**Bridge in Three Acts by Rich Gram**

In 1968 when I was a senior in high school, a friend from the neighborhood said that he was going to sign up for bridge lessons that were being offered in town at the local bridge club, and he asked me if I wanted to join him. His parents played bridge socially, so he had been around the game. He said, it is a game for smart people, and that was the hook I needed. Our teacher Elsie Mentuck was well-regarded in Boston area bridge circles. We signed up for lessons. The textbook was "Five Weeks to Winning Bridge" by Alfred Sheinwold, a book that still has an honored place on my shelf. Elsie operated the ACBL sanctioned bridge club in Swampscott, and Steven and I started playing there on Thursday nights. Everyone else in the room was an adult. Over the last few weeks of my senior year and into the summer, I won a grand total of 4.08 points. (Actually, I won a few more than that, but in early August I asked Elsie to stop sending them in so I could qualify for the Novice tournament in Boston scheduled for the Fall.)

How I became a club legend. One night when my partner couldn't play, I showed up at the club alone, figuring that this was a chance to play with Elsie. Alas, another single player was hanging around hoping for a partner. He became my partner for the evening. Right away I observed that he was not very high functioning in life skills generally. He had a fold-out with all the bridge bids on it, and he consulted it before every bid. I observed that he really knew nothing, and I started to feel upset that I was about to waste a whole evening when I could have been home studying. "This is a joke." By Board 2 I was desperate. In a flash, I formed a plan. I would look at my hand, listen to the first couple of bids, and whenever I could, jump to a game that would make me declarer. When he opened a spade and I saw a chance for game I bid 3NT. When he bid NT, I went to game in hearts or spades. I could see that some people saw what I was doing, but they kept quiet rather than coach me on improving my bidding as they usually did. At one point my partner grumbled, why was I playing all the hands? I shrugged and said, yes, well that is just how the cards went.

By evening's end it turned out that we were top team over all. A man in his forties turned to me and asked, "Do you know who won?" I said in a cheery tone, "We did!" His eyes bugged out. He pointed at me. "You??? And him??? "Yes, and I owe it all to my partner." My partner smiled proudly. As I was leaving, Elsie, smiling, said she had been planning to refund my card fee. She said I had made it much harder for her to tell my one-night partner not to come back. When I told Steve my real partner the story, he was abashed. "You won't want to play with me anymore." I said that winning the way I did was a lot of fun, and I never want to do it again.

My spare time that summer was spent reading bridge books such as H.W. Kelsey's "Killing Defense at Bridge," and learning conventions such as Schenken 1 Club opener. Steve and I experimented with conventions, carding, and opening leads. As summer's end approached, I realized that I needed to make a decision. It was clear to me that bridge and college were not going to play nice together. We all know people who can do both, but I knew I was not one of them. I would wind up wasting my tuition money, giving almost all my attention to improving my bridge game. I could not allow this. Bridge is only a card game, right? And life has many more important things to do. Right? (The Novice tournament in Boston could wait.)

Fast forward to my thirties, working at Zayre Corp. in Framingham, nestled between the Mass Pike and the shores of Lake Cochituate. I was drawn to watching the lunch time bridge game that took place down the hall from my office. After watching several times and making comment along with coworkers, I was invited to sit in as a fourth. Then I became a regular. And then we played once a month after work, for money. A tenth of a cent a point, with a cap of five dollars and a floor of one dollar per player. My partner Eddie and I won most of these.

My favorite bridge hand of all time occurred in this game. Eddie and I played short club. I opened 1C not vul with 12 aceless points and two little clubs. It passed around, everything was offside, and I went down 7 for minus 350. My left hand opponent had about 18 points with no distribution, so she decided to wait to see what my partner and her partner would do. Eddie passed. My right hand opponent had the remaining points with club strength and no other suit to bid, so he decided to let it go. I'll bet none of you has ever gone down 7 in a one bid! It is not a fun experience during play. In the post mortem, it was hilarious.

The Seasons. In 2023 my wife and I moved to Holden, at the Seasons. The ladies at the Seasons hold a bridge game once a week in the club house, and I started playing in it. It is not really bridge however, since no one keeps score. It is more like, "bridge hands." But it did remind me which way play proceeds around the table. At the Seasons' Christmas party, Al Cooperman asked me about the clubhouse game and we talked about his experience playing duplicate. Something sparked in me, and I shared my story about abandoning the game upon graduating high school in 1968, with an interlude of rubber bridge at Zayre in the 1980's.

Al invited me to play with him in Holden at the end of December 2023. He said he would connect me with Al Berg, and that normally he doesn't play in Holden because he is above the maximum master points for our NLM game. Al C. and I played just before Christmas 2023. We scored around 40%, close to the bottom. No matter...the Spirit of Bridge had come over me. At long last, I thought, I might as well face it: I'm addicted to bridge.

I showed up in January to play in the Holden club. Al Berg connected me with a partner, and I played in Holden in 2024 until late October, when my teaching schedule as a WPI adjunct precluded playing on Mondays.

In response to an email I sent off to ACBL, a very sweet lady in the office found my 4.08 points from high school and added them to my new player number. It turns out that ACBL has paper files in a closet somewhere, and the paper has not started crumbling yet. I knew that my ability to rattle off “4.08” instead of "a few" would be persuasive. The brain is a wonderful mystery.

Teaching at WPI interferes with my bridge game, but at least now I have my priorities straight. Foolish arrogant youth that I was, I once quit playing because I thought I had more important things to do. Hah!

See you at the table!

Rich Gram