



Ian Payn

## Women are as good at bridge as men

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at [elena@ebu.co.uk](mailto:elena@ebu.co.uk)

BOYS like guns. Girls like dolls. Men can read maps. Women can't. Men like sport. Women like shopping.

All the preceding claims are facts, scientifically proven and hard-coded into our collective subconscious. Except they're not. Scientific facts, that is. What they are are vague generalisations, handed down through the generations until they're accepted as absolute truths. Similar things leap out of the newspapers every day. 'Scientific research shows . . . ? Scientific research normally shows no such thing. Hysterical journalism extrapolates unsound conclusions from properly conducted research. 'Red wine good for you!' screams Monday's headline. 'Red wine gives you in-growing toenails!' screams Tuesday's. All tommy rot. My favourite absurd sexist cliché is that men can't multi-task. Well, I can, I can do half a dozen things at once without the slightest problem. And I know men and women who can barely do one. So you can sling that piece of nonsense in the bin, for starters.

My second favourite is 'men are better than women at bridge'. If this means that more men enjoy success at bridge at the highest levels, then all well and good. They do, and there's a reason for this (which we'll come back to shortly) but if our dear Editor's Friend (who started this, see the August 2010 *English Bridge*, page 54) thinks that he is better at bridge than fifty per cent of the world's population simply because of his gender, he needs his head examining.

The most common place to play bridge (for now) is a bridge club. Walk into any

bridge club and you'll find a few genuinely good players, a few hopeless ones and a large mass of average players. I am convinced that if you held a practical bridge exam for five male and five female players from any of those groups (or any number you like) in which both parties were given exactly the same problems then the women would score the same as the men in their peer group. Not better, but not worse. There is no proven correlation between gender and the ability to play bridge, or indeed any mind sport.

So, why are all the world's top bridge players men? I'll tell you in one word, albeit a poncey one: *milieu*.

Men have taken over the top echelon. They strut around as though they own the card room, acting like animals protecting their turf. Take a look around the top end of any competition, and there they are, with their aggressive swagger, their egotistical posturing and their supercilious body language (don't write in: I don't think body language can be supercilious either, but I like the phrase). The talk is of 'carting out' opponents with pushy doubles, the emphasis at the table is on wallowing in self-proclaimed genius – it's all, frankly, too much, my dear. This is certainly the reason that I won't be playing in the Bermuda Bowl anytime soon. (There may be other reasons, obviously, but I don't have the space to dwell on them.) Is it any wonder that this macho atmosphere is unpalatable to all but the hardiest women?

So, it's not anything to do with ability, it's to do with attitude. Okay, attitude is part of the game, and part of the secret of success, but it's nothing to do with the ability to count up to thirteen or remember what trumps are. Speaking of attitude, if the Editor's Friend wants to bring his three best mates from his club and play against four of

my lady friends, ooh, let's say Heather Dhondy, Nicola Smith, Sally Brock and Nevena Senior for a nice forty-eight board match, well, the best of luck to them. Think I'm being unfair? Okay, crank it down a notch and they can play against my Gold Cup / Crockfords / Hubert Phillips teammates for the last umpteen years: Jane Moore, Christine Duckworth and Gillian Salt, with another woman replacing me (is our consistent failure to win these events because I'm saddled in a team with three women, or because they're lumbered with me?). I don't fancy the gents in that one much, either. Note, by the way, that 'Editor's Friend' is a fictional construct rather than the real editor's friend, who made a passing comment which I have pounced upon and ridiculed for dramatic purpose. That's not to say that I agree with the real editor's friend, I just wouldn't have given it to a real person in the neck quite so much.

At the risk of labouring the point (but we have to get to the end of the page somehow), in the 2010 Buffet Cup (see page 11), Team Europe's most successful pair in the teams were women – Auken and Von Armin (tying, admittedly, with Fantoni and Nunes, but ahead of the Hackett twins, Helgemo – Helness and all the other male worthies). One swallow doesn't make a drink, of course, but if this proves nothing else, it proves that on the day women are capable of competing with men at the top level, and winning.

So there you have it. A cogent, rational explanation of why women are as good at bridge as men (I can't quite bring myself to support the thesis that they're better)? Scientifically proven facts backing my case? Well, none of the above, really, just a load of self-serving rubbish. But no more rubbish than claiming that men are better than women at bridge. □



# Women are not as good at bridge as men

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR). Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

THE Bermuda Bowl, the World Teams Championship, has been played 39 times. In all that time, there has been exactly one woman in one winning team, and she was a sponsor paying a team of top American professionals. In this country, the British Championship (the Gold Cup) has been won by 180 different men (some of whom have won it more than once) but only ten women. The first division of the English Premier League has 34 men and five women playing. Of the 78 players in the Tollemache final in February, only five were women. There was one woman in the top ten pairs in the 2010 Brighton Swiss Pairs, while the overall entry was almost exactly one third women and two thirds men.

That avalanche of statistics gives one consistent message: that the top bridge players in both this country and the world are virtually all male. Ask any good player (of either sex) if women's bridge is the same standard as open bridge at the top levels and you'll get nothing but laughter. There is no debate to have.

There are however two questions that are worth debating. The first is 'Why?' and the second is 'So what?'

'Why?' is difficult to answer in one page: one might equally well ask why very few of the top chess, poker or backgammon players are female.

In spite of the occasional headline to the contrary, studies consistently show that the average IQ scores of men and women are equal. However, on almost all forms of test more men have extreme scores, both high and low – so there are more both very intelligent and very stupid men than women. A high IQ may not be a direct indication of anything other than being good at IQ tests, but the pattern of men having a wider range of ability is consistent across most intellectual pursuits. It is

certainly plausible that this will be true in bridge as well.

There is a lot more to being a good bridge player than just card play technique. Men tend to be more competitive, more dedicated and may simply care more about winning. This can be seen in the 'real world' where there are many more men at the top than there are women, whether they are running a company or running a country. It's true that some of this may be cultural and historical rather than genetic, but it's hard to deny that the bias is there.

There's also the influence of family. Of the juniors who were my contemporaries, many of the women gave up playing seriously when they got married or had children. If you look at the top female players in England, they are virtually all either single, or their partner is a very good bridge player. An informal survey indicates the same is true in Australia (just as an example). There does seem to be a trend that when women marry non-bridge players they give the game up, while the reverse does not happen.

In conclusion, there are plenty of physical differences between the genders (including in their brain chemistry) so I don't think it is surprising that there is a range of mind sports where men outperform women.

'So what?' Is this discussion an argument for women to give up playing open bridge? I do believe that men, on average, have an inbuilt advantage over women, but I'm not some Ms Average Everywoman. Just because four players chosen at random from the top fifty men will almost certainly beat a team chosen from the top fifty women doesn't mean that any male bridge player at the local club is better than his wife. That's like saying that men are heavier than women on average, therefore I must weigh less than my husband. No-one can seriously claim that all women are incapable of being



Frances Hinden

THE DEBATE

good players. There are women in England competing in, and winning, all the top events – it's just that there are more men.

There are various ways to gain a psychological advantage at the bridge table. One is being so well-known as an expert that your opponents assume they will lose and play badly. Another is to be underestimated: if your opponent doesn't believe you capable of making a deceptive play, then any false card will always work. Speaking personally, I have no objection to playing against the editor's friend-in-a-pub who thinks that a mixed pair (or ladies' pair) are bound to be easy opponents. I shall just take my IMPs and thank him for the game. □

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