

THE STRAIGHT DOPE

#1

07-31-2007, 10:59 PM

Drum God 

Charter Member

Join Date: Mar 2000

Location: Central Texas, USA

Posts: 1,810

How do you read the Bridge column in the newspaper?

Okay, yesterday, I was reading the comics page of my favorite major daily paper when my eye scanned over to the bridge column. I usually don't read it, but for some reason I did.

It was written entirely in English. I read English fluently. This column made absolutely no sense to me. Now, I admit that I do not know much about bridge except that it's a card game played by two pairs of people sitting across from each other at a square table. However, I can't even figure out what the audience is supposed to get out of this column.

Quote:

Originally Posted by "Bridge" by Bobby Wolff, United Feature Syndicate, Jul 30, 2007

Declarer now "knew" he could not ruff a club in the dummy, so he crossed to a diamond and led a second trump.

Huh? What does that mean? Is the reader supposed to be witnessing a game as a spectator, much as I might read an article about yesterday's baseball game on the sports pages? Does each column advance the game, unfolding over a period of days or weeks? Am I supposed to imagine how I might play the hand were I in the game? The column almost reads like a soap opera except that I have no idea of the character's goals or motivations.



#2

07-31-2007, 11:07 PM

delphica 

Guest

Join Date: Oct 2000

I can't answer the question (sorry) but I love reading the Bridge column for exactly the reasons you described, it's so surreal to read a bunch of English words and have no idea what is going on. In the beginning, I think I had a vague hope that if I read it frequently, I would pick up on some of the points eventually, but that's clearly not going to happen.



#3

07-31-2007, 11:23 PM

Oslo Ostragoth 

Charter Member

Join Date: Feb 2004

Location: the Prairie

Posts: 6,748

Amen, bro. The last column I read had something like "My partner raised to 2 clubs, so I knew he had A-10 of hearts, not A-J". WTF?



#4

07-31-2007, 11:51 PM

Savannah 

Guest

Join Date: Oct 2004

Thanks for the memories!

My mother was a ferocious duplicate bridge player. This sounds just like her discussing their gameplay post-tournament. Didn't understand a word of it, but it made her happy and she got to travel.



#5

07-31-2007, 11:52 PM

robardin 

Member

Join Date: Jun 2005

Location: Flushing, NY

Posts: 4,345

Er, if you don't play bridge, why would you expect to be able to follow a bridge column? Bridge is a complex and deep game with a lot of jargon and slang. I mean, I don't play chess, so I find chess columns full of notations like Ng1-f3, Bb5xc6...?? cryptic and boggling, I imagine bridge talk is as bad or worse.

To answer your question though: *Declarer now "knew" he could not ruff a club in the dummy, so he crossed to a diamond and led a second trump.*

All the terms used in this sentence are common to entire families of trick-taking card games such as Spades or Hearts or Whist or Euchre, except for the special terms *Declarer* and *dummy* which are features unique to Bridge.



#6

07-31-2007, 11:59 PM

robardin 

Member

Join Date: Jun 2005

Location: Flushing, NY

Posts: 4,345

Quote:

Originally Posted by **Drum God**

s the reader supposed to be witnessing a game as a spectator, much as I might read an article about yesterday's baseball game on the sports pages? Does each column advance the game, unfolding over a period of days or weeks? Am I supposed to imagine how I might play the hand were I in the game? The column almost reads like a soap opera except that I have no idea of the character's goals or motivations.

Each column typically analyzes just one deal, which in real life would have played out in about five to ten minutes "at the table". But Bridge is at turns a game of psychology, inference and deduction, and occasionally intuition and luck as well. So yes it can read like a soap opera too.

A good bridge columnist will give instruction as well as entertainment by way of illustrating the thought process of an expert bridge player. For example, the fact that this particular declarer "knew" that he could not ruff a club in dummy was probably not obvious to many of the readers of the column -- not that ruffing a club in dummy was impossible or illegal, but would result in declarer failing to make his contract (take enough tricks). By showing the reader how this conclusion was reached is instructive, as would be how this declarer then presumably managed to overcome this obstacle by imagining the likeliest layout of the cards and figuring out a sequence of play that would work out.

For hard core tournament bridge players, the true goal is to display extremely cleverness through the medium of bridge, actually winning an event is sort of a natural by-product of being a flashy smart-ass 😊



#7
08-01-2007, 12:07 AM

DanBlather
Guest

Join Date: Jul 2001

Each column describes a different game. The hand is shown to the right of the text and below that is the bidding. The player to the left of the dealer makes a "bid" that indicates how many tricks he thinks he and his partner (the person opposite) can win. Bidding 1 club indicates that you think you can win 7 (6 + 1) tricks if clubs are trump, 2 hearts means you think you can win 8 (6 + 2), etc.

Things are made more complicated by the fact that many bids are artificial; i.e., they indicate a certain strength of the hand rather than what they would naturally mean. The only legal way to share information with your partner is through bidding and you must explain to your opponents what bids mean if you are asked.

Bridge is addictive and often played by very bright people liker your average doper.



#8
08-01-2007, 12:15 AM

robardin
Member

Join Date: Jun 2005
Location: Flushing, NY
Posts: 4,345

Quote:

Originally Posted by **DanBlather**

Bidding 1 club indicates that you think you can win 7 (6 + 1) tricks if clubs are trump, 2 hearts means you think you can win 8 (6 + 2), etc.

This is because there are 13 tricks in all (52 cards dealt out to 4 people = 13 cards each, and everybody plays a card to every round), and for you to bid you have to be claiming your side will take at least a simple majority of the tricks (7 to 6). So the lowest bid of "1" means "contracting" to take 7 tricks (hence the name of the game, Contract Bridge).

Colloquially, the taking of the first six tricks are referred to as "making book" towards making the contract. Which allows for some really bad puns too, such as referring to the first of these tricks as "the oldest trick in the book". Blargh!



#9
08-01-2007, 12:35 AM

InternetLegend
Member

Join Date: Aug 2000
Location: New Mexico
Posts: 3,585

Add me (and also my 17-year-old daughter) to the list of people who love reading the bridge column as surrealist lit. I didn't realize there were others!



#10
08-01-2007, 12:46 AM

Finagle

Join Date: Sep 1999

Charter Member

Location: Somewhere near Boston
Posts: 8,724

Quote:

Originally Posted by "Bridge" by Bobby Wolff, United Feature Syndicate, Jul 30, 2007
Declarer now "knew" he could not ruff a club in the dummy, so he crossed to a diamond and led a second trump.

I didn't read the column, but I'll give it a try.

When you play a hand of bridge, you have to form a plan to take as many tricks as possible without letting the other team get an opportunity to take their tricks. This typically involves making the best use of your trumps, including "ruffing" tricks. If you are out of a suit, you can play a trump. This is called a "ruff". Even a two of trumps can overtake an ace of another suit. However, a trump can be taken by a higher trump. The team that has bid a suit will always have more trump than the other team (except in rare bidding disasters), so removing trump from the opponent's hands is a key element of strategy. However, because drawing trump involves losing a trump from both declarer's hand and dummy's hand, sometimes you prefer to ruff if, for example, dummy only has a couple of trump.

In the hand described above, it sounds like the dummy was void in clubs which would normally allow the declarer (the person opposite the dummy who is playing the hand) to play a club, getting use out of the dummy's trump. But apparently the play of the game indicated that East, the player to the right of dummy, was also void in clubs. So attempting to ruff would only allow East to get a trick. Instead, the declarer had to play a diamond, and take the trick in dummy by playing a high diamond. Then he led a trump from dummy, forcing East to play a trump as well. This is known as "drawing trump". It may also have been a finesse -- essentially a guess as to which opponent has a card of a certain value.

Example of a finesse: We know that dummy leads a trump. We also know that the declarer fears that East has a trump that's higher than dummy's (otherwise, he wouldn't have feared an over-ruff). So let's assume that dummy has a Jack of trumps. Declarer has an Ace of trumps. One of the opponents has the Queen. We lead the Jack from dummy. If East has the Queen, he has to make a decision. If he plays the Queen, it will probably lose to the Ace. But if he doesn't play the Queen, declarer can let the Jack ride, winning the trick. Of course, if declarer is wrong and West has the Queen, then letting the Jack ride will lose a trick. But sometimes, finessing is the only way to make a contract.

Ah, it's late and I don't know how coherent this was. But what it comes down to is that bridge is a game of making educated guesses about where cards lie, and coming up with strategies to take the greatest number of tricks based on those guesses.



#11

08-01-2007, 05:25 AM

Malacandra

Guest

Join Date: Jan 2003

I remember reading the bridge column when I was a nipper and not understanding a word of it ("Jeremy Flint's Bridge Class" in the *Sunday Express*). Since then I've learned to play bridge. I now understand some papers' bridge columns, but by no means all. Really, unless you learn to play the game you can't expect to understand it any more than you'd understand "With only an over and a half to go before the close, Pietersen attempted to reverse-sweep Muralitharan's doosra, but succeeded only in top-edging to short extra, bringing Hoggard in as night-watchman".



#12

08-01-2007, 05:29 AM

Quote:

Originally Posted by **Malacandra**

Really, unless you learn to play the game you can't expect to understand it any more than you'd understand "With only an over and a half to go before the close, Pietersen attempted to reverse-sweep Muralitharan's doosra, but succeeded only in top-edging to short extra, bringing Hoggard in as night-watchman".

But I've never played cricket in my life and that still makes perfect sense to me. On the other hand, I've played plenty of card games but the Bridge columns in newspapers may as well be written in Hungarian as far as I'm concerned.



#13

08-01-2007, 07:19 AM

Originally Posted by "Bridge" by Bobby Wolff, United Feature Syndicate, Jul 30, 2007

Declarer now "knew" he could not ruff a club in the dummy, so he crossed to a diamond and led a second trump.

Bridge is a game played by two teams of partners, sitting opposite each other. The bridge columnist attempts to instruct beginners and intermediate players in the finer points of the game by showing (often from high level tournaments) how a particular hand was played and (often) how it could have been played better.

In a real bridge game there are a minimum of four bids (every player has a turn) and bidding stops only when 3 players pass consecutively. At that point the person who first bid the suit (or no trump) on the team that won the contract (bid highest) becomes the "declarer" and he sets out to make the final contract. There are scoring bonuses for bidding certain contracts. Declarer plays the hand and after the person on declarer's left leads, declarer's partner becomes "dummy" and lays his hand on the table for all to see. The declarer then plays the hand by leading from his own hand or dummy according to which hand won the previous trick, hence declarer "crossed to a diamond" meaning he led a diamond from his own hand to a high diamond in dummy. (This crossing is the derivation of the name "bridge" although you can get arguments from some Russians.) There may be a number of reasons why declarer "knew" he could not "ruff a club in the dummy." To ruff is to trump (bridge being a trump game where the lowest trump outranks all other non-trump cards but they can only be used when a hand cannot follow suit.) For example, declarer would like to trump a club in dummy but his only clubs are the 3,4,5 and dummy has the 2. In order to trump a club he must first eliminate clubs from dummy and when he does this the opponents, seeing his plan because they too can see dummy has no clubs, will surely lead trumps leaving dummy without the means to ruff.


Most bridge columns are arranged for convenience so that "South" is always the declarer, thus the columns all look eerily similar to the non-player. Contract bridge, the current game, was invented by a Vanderbilt in the late 1920's on his yacht. Prior to that time players played auction bridge where there was only one round of bidding (I think) and there was no means of creating artificial bidding languages as exist today. It was hailed at the time as a godsend, making the game more interesting. Now of course, you have to be a Philadelphia lawyer to understand all of the rules and bidding structures (ironic since the man who led bridge to its greatest success was Charles Goren - that's right, a Philadelphia lawyer.)

If you like puzzles the fundamentals of bridge are well worth learning since the bidding in the daily columns, while it can be instructive for the player, it is totally unnecessary (rarely the bidding is the point of the column, but only rarely) for the average reader to understand. There are many books of bridge puzzles (often

called double dummy problems) that can entertain and baffle you for hours on end and they are a lot of fun even if you never pick up a card.



#14
08-01-2007, 08:15 AM

Malacandra 
Guest

Join Date: Jan 2003

Quote:

Originally Posted by **Colophon**

But I've never played cricket in my life and that still makes perfect sense to me. On the other hand, I've played plenty of card games but the Bridge columns in newspapers may as well be written in Hungarian as far as I'm concerned.

I assume however that you have watched or read about a good deal of cricket - if, by analogy with your card-game experience, you were a whiz at table-tennis but had no idea what a doosra, a reverse sweep, a short-extra and a night watchman were, your ping-pong experience wouldn't help you much with my imaginary cricket report. Both games involve bats, balls and scoring, and there the resemblance ends.

As it happens I'm more of a bridge watcher than a bridge player - I've played a bit of social bridge in my life, and read a number of books written for players of a rather better standard than mine. That puts my bridge comprehension skills on a par with my cricket comprehension skills. I have both an awareness of my own manifest lack of ability and an understanding of the deeds of my betters, in each case.


To parse the original quote:

"Declarer now "knew" he could not ruff a club in the dummy, so he crossed to a diamond and led a second trump."

1) In the trick-taking part of the game (which is like whist, and follows the "auction"), one player ("declarer") plays from both his own hand and his partner's, the latter ("dummy") being displayed face-up on the table. The players still take their proper turn though.

2) Declarer, at some point in the playing of the hand, meant to use one of his partner's trumps (unstated; either hearts or spades, from context) to trump ("ruff") one of his own clubs. There are several reasons why he would do this. Presumably events in the playing of the first few cards have persuaded him that one of the opponents will be able to trump as well; at any rate, he decides on a change of plan. So...

3) For some reason (unstated) declarer doesn't want to lead trumps from his own hand, he wants his dummy partner to lead them. As it isn't dummy's lead, declarer has to play a trick that dummy can win. As in most trick-taking games, whoever wins the trick leads to the next one. Obviously (from context) dummy holds the highest Diamond (the Ace, unless some high cards have already been played) so declarer knows that he can put his partner on lead by leading a Diamond. That's what "he crossed to a diamond" means - he "crossed" the table to his partner's hand.

If you think that's bad, wait until you get onto more advanced stuff like "Unfortunately, East's crocodile coup sank declarer's attempt to strip-squeeze West". 



#15
08-01-2007, 09:18 AM

Derleth 

Join Date: Apr 2000

Guest

Dialogue about bridge between DEATH and Twoflower in *The Light Fantastic*:

Quote:

Originally Posted by **Terry Pratchett**

"HUMANS PLAY THIS FOR FUN?"

"Yes, some of them become very good at it. I'm only an amateur."

"BUT THEY ONLY LIVE FOR EIGHTY OR NINETY YEARS!"

I like the bridge column. I don't understand a word of it, but it's so obviously by and for people competent in that domain the love shines through the words.

"Ridicule is the only weapon that can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them."

If you don't stop to analyze the snot spray, you are missing that which is best in life. - **Miller**

I'm not sure why this is, but I actually find this idea grosser than cannibalism. - **Excalibre**, after reading one of my surefire million-seller business plans.



#16

 08-01-2007, 09:39 AM

RealityChuck 

Charter Member

Join Date: Apr 1999

Location: Schenectady, NY, USA

Posts: 36,604

As everyone has said, you need to know how to play the game to understand the column.

What isn't stated (and is probably confusing) is that when you play a hand, you keep track of what cards are played. At a basic level, this is counting the number of trump cards played. At tournament level, this means keeping track of all the cards. The defender would know what cards were played, and who had what.

Most likely what happened was that the opponent to the right of the dealer had shown he was out of a suit. There are various ways to determine this, but one would be if you played an ace and he played a king afterwards. If he had any card but a king, he would have played that, so this is a sign he no longer has any cards in that suit (**Note**: this is an oversimplification -- he may have a queen and did a "high-low" -- but we won't get into them right now).

OK, as declarer, you note this when he plays the king of clubs. Now your plan was to lead a club to the dummy and trump it. However, you only have low trumps, and there's a good chance the player who is out of clubs has a card higher than yours. So you have to change your strategy and play a diamond.

Bridge is one card game where skill is more important than luck (at one point, years ago, a court ruled it was not a game of luck and thus not gambling). What the bridge column does is show the average player how the top players strategize and use tricks that the average player might not think of.

