

EVERY MAN A BRIDGE MASTER

THOUSANDS OF U.S. BRIDGE ADDICTS ARE RISKING THEIR LIVES AND SANITY FOR AS LITTLE AS .05 OF A POINT

RAY CAVE •

To the happily uninitiated and blissfully naive there are two kinds of pink slips: one a scintillating bit of lingerie, the other the deflating note that employers tuck into the final pay envelopes of discharged employees. But to the quarter million hopelessly obsessed duplicate-bridge players in the U.S. the only important pink slip is a third type—the 5½-by-3½-inch paper reproduced on the next page that the American Contract Bridge League gives to the winners of the 6,000 tournaments it sanctions each week. The pink slip usually represents a small fraction of what the ACBL calls a master point, and the master point is threatening to replace the Cadillac as the most coveted status symbol in suburbia. Competing in 4,000 clubs from Belfast, Me. to Bellflower, Calif., an ever-increasing number of bridge players are ignoring expense, tension, manners and mores to chase pink slips with a fervor they once lavished on Martinis, Monopoly and the country club dance.

The game these master-pointers play is called bridge, though it actually bears little resemblance to that friendly old card contest conducted by the fireside amidst peanuts, conversation and bourbon on the rocks. In its most common form duplicate bridge consists of about eight tables of players. Each East-West pair is competing against every other East-West pair, while North-Souths are likewise attempting to beat each other. The cards are shuffled and dealt into hands only once, the hands then being placed in oblong duplicate boards that have printed on them who is vulnerable, the hand number and other stage-setting information. When a card is played the player places it in front of him instead of putting it in the center of the table as he would in ordinary bridge. Once the hand is finished each player puts his own cards back into the proper compartment in the board. The score is recorded on a sheet that is also placed in the board. After a fixed number of hands all East-West pairs move clockwise to the next table, while the hands are moved counterclockwise.

The result of this game of musical chairs with cards is that by a session's end every East-West pair has played the same hands. The tournament director tabulates all scores on a master sheet that shows, often embarrassingly, how each pair fared on each hand, as well as who won. There is also, of course, a North-South winner. Because everybody plays identical hands there is no luck of the deal, making duplicate a game where the smallest mistake is as obvious as a fullback's fumble. Hence, no peanuts, no conversation, no bourbon: just three exhausting hours of ulcer-producing, home-wrecking, ego-shattering tension.

In return for this evening of agony, assuming it occurs at an ACBL-sanctioned event, the winners get as little as .16 of a master point, the award at a small weekly event, or as much as 125 special red points for a national event. The ACBL dutifully records each member's master-point total and publishes the lists showing who has how many points. Thus, in a subtle way, the poorest player in the smallest club is competing for status not only with every other Junior Master (the rookies who have from one to 19 points) but with Charles Goren himself (a Life Master, he tops the list with 6,358 Vi points tonight, and who knows how many more by tomorrow morning).

The ACBL, which admits that it is the master point that changed tournament bridge from the avocation of the few into the passion of the many, stumbled into its grading system almost by accident. It was in the early '30s that the league officially recognized its first "Masters." It gave this title to the winners of national championships. This meant there were so few Masters that when they got together they virtually needed a fourth for bridge. Since this would hardly do, it was decided to give the winners of a few lesser tournaments something called master points. By winning three such points a player could become a Master. This system for conferring a title and prestige excited the country's top bridge players, and the ACBL soon realized it might increase interest at all

levels of the game if the gimmick were simply expanded. More and more tournaments were recognized, and higher and higher went the number of points needed to qualify as a Master.

By the late '30s the ACBL knew it was holding a promotional grand slam, and it began to give away points, or fractions of points, at all of its tournaments. The league established a complicated system, which made the point award at tournaments proportionate to the level and numbers of competitors likely to be there. It also founded a superior point, called a red point, which could only be won in regional or national events where the competition was very tough. To attain certain exalted categories of Master, a player had to have red points in his competitive background.

With its grading system in order, the ACBL set its awards, eventually establishing the six classifications for players it has now. These begin with the Junior Masters, who have one point and get a most inauspicious white card to mark their achievement. There are 50,000 Junior Masters. Next come Masters, National Masters, Senior Masters, Advanced Senior Masters and, finally, Life Masters. There are 3,200 of these last, and they have 300 points or more, at least 30 of which are red points. They receive a glossy gold-tinted card, plus a lifetime ACBL membership, which saves them from paying league dues, \$2 a year. It is a modest saving at best, since it is estimated that entry fees and travel costs cause even the best players to spend at least \$20 for every point they win.

If spending big sums of money—and, incidentally, keeping up with Goren—is not necessarily a great American game, keeping up with the Joneses is, and it is on this level particularly that duplicate bridge has boomed. First, the holder of a master point automatically qualifies as a figure of awe in a neighborhood bridge game. He can and will join such a game with feigned condescension, acting like Sam Snead entering a Flag Day tournament at Happy Knoll. Once playing, he will be allowed to explain with cool erudition his own tactics to his rapt audience, and to tut-tut at the mistakes they have made. He will have, in short, a glorious chance to show off.

Second, the duplicate player has the constant opportunity to improve his status in his local bridge club's pecking order by getting more master points. He zealously attempts to achieve this, while every other club member is taking all possible measures to see that he does not succeed. The most avid pointsman will go so far as to hire professional partners for \$25 to \$100 a night to help him win. Duplicate thus becomes about as sociable as an off-tackle smash and as sporting as a zip-gun fight.

Yet the contestants in this national karate—with cards—are obviously having a wonderful time and wouldn't want things any other way, for they are competing now as they never have before. The ACBL has 10 times as many registered players as it did only 15 years ago. The number of sanctioned clubs has increased 25% in the last year. The league, smothering in a fallout of its own pink slips, has had to turn to IBM for a data-processing system that mechanically maintains the vital list of who is entitled to sneer at whom. (The ACBL got a panicky wire last week from a Dallas woman: "My child swallowed the card with my IBM number. Please telephone it collect today." She was anxious to register some newly won points.) The increase in play has even forced the ACBL, for speedier handling, to change one type of its reporting slips from the classic pink to white.

ACBL tournaments now draw 1,000 competitors a week in Washington, D.C., 1,000 in Houston, 1,200 in Milwaukee, 800 in San Francisco and as many as 7,000 in Los Angeles, where a bridge extravaganza last June at the Ambassador Hotel was deluged with 30,000 entries in various events.

A sport that was once confined to such proper, staid and revered bridge clubs as New York's Cavendish Club, Detroit's Knickerbocker Bridge Club and the Contract Club of Kansas City is now being played in hotels, dance halls, shopping centers, YMCAs, church basements and fire houses. Private homes also are used; more than once crowded conditions have necessitated that tables be set up in bathrooms. The rear sections of bars sometimes are commandeered, and if Dietrich were again to ask what the boys in the back room would have, she probably would find them asking for aces—using the Gerber and Blackwood conventions, of course.

In Sarnia, Ont., which is near Detroit, a major sectional event was held in an old airplane hangar; Washington tournaments have been conducted in the cafeteria of the House Office Building and the Daughters of the American Revolution Hall, and an industrial league in Los Angeles plays weekly in tool rooms, at drafting boards and on factory front lawns. Even Leavenworth penitentiary is the site of weekly tournaments, though players there are understandably barred from playing in out-of-town events.

Among devotees to be found at these duplicate affairs are more than a few entertainers, politicians, sports figures and celebrities who understand that fame may be fleeting but that a master point won is a master point held forever.

Indianapolis "500" winner Rodger Ward has one point, and Giant Pitcher Stu Miller 15. Among musicians, Les Brown has 2, Paul Weston 12 and his wife Jo Stafford one. Author Laura Z. Hobson (3), Dr. Karl Menninger (1½), Artist Dong Kingman (11½) and Actor Stephen Chase (287) also play in tournaments.

Many others, forced to choose between careers and master points (it is hard to pursue both successfully), have given up the game. George Docking was considered a comer in Kansas bridge circles, winning 16 points his first year. Then the citizens inconsiderately elected him governor for two terms, and he has hardly had time to win a point since.

The single-mindedness of duplicate players, whether famous or unknown, has led to rare moments that, if they do nothing else, demonstrate to what extent the master-point neurosis grips them all.

When the Wisconsin Hotel in Milwaukee caught fire during a tournament a player went to the window, verified the firemen were on hand and announced, "The fire is here, but I'm sure they'll call us if it gets too bad." Play continued.

In another Milwaukee tournament a man slumped in his seat, fatally stricken with a heart attack. He was removed by ambulance. A substitute immediately filled his chair and picked up the victim's cards as play resumed. The deceased undoubtedly would have approved.

On the day of a sectional tournament in Kansas City last year a blizzard forced schools, businesses and industrial plants to close. But 104 of the expected 112 bridge players showed up, including a man who flew from Chicago, got rerouted to Denver and had to take a train back to Kansas City. Six master points could be won there.

One of the favorite, though presumably apocryphal, stories of the game concerns the bride who came home to mother on her wedding night crying. "All he did was talk about the duplicate tournament you and he played in last night," she wailed. "He started by explaining how he played the first hand, and when he got to hand No. 25 I ran out and came home to you."

"That's too bad," answered the mother. "The 25th hand was the most interesting of the night."

It was a more sporting, and very real, wife who couldn't get a baby sitter the evening of a tournament being held in a Chicago hotel. So she took the infant with her. Midway through the competition the baby wouldn't take its bottle and began to cry. The noise disturbed the rest of the competitors, so the mother's table was moved into the hotel hall. When the baby still cried the mother opened her dress, discreetly fed the youngster in the natural fashion and continued to play against some presumably rattled opponents who must have forgotten their own conventions when the young lady forgot hers.

The ACBL is not only not surprised at such signs of point compulsion in its players, it expects them. "Every player is striving to advance himself into the next category, which not only impels him to play more often but increases his enthusiasm and enjoyment in the game," says the league in its handbook for clubs.

Any rubber-bridge player accustomed to the amenities of the neighborhood game would certainly wonder, as he first attempted to play duplicate, what enthusiasm and enjoyment the ACBL was talking about. Arriving at the local YWCA at 8 p.m. on a typical night, he and his partner find 20 to 50 of what he assumes are friendly fellow townspeople. Only now they look as worried and irritated as a baseball team about to take the field against the Yankees. The player registers. Most ACBL clubs are open and he need not be a member to play. He pays a small entry fee (usually about \$1) and sits down with presumably as much chance to win as the next man.

By evening's end he has learned that an adequate ability at rubber bridge will not suffice for a duplicate game. There are several reasons. The competition is too tough, which it ought to be, since all the uncut lawns, unread books and dirty dishes in town belong to duplicate players who feel they are putting first things first. ("Baseball?" said one recently when asked about Maris. "You mean the great American wastetime?") And duplicate bridge has many technical nuances that rubber bridge does not. For example, getting set one trick at one no trump can be a calamity, while getting set six tricks at seven spades may be the most brilliant move of the night, if it succeeds in keeping North-South from making a grand slam.

Worst of all, duplicate abounds in what may be called pointsmanship. This is a psychological—if not necessarily ethical or sporting—attack designed specifically to reduce inexperienced opponents to malleable masses of blubber. In its more subtle forms it can shake experts as well. Because pointsmanship is invariably successful against apprentices, no matter how much rubber bridge they have played, a first duplicate tournament is likely to be remembered in the same context as a first driver's test, a first tooth extraction and a first artillery barrage.

Though pointsmanship assaults are infinite in their variety, no one delivers them with the cunning ferocity of that saber-tooth tiger of small-town duplicate tournaments, the Little Old Lady. The phenomenon is well worth detailing.

A Little Old Lady attack starts gently; the neophyte and his partner sit down and are totally ignored. It is considered glaringly gauche to introduce yourself to an opponent. Enmity is the proper mood. Nice bridge players, the consensus is, finish last.

Once the newcomers are feeling as welcome as a Borgia at a wine tasting, one Little Old Lady asks her LOL partner, "Did you pick up our pink slips from last week, dear?" They may not have won a point in a decade. No matter. The ploy is designed to make an opponent feel he is hopelessly outclassed and can't win. He is, and he can't.

Duplicate pairs are required to write the conventions they play on a card, which is placed where their opponents can see it. All a novice can think of writing on his is his own name and "Goren." Any LOL worthy of the title has a convention card that looks like a microfilmed *Gone With the Wind*.

When the novice finally takes his hand and manages to bid a quick, "One club," an LOL will ask sharply, "Are you playing the Hazard Inverse Transfer?" Somehow she manages to get across the simultaneous implication that if you aren't playing such a thing you should be, and if you are you shouldn't.

Eventually, when the newcomer has remembered not to shuffle the cards, not to play them in the center of the table and not to breathe, when the sweat has stopped trickling down his yellow spine and the face of his partner is again in focus across the table; in short, when he just begins to relax, one of the LOLs will suddenly bellow, "Director," loud enough to startle a sloth.

The official running the tournament advances sternly. Every pair of eyes at every table jerks up to look grimly at the novice, and there he sits, the Caryl Chessman of the East Orange YWCA. He had burped. The LOLs claim he was trying to signal his partner.

When he finally finishes three hands against these Mesdames Defarge the novice is amazed to see them smile sweetly, thank him and move off to the next table. Of course they thank him. They figure they have scored more points on those hands than anyone else

possibly could during the rest of the night. Then two more sweet Little Old Ladies sit down.

Ridiculously, novices rarely give up. Pointsmanship triggers a hostile reaction. The peaceable card player gets so mad he is determined to come back next week and give it to some frail LOL right in the gizzard.

A couple of months of returning to the same weekly tournament to get revenge on the same LOLs, and the beginner and his partner unexpectedly finish third. Next week he is handed a small pink slip of paper. Across the top it reads, "Fractional Master Point Certificate." It bears his name, and in a small box at the lower right is the figure .05. He has five-hundredths of a master point. These people are pretty friendly after all, he decides. Two weeks ago didn't one of them say hello?

He will now buy a five-foot shelf of the 1,000-odd bridge books available, read some of the six syndicated newspaper bridge columns and take lessons for \$20 an hour. He will find out about a Thursday night game in a church cellar and a Saturday afternoon game at a community center and a Sunday morning game in a closed hardware store. He will play five times a week, take his vacations during regional tournaments and develop insidious pointmanship techniques of his own with which he tortures not only novices, but LOLs (he has found they usually are not the best players).

He may eventually travel from coast to coast to play in national events, take a bridge cruise (400 have signed up already for this year's trip to Hawaii) and a bridge tour of Europe.

In the course of doing all of these things he will have become a very good bridge player—the quality of tournament play has risen immeasurably since World War II, a fact bemoaned by some oldtime experts who find points coming harder than ever. And he will be a delighted insider among those quarter million happily combative cohorts for whom a pink slip of paper has become the Ticket to Everything.

ILLUSTRATION

ROY MCKIE

In Milwaukee master-point hunters played through a fire

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A duplicate tournament stops for no man, living or dead

PHOTO

Suburbia's newest status symbol is this master-point slip

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Master points establish the hierarchy of who may sneer at whom

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He burped and became the Caryl Chessman of the East Orange YWCA

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