

What Makes for a Good Bridge Partner?

By Bill Gates

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I'm lucky that I get to play with bridge players who are dramatically better than I am, and who are nice enough that they will understand my game and appreciate why maybe I led the wrong thing or didn't shift to the right suit or evaluated the hand just slightly wrong. They'll make comments that add to my knowledge, increasing the chance I might do it right next time. And that's a lot of fun.

I'm amazed that some of these bridge players remember all the hands. You play 50 or 60 hands in a day, and you go to dinner that night, and they know every single one. Bob Hamman, one of the greatest bridge players of all times, is kind of the ultimate of that. If I misplayed some hand three years ago, he can still tell you the spot cards that were in there. Bob himself has misplayed very few hands when I've played with him, but I do make sure to remember those so I have my modest defense ready.

The classic form of the game is the team format where you have four people and you're playing for the normal game-type scores. Warren Buffett prefers that, because it's just the traditional form of the game, and doesn't make a big deal of the small differences of a no-trump contract versus a suit contract.

I like both team and match point. I like match points because there are just two of you playing, so there are slightly fewer variables. You usually get hand records afterwards, and a lot of tables play the same hand, and so you can look at all those different scores and see what happened. And because it's so excruciatingly important to take every trick you can, match point highlights any sloppiness in defensive or declarative play. So it forces you to think, okay, I've got to learn about squeezes, I've got to keep track of the shape of the hands I don't know as the hand goes on, and take full advantage of that.

So, I really like the mix of the two. If you get the right team of four, that's a lot of fun because it's a social thing as well as kind of a mental challenge.

BEING KIND TO YOUR BRIDGE PARTNER

Most bridge players value a reliable, happy partner above anything else. It's important to the success of your partnership that you work together as a team. You both want to win, so you can't gain anything from getting upset when play doesn't go exactly as planned. It seldom does! Here are a few tips on keeping your partner one happy camper.

TREAT YOUR PARTNER LIKE YOUR BEST FRIEND

Even if you don't know your partner well, treating her with respect improves her play. Treat your partner like your best friend, and you'll be repaid in "spades." Be a pleasant, courteous opponent, and you'll win everyone's "hearts."

TOLERATE YOUR PARTNER'S ERRORS

Don't keep harping on your partner's errors — just forgive and try to forget (at least until after the game). After all, do you want to be reminded of all the mistakes you've made?

(*Everybody* makes mistakes, including you.) If you have constructive criticism, save it for after the session, when you'll both be calmer. Expect (demand) that your partner show you the same respect.

KEEP A POKER FACE

Never make any facial or body mannerisms that indicate whether you're pleased or displeased with a bid or play. You'll lose the table's respect. Facial and body mannerisms can be construed as illegal signals.

DEAL WELL WITH DISASTER

A truly good partnership handles the inevitable disaster with a touch of humor. If your partner doesn't have to worry that you'll have an apoplectic fit whenever something goes wrong, he'll play better.

PLAY CONVENTIONS YOU BOTH WANT TO PLAY

Don't force your partner to play your favorite conventions. A partner worried about a convention inevitably makes more errors in the bidding, play, and defense, not to mention screwing up the convention if it comes up.

PICK UP THE SLACK FOR THE WEAKER PLAYER

The better player in a partnership should make the weaker player feel at ease. Make your bids, leads, and signals as simple and clear as possible, and don't give an inexperienced partner tough contracts to play. When you judge that it's going to be a tough hand to play, bid conservatively.

OWN UP TO YOUR OWN ERRORS

Avoid the human tendency to lay your own errors at your partner's doorstep. It makes a weaker partner feel good to know that you, the stronger player, make errors as well — and are a big enough person to admit them.

OFFER WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Give your partner a few words of support after the hand is over, particularly if he doesn't make his contract. "Tough luck" and "Nice try" go over better than "My great-grandmother could've made that hand in her sleep."

TREAT YOUR PARTNER THE SAME WHETHER YOU WIN OR LOSE

When the session is over, win or lose, tell your partner how much you enjoyed playing with her (no matter how you feel). Kind words mean the world to a player who knows that she hasn't played well. It also shows class.

KNOW WHEN TO HAVE FUN