Being a Better Bridge Partner

For most of last year, we focused on improving our declarer play. To help round out our lessons, I thought we could focus more on bidding. So, over the next few months we'll cover things like useful conventions, bidding in competition and making decisions at the table. However, before we kick that off, I thought it might be useful to spend some time focusing on a part of the game that, in my opinion, gets far too little attention: our approach to the game itself. It's fun to learn a new convention or how to execute a squeeze. But, its also important to focus on improving the softer aspects of the game. If you can't take your lessons to the table, then you're going to have a hard time getting better.

In that vein, here are some of the things that I'm working on this year to improve my game. Feel free to consider them my Bridge New Year's resolutions.

1A. I want to be a better, supportive partner
1B. I want my inside approach better match my calm external approach

I find that I play better when I'm having a good time. One of the reasons we play this game is to have fun after all! On the flip side, when I'm mad at myself or my partner, I often turn one bad board into several bad ones. When I make a mistake, I'm aware of it. So, the last thing I want is my partner pointing it out! When I turn that around to my partner, I think I can improve our results by avoiding creating these stressers as much as possible. On-line, where they can't see my grimacing face, is actually pretty straight forward. Whenever my partner plays a hand, I try and take the same approach:

- 'glp' (Good Luck Partner) when the hand starts
- 'njp' (Nice Job Partner) when they make the hand. Occasionally, 'great job, p' when they did particularly well
- 'ntp' (Nice Try Partner) when they don't

I'll even throw in a 'wdo' (Well Done Opponent) when it's merited. I'm not going to give them a "why didn't you cash your good spade?": we can discuss that after the game, if necessary.

The harder part for me, both on-line and in person, is making my internal monologue match this calm external approach. Just like with focusing on my own mistakes, focusing on my partner's mistakes has the potential to make to turn one bad into several. I'm getting better here, but it's still something I need to improve to move my game forward.

2. Don't worry about being in the "best" contract at the table. Instead, focus on making the best of where we land.

In most bridge books, there is one "correct" way to bid a hand. But, in real life, there's often a couple of different options. That's true even at the highest level of the game: just check out each month's "It's Your Call" column in the ACBL Bulletin to see that. As a result, a key part of building a strong partnership is understanding each partner's tendencies. If your partner rarely opens 1 NT with a 5-card major, then there's not much point in playing Puppet Stayman. On the other hand, if your partner will make that bid with two worthless doubletons, you may have to be a little more cautious in raising directly to 3 NT. That being said, once you're at the table, there's nothing you can do about it. Consider the following hand I recently playing on-line robot tournament:

South

♠ A K Q

♥ A Q

♦ A K J 6

♣ A Q J 6

That's right, I was dealer with a 30-POINT monster. Naturally, my thoughts immediately turned to whether we'd be in 6 or 7. Unfortunately, here's how the bidding went.

North	South
	2♣
2♦ (waiting)	4 NT (30 – 32 points)
All PASS!?	

My mood didn't improve when dummy came down with this tasty morsel after a J♠ lead:

North

♠ 9 8 7 5 4 2

♥ 7

♦ 7 4 3

♣ 10 8 2

My first though was: how are we NOT in 6♠! From either side, that contract is cold: win the first trick, draw trump and drive out the K♣. That'll make the fourth ♣ in hand a winner to park dummy's third ♦ on. I was so focused on that issue that I messed up the play: I cleared ♠ by cashing the Ace and King and then tried to establish an entry to dummy by leading the Q and then J of ♣. My mistake became obvious when East won this second ♣ with the King and returned a third round of the suit. That let me reach dummy with the 10♣, but it was too soon: I couldn't run

dummy's ♠ because I still had the Queen in my hand blocking the suit! While I was able to ended up making the contract, making only 4, instead of 6, dropped my score from 65% down to 19%!

Afterwards, I went back and looked at the board and was even more annoyed with myself! First, the board was played 3 times: 9 in No Trump and 3 times in ♠. It turns out that all of the ones in ♠ got bad results! One was in 7, down 1. The other two were in 4, but making 6 was worse than all the people making the same number of tricks in No Trump. The ones who got top boards were the ones that blasted straight into 6 NT after dummy's 2♦ bid. While that worked on this hand, it fails one of the other basic tenets of a good partnership: masterminding the hand. To make 6 NT, we need at least 1, and possibly 2 tricks, from dummy to take 12 tricks despite our powerful hand. While there's a good chance that North has that much on a random 13 cards, that's not the situation we're in here. Rather, we told him we had 30 – 32 points and he said "Pass". Would he do that with 2 Kings? No way! He'd almost certainly go to 6NT with a SINGLE King. With 2, he'd probably put us in 7. So, by bringing in partner to the decision, we're pretty sure that partner is sitting on a Yarborough! Now, how do you like your chances at 6? To see how dicey this contract is, just switch dummy's ♠ and ♥. That's still the same "strong" Yarborough, but it gives close to no shot at making 6! So, not only did my bad attitude cost me half a board, it took calm analysis after the fact to realize that I was wrong in the first place!

3A. I will work on improving one aspect of my game this year in pursuit of my ultimate goals.
3B. I will use all the available tools out there to help me along this journey.
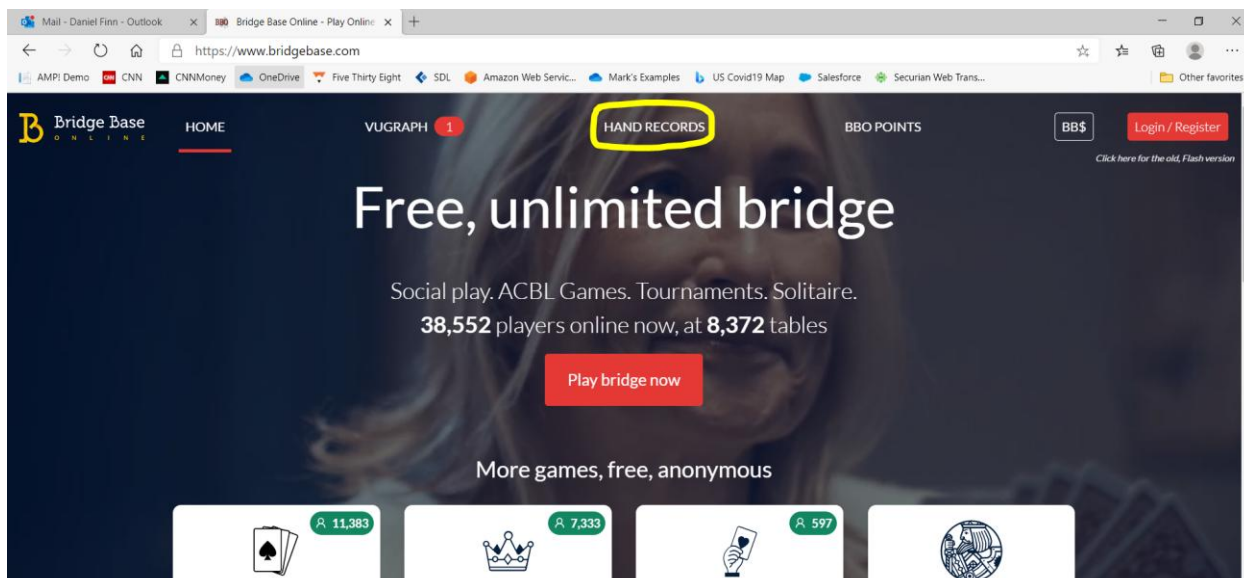
I've been playing bridge since I was about 12. So, I've always been pretty comfortable with the play of the hand. This has also led to set pretty big goals for myself: I plan on becoming a Grand Life Master. In particular, this means I will need to win a NABC+ championship. My guess would be Fast Pairs, but I'm not picky! Not surprisingly, I'm not at that level yet. So, that raises a few interesting questions? First, how do you identify your weaknesses? Second, how do you improve those weaknesses? And, finally, how do you track that you're making progress?

The second one is the easiest: if you know you're weak in an area, seek out help! That could mean reading a bridge book on the subject. I could be taking a Tuesday night class where you suggest topics to your grateful teacher! It could be playing more bridge. It could also mean talking to more experienced players. The possibilities are nearly endless.

The other two are a little harder. For me, there are two areas where I feel like I need the most improvement: 1. defense and 2. slam bidding. On the second one, it's more about avoid bad slams than missing good ones: I see too many zeroes when I'm the only one in a failing slam. However, even with my aggressiveness, these boards don't come up often enough to make a huge difference in my typical results. Defense, on the other hand, comes up on about 40% of my hands. (Note: Did I mention I was aggressive?) So, even small deficiencies here can be a major impediment.

Back in the days of IRL bridge, finding out how good or bad you are at something could be a pretty tedious task: you pull out your log at the end of the session and compare your results to the other tables and hand record. Even then, it would be very hard to discern patterns since you might only be looking at 5 – 10 hands of the type your interested in. However, now that we're playing on BBO, there are a whole new set of tools available that can help us do some real analysis.

For example, on the main BBO site, this link at the top of the site will take you to a record of most of the hands you've played over the last month: the only thing it doesn't cover are large Robot Games. (Note: It'll be easier if you log into the site first.)

Once you've got the list, like the one above, it's pretty easy to start filtering and sorting the hands to see patterns. For example, on all Robot Instant Tournaments, I average about 60%. But, when we look at just hands where I was playing defense, that average drops to about 45%. By looking at averages like this, you help minimize the impact of one good or bad board. It also allows you to track the changes over time to see how quickly you're moving towards your goals.

4. I will try something new this year. Hopefully, it'll make me a little nervous, at least at first.

It's easy to fall into a rut a bridge. You play with the same partner at the same game against the same people. While it can be both fun and comforting, it also tends to restrict our growth. So, each year I try and find something new to try. Sometimes it's a home run, like the year I found Instant Games on BBO: 8 boards, 12 minutes, what could be better! Sometimes it's less successful, like the time I tried regular open games on BBO: rude people and bad bridge is NOT a good combination.

Last year, I had the pleasure of spending time with all of you in these Zoom lessons. In particular, when I took over creating the lessons, I realized how much effort Linda and the other teachers put into their work. But, it's real been a pleasure. Specifically, it's forced me to go beyond what you should do to help explain why that's the right thing to do.

For this year, I'm going to try something totally different. In the spirit of the HBC Board's recent offer, I'm going to try and play with as many HBC members this year as possible. If you or someone you know is interested, you can contact me at either Daniel.finn@conning.com or danbfinn on BBO and we'll set up a time to play. I can't promise that we'll do well, but I can promise you'll get a lot of "wdp" and "ntp"s.