can choose the next great bridge player is a lot more likely to be, if it's going to be found in a roomful of people that play cards all day and night, there just aren't any women there. It has never really been socially acceptable. If someone's say Oh, what were you doing last night – I was playing cards all night – it's not the female thing to do. I don't know if it's a social reason or a desire reason. There are probably some other reasons. I don't know what they are. It's true in Chess also, there could be similar reasons, honestly I don't know. You should ask Sabine. She has some thoughts about it.

Do you think bridge is a sexist game?

The sexist viewpoint about the ability of players unfortunately, currently, it is mostly true. I think that the whole world of bridge creates a big disservice by actually having women's events because I think if they didn't have them they would be forced to compete and the result would probably be that women could compete equally with men. I haven't really dwelled on it that much. It's an unfortunate topic to discuss because it can probably be perceived as demeaning to some extent to women, more insulting.

It's unfortunate that the question is ever posed – why is it that women aren't able to compete at bridge? To those who think that all brains are created equal, I am one of those people. I mean, they are different, but I did

read something recently that could explain a little bit. One of my favourite books called "The Brain Rules" and the author, I didn't read it, I listen to audio books a lot, who was reading the book said that he had this young son, and his son was playing with some other kids, and one boy said, "I can throw this ball up to the ceiling." Another one says, "Oh, I can throw it higher." And then, he goes I can throw it up to the moon and they get competitive. And he said they were analysing the behaviour of girls of the same age. One girl says, "Hey, look, I can throw this ball up to the ceiling." And the response was, "Oh, I can too." A pretty big difference. So I don't know if that's instinct or, whatever it is, but I wouldn't rule out the possibility that, as a result of the evolution of man, that there are more competitive instincts in a male than a female, left over from the days of when they had to go hunting, or something. I don't know. I don't really want to talk too much about this topic because I don't really know anything about it.

How do you cope when it's not going quite so well? Do you ever get cross with each other?

I think probably it's easier because I worked for a long time as a trader on the floor at the Stock Exchange and that's an industry where it's really just like I've described my bridge game. If I made money 55% of the time that was fantastic. But that must mean you lose 45% of the time so almost half of your life you were losing money and it's just part of the game. You have to look at it that way. Otherwise you'd just be pulling your hair out every other day, so in bridge it's the same way. Nobody wins every time they make a bid – sometimes you're gonna play badly, sometimes you're gonna lose and it's part of the game. If you don't accept that you probably shouldn't play.

So how did you decide to play for Germany and how did you feel about it?

In some ways it was very easy, in some ways it was difficult. It was an easy decision to make because I had never had so much fun playing bridge as playing with Sabine. We had a great system, we both loved playing and we have fun before, after and during bridge. We go to dinner, we have drinks afterwards, go running in the morning and I didn't want to play with somebody else in some other events because, to me, bridge at the highest level partnership is absolutely essential. Sometimes you can get away with not having it, but if you're gonna expect to compete on a regular basis you have to have a good partnership and bridge globally is just getting more and more

difficult every year. Look at the European Championships. I used to think, Oh, all you have to do is come in the top six over there, so easy, and now I'm over there – I'm like, what? Look at those teams! Look at the teams that didn't make it. France was a really strong team that didn't qualify and Norway. Some other really strong teams took part.

I've had a problem for a long time with the rules in the United States Team Trials. You are granted a very large advantage based upon your play during the course of the year in the three Nationals and the previous year's Trials, but *only if your team contains at least four American players*. So, for example, in one year I lost in the round of 8 in the Spingold and won the Vanderbilt and came second in the Reisinger but I would have had to play in the round robin.

Because you have team mates from elsewhere you mean?

Yeah, yeah. Originally the concept was they didn't want to have some sponsor who wasn't that good getting a bye into the semi-finals that he didn't really deserve or earn. But that wasn't what was happening here. I didn't expect anybody to make special rules for me but it's a significant handicap to have to play in a round robin, whereas if somebody else had those results they would have started in the semi-finals so they would play the worst team first and then allow the other teams to battle, so they'd probably have a 35% or 40% chance of being the Nation's representative, whereas my chances were probably 5-7% starting in the round robin because you have the round robin and then you have a round of 16, a round of 8, a round of 4, so they probably have 8 times my likelihood of earning a place.

Couldn't you then have picked team mates on that basis to have played with so that you could have got a bye to the semi-finals.

It's difficult to do that. The best American players are paid a lot of money, so for example, Meckstroth and Rodwell and Weinstein and Levin both play for Nickell and they are very well paid and that's the reason. I mean, you could get another really good pair, or you could get a team that's really good, the Monaco team for example, or even a team that's really good for a lot less money, but you wouldn't get that placing in the Trials. So I lost to Nickell almost every year, but many times after playing six days longer than they did. I lost three years in a row in the Finals. I played 11 days the first year, 10 days the second year and I don't remember how many days the

third year – I had a bye in it somewhere. It's a lot of bridge and by the end you might feel sharp, but even if you're fit and healthy, but when I analyse I thought I was playing really well, but when I subsequently analysed my play it was flopping because of fatigue, because playing every board for 11 days is a lot, 60 boards a day for 11 days.

So the rules make it really difficult. My chances of being the US representative were extremely small. Firstly, I couldn't play with Sabine, so I tried to do it every year, but then when Sabine and I started playing together then what was I going to do? If I played with Sabine in the US Nationals I would play in the round robin in a non-partnership. So what would be my chances of winning the US Trials? Close to zero.

Are there any differences that you see between playing in Europe and playing in the US?

Yes. Much nicer to play in Europe.

Why is that?

Well these bridge professionals, not all of them, but some of them make the game a lot less pleasant. Sometimes it's intentional and sometimes it's competitive or whatever but it's unfortunate. It's so much more pleasant playing there. We have had not one minute that was not pleasant bridge over there the whole time.

And when you said intentional?

There are pairs who try to make their opponents uncomfortable. It's a very specific objective to make their opponents uncomfortable at the table. So they are rude and curse and stuff like that, and do a lot of things just to throw you off balance. It's intentional. Wilful and intentional.

If someone's dishing that out how do you cope with that to make sure it doesn't throw you off balance?

I know what they are – I just think of them as assholes when they're doing that. I mean they probably get a great deal of success because of it. And there's also a lot more what I would call borderline unethical play here, where there is a little hesitation, just enough so would you go with it, was he thinking about winning the Ace when they don't have it...

Is there anything that is tangible that is more so here than in Europe?

I see that very rarely in Europe. I don't see very much of that at all.

Why—have you any idea why?

I guess there's a greater incentive to produce good results here, because it's your occupation—you have to. So if you have to win, if you have to cheat to win you'll cheat to win. I'm not saying everybody but some people will and some people have ...

So I guess that is a downside to professional bridge.

Definitely.

And are there any other downsides?

Well the upside is it has elevated the game. I don't think bridge would be this strong without professionalism in bridge so that is a really big plus—look at how strong the American Nationals have become because there are sponsors hiring all of these best players in the world to come over and play in it. It's a real pleasure to play in these events. It's something special, it's like whatever sport you compare it to, you are playing with all of the best players from all around the world. I think it is just the greatest thing, so that is a huge plus. The minuses—I don't know—other than it perverts the game a little bit. I mean, there are some issues of randomness which is unfortunate. With randomness, not in the knock-outs, but in the Reisinger or in the Swiss Teams, if you play, say for example a team with a weak sponsor in the afternoon when the sponsor is playing, that's a big advantage. So that you have that kind of effect where you're just really unlucky if you have to play a really strong four-handed team, and somebody else plays the sponsor.

A final question, what would your advice be to someone trying to get better?

I've watched a lot of bridge, I've always watched a lot of bridge. I used to come to the Nationals when I wasn't playing that much and so I would have some lousy team. And I would just watch instead of playing in some pair event I would watch the Spingold. I loved doing that, so I would sit behind Zia or somebody like that and watch how the best players played, and pay attention.



Roy Welland

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