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[Times photo: Pam Royal]

Hands across the table is a familiar-enough sight, but something special happens when Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell play bridge. The analysis of the card-play above appears [here](#).

Or learning how to bring out the Meckwell in your relationships

By BILL DURYEA, Times Staff Writer

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They are the longest-standing partners in professional bridge, and what keeps them together and winning can tell us a lot about what makes a successful partnership.

TAMPA -- Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell, the two men who would ultimately form the world's most successful bridge partnership, met on what amounted to a blind date.

It was the summer of 1974, at a tournament in DeKalb, Ill. A mutual friend, sensing that their different styles would complement each other, matched them up.

It wasn't a magical moment or anything, just intense mutual admiration.

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For Meckstroth it was watching Rodwell, likely the only other teenager in the tournament's field of 800, execute a punishing maneuver called a "vise-squeeze."

"I'd never even heard of a vise-squeeze," says Meckstroth. "I knew right away he was the guy I wanted to be my partner."

Rodwell was no less impressed when Meckstroth boldly seized every trick in a hand that other competitors had played far more conservatively.

"He played the hand as if he were seeing every single card," Rodwell says. "I hadn't seen anything like it before."

[Playing the cards dealt them](#)

In 1998, at the trials that determined who would represent the United States at the world championships, Eric Rodwell and Jeff Meckstroth played a hand that spotlighted their gifts as players and as partners.

Meckstroth suggested they team up, and they won the first tournament they played together. In the 25 years since, they have won five world championships, including this January, when they anchored the United States team's record-setting win in Bermuda. Ten days ago they won their second national championship in less than a year, sealing their reputation as the dominant pairing of the last decade.

Individually, Meckstroth, who lives in Tampa, and Rodwell, a Chicago resident who vacations in Clearwater, rank third and second in the world. As good as they are individually, they are legends as partners, so much so that commentators long ago fused their names into one: Meckwell.

Bridge lore is rife with stories of temperamental players raining abuse, and even blows, on their partners. Against such odds Meckstroth and Rodwell have discovered their bridge playing excels in direct proportion to the health of their partnership.

They are not great bridge players who happen to be partners, they are great bridge players who are better because they are great partners.

Though they never intended to become a case study, looking at their success reveals a lot about the internal dynamics of partnerships in general. You might not be able to understand their bridge strategy, but they could do wonders for your marriage.



[Times photo: Jill Sanders]

Eric Rodwell, left, plays a slow, deliberate style, the opposite of partner Jeff Meckstroth. Balance is important in their relationship. "Your fate is inexorably tied to the ability of your partner," Rodwell says.

Like many intellectuals who see beauty in patterns that elude most of us, Rodwell and Meckstroth are generally disinterested in the fashions that consume society.

Rodwell lives most of the year in Naperville, a prosperous Chicago suburb popular with corporate executives. He and his wife, Donna, vacation in Clearwater, where they own a condominium in a mock-Tudor complex near the Courtney Campbell Causeway. Rodwell, 42, wears Topsiders without socks and, like a schoolboy, has a hard time keeping the laces tied.

Meckstroth, 43, moved to Tampa in 1988 after brief stints in larger cities. He prefers that his urban amenities, the local NFL team, for example, come without the stress of urban congestion.

Neither man fusses over haircuts. Rodwell for many years sported a beard that started just below his eyes and ended in his shirt collar because he couldn't be bothered shaving. They have the less than robust complexions of men who often spend a dozen hours in a room of smokers. They talk with the uninflected nasality of math whizzes who would rather speak accurately than dramatically.

But when it comes to bridge, they are polar opposites.

Meckstroth plays with legendary brio.

"His intuition and his fearlessness are what make him famous," says James Gleick, an acclaimed science writer who has studied with Meckstroth for the past three years.

"He always knows where all the cards are. It's scary."

Rodwell, known as one of the game's top theorists, plays a slow, deliberate style.

"If Jeff (Meckstroth) is playing a hand as a declarer, it will take him 60 seconds," says Martin Seligman, 57, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "If Eric is playing, he'll do it in six minutes."

Meckstroth says he has read exactly three books on bridge and hardly thinks about the game when he is not playing; he'd rather golf. Rodwell tinkers constantly with the approximately 400-page bidding system he has developed over the past quarter century.

A bridge commentator once described them this way:

"Rodwell just wants to get you over the finish line.

Meckstroth just wants to hit you over the head with a candelabra."

They have what successful partnerships in any endeavor require: balance.

In physics, balance is a simple function of equal distribution of weight. Human partnerships depend on balance as well, but each member need not possess all the attributes of success; the attributes need only be possessed by the partnership as a whole.

John McEnroe was one of the top tennis players in the world. Playing singles, Peter Fleming was never anywhere near the top 10, but he and McEnroe dominated doubles tennis in the early '80s. A 6-foot-5 right-hander, Fleming had immense reach at the net, providing the perfect complement to the left-handed McEnroe's serve and equally brilliant net play.

The balance in a bridge partnership comes from familiarity, or what Brent Manley, editor of the Bridge Bulletin of the American Contract Bridge League, calls "partnership understandings."

"I've seen this many times," Manley says. "Two world class players sit down to play and if they haven't had time to work out their bidding system, they have problems."

As with so many relationships, the root of most bridge problems is communication.

At the tournament level, the only talking at the bridge table is

an oblique language called bidding. What a player wants to do is tell his partner exactly the cards he is holding so they can come to an agreement about the combined value of their hands. But he can't.

Instead players use bids -- one heart, two clubs and the like -- which suggest how many cards a player has in a particular suit and their relative value. A player is not allowed to change the inflection of his voice or raise his eyebrows as a kind of secret code. That's cheating. At major tournaments, the players cannot even see each other. They use a bidding box, which is passed from player to player through a screen that extends from below the table (to prevent illicit foot-tapping) to above eye-level.

The partner, in turn, supplements the information received in the initial bid with a bid of his own. This back-and-forth negotiation between partners is known as "the search for a fit." Find the "fit" and your partnership can control the game by making the highest bid. That bid becomes a "contract," and then the cards are played to determine whether the contract can be met.

By longstanding convention, all bids have meanings that are understood by players at all levels. The best players combine the information from their partners with the information exchanged by the opposing team to get a picture of where all the cards are on the table.

Meckstroth and Rodwell have evolved their play to such a high level that the standard bidding language no longer suffices for the nuanced information they need to exchange. They have developed a bidding system called RM Precision.

Because their system seems unfathomable, Meckstroth says, opponents sometimes refer to it as "darkness and superstition."

So how does it work? Rodwell invokes an obscure mathematical formula called the Fibonacci Summation Series, in which each number in the series is the sum of the two preceding numbers. The series explains the growth pattern of snail shells and the maximum amount of information that can be exchanged across a bridge table.

In some games the two reach contracts with lightning speed, making bold leaps in the bidding that rob their opposition of useful information. Other times their bidding is laboriously detailed.

Perhaps the best proof of their uncommon power as a partnership is that everyone they play has access to their playbook (bridge rules require the pre-tournament exchange of all bidding systems), but no one else uses it.

"Only a few people would be capable of attempting to play our system," Meckstroth says. "Most people might just blow up."

Clearly they have computer-like calculating skills, but they also have intangible qualities. They are known for their Zen-like demeanor at the table. They are ruthlessly competitive, agitating their opponents with the equivalent of a full-court press. Yet they are seemingly ego-less, unfazed even when they lose a crucial hand. They don't harangue their opponents, and they don't carp at each other.

Why risk breaking up the longest-standing partnership in professional bridge?

* * *

Meckstroth's father, a credit manager, imparted to his son a great deal of sound Midwestern advice. None was more valuable than his philosophy about the game of bridge:

Be civil. Master the fundamentals before you experiment. Above all, be faithful. Bridge is a game of partners, and you will achieve your greatest fulfillment if you stick with just one.

At age 16, Jeff Meckstroth already was searching for just such a partner. The pool of candidates wasn't large.

He needed someone equally talented, someone roughly his age, someone who had the time and the means to play. Two years passed before he met Rodwell.

Meckstroth quit college at 21 to turn professional. Rodwell graduated from Purdue with a master's degree in finance and turned pro. Neither has ever needed another job. They play about 25 weeks a year and, according to bridge commentator Barry Rigal, make an estimated \$250,000 each from playing and teaching fees. (Their playing fees are paid by New York businessman Frank "Nick" Nickell, who drafted Meckstroth and Rodwell for his six-member team in the early '90s.)

Both married relatively young, both have teenage children. Meckstroth's first marriage ended in divorce. So did Rodwell's.

In 1995, Rodwell married Donna Burt, a vivacious mother of two grown children who is as outgoing as Rodwell is reserved. Meckstroth, who prefers to shield his private life, has been involved with the same woman since 1988.

In their bridge partnership, the two men display a rare emotional maturity, or at least the allegiance of two men who have grown up together.

"We put us first. That's the way to keep a partnership going," Meckstroth says. "It's not me and it's not you."

"It's nothing like being married to somebody, nothing like the intimacy between a man and his wife," Rodwell says. "But the same sorts of things are required, the ability to resolve differences for one."

This is not to say there has not been tension.

In the beginning, Rodwell had a tendency to lose his cool at the table, saying things that might have offended Meckstroth. In the mid-'80s, five years after their first world championship, the pair ran into a problem that many successful businesses face. They grew too fast.

"I think back to 1986," Meckstroth says, referring to a tournament in Baltimore. "We played very poorly. We figured out the problem was we were trying to do too much system stuff. It was too much of a strain on memory, and it was taking away from our concentrating on the game."

The two agreed on a one-year moratorium on changes to the system.

"It worked magic," Meckstroth says.

As Rodwell says, this isn't a marriage. But it sounds so much like one that you want to see how their untutored philosophy stacks up against someone who gets paid to make bad relationships better.

* * *

Nancy Gallant becomes excited when you describe the bridge partners to her. A clinical social worker, Gallant has been working with troubled marriages for 30 years, and she recognizes overlap between the Meckwell Way and what she preaches to her clients.

Good partners feel free to speak and be heard. Partners

adapt the strengths of the other and shore up the other's weaknesses. When mistakes occur, there's a minimum of blame-laying.

"When people have this solid relationship things flow out of it, what they produce is a higher quality," Gallant says.

"People say there are many fish in the sea, but in reality there are only two or three people who are a fit for you. My guess is these people know there is no better fit."

A long-standing partnership between the world's No. 1 player, Bob Hamman, and another world-class player, Bobby Wolff, recently ended after 27 years. They decided the partnership had become stale.

Neither Rodwell nor Meckstroth can envision a circumstance in which they would break up the partnership. "We've been through everything. One of us playing badly would not be enough," Rodwell says. "It would have to be some act of deep personal treachery."

Maybe the next time your marriage feels hopelessly broken or your business partnership unsalvageable it would be worth asking yourself: What would Meckwell do?



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