



David Bird

# Great Bridge is Percentage Bridge

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)

ONE benefit of having been educated as a mathematician is that some decisions come easily to me. How did the human race come into being? Should I choose the Adam and Eve version, or the Theory of Evolution? Hmm, I think Evolution just edges it. Suppose I want to know how long I am likely to live. Should I visit the doctor for a thorough check-up or rely on the Astrology column in the Sun? Tricky, once again, but I think I'll phone the local surgery. After such an introduction, you will not be surprised to hear me argue that you should base your quest to become a bridge champion on playing with the percentages.

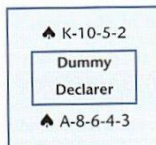
This seems so obvious that I should perhaps make some effort to understand what is meant by the 'flair' alternative. Let's start by looking at flair in the bidding. When England faced Germany in the 1965 European Championships, the irrepresible John Collings picked up: ♠ 10 6 ♥ 9 7 ♦ 6 ♣ A K Q 8 6 5 4 2. The auction began 2♣ (strong) – Pass – 2♥. What would you say on Collings' hand in the fourth seat? Playing percentage bridge, you might bid 5♣. Collings, the most famous 'flair' player of his generation, preferred to overcall 4♠! His intention was to retreat to 5♣ if doubled. Unfortunately, when the German on his left bid 5NT, Jonathan Cansino raised all the way to 7♠! This was doubled and went ten down (it would have been twelve down on best defence). Did I choose an example of 'flair bidding' that just happened to assist my argument against it? Some would say so.

Let's see another example of what might be called 'flair bidding'. Your partner opens 3♥ and the next player doubles for take-out. What do you say on:

♠ 9 7 ♥ A Q 7 2 ♦ 8 7 4 ♣ A Q 6 3? You can raise to 4♥, yes, but a much better bid is 4♣. This shows a heart fit and at the same time tells partner what to lead against 4♠ – a club through the doubler's king. When partner holds fewer than three clubs, a club lead may well beat the contract. Such a bid is so sensible, and offers such excellent prospects of success, that I would call it a 'percentage bid' rather than a 'flair bid'.

It's the same if a so-called 'flair player' regularly bids a suit of three low cards, intending to bid 3NT later and avoid a lead of his weak suit. If this happens to work well, over the years, it becomes by definition the percentage bid in the situation. If instead it works out poorly, he should take pity on his team mates and start bidding suits that he actually holds.

Let's turn to card-play now. You need to pick up the following suit for no losers:



You begin correctly by cashing the ♠A; LHO plays the ♠7 and East follows with the ♠J or ♠Q. What should you do on the second round – finesse dummy's ♠10 or play for a 2-2 break? Any mathematician can tell you that a finesse of the ♠10 is around twice as likely to succeed as playing for the drop. (In the long term such a play wins against a singleton ♠Q or ♠J, two combinations, and loses only to ♠Q-J doubleton, one combination.) There are many thousands of 'flair players'

around the world who refuse to believe this and play for the drop throughout their lives. One time in three, when East does hold Q-J doubleton, these players smile knowingly and say: 'You see what nonsense Restricted Choice is?'

Suppose two lines of play are possible on a particular contract. One line will give you the better percentage chance against perfect defence; the second line offers less chance against perfect defence but will give the defenders an opportunity to go wrong. Let's say that you go for this second line and (yes!) the defenders screw up; not only that, but the 'percentage line' would have failed. Is that a victory for flair bridge over percentage bridge? Not really. If the second line did in fact offer you a greater chance of success against those particular defenders, it became the *de facto* percentage play.

There is just enough space for an example of what might be termed 'flair in defence':



Needing to pick up the suit, declarer cashes the ♥A on the first round. The 'flair player' in the East seat can see what will happen if he plays the ♥10 and therefore follows deceptively with the ♥Q. Declarer promptly finesses the ♥9, losing to East's ♥10. A triumph for flair, at last! Of course not! It is a cold-blooded percentage play – the only way to give declarer a losing alternative. □



# Great Bridge is Flair Bridge

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

Can you imagine Shakespeare or Michelangelo or Beethoven being satisfied with not making mistakes? Would Botticelli have given us the Divina Commedia just by not chucking?

— *The Hideous Hog*

IF I asked you to name the first great bridge player to come to your mind, I'd be surprised if you didn't pick Zia Mahmood. Or, depending on your nationality and age group, perhaps Geir Helgemo, Benito Garozzo, Paul Chemla, Jeff Meckstroth, John Collings . . . Now, what have all those players in common? Their knowledge of the technical side of the game – bidding judgement, percentage plays, Scissors Coups and compound squeezes – is no better and no worse than other champions. But what sets them apart from the rest, what make them the people who are surrounded by kibitzers at the table or online, is flair.

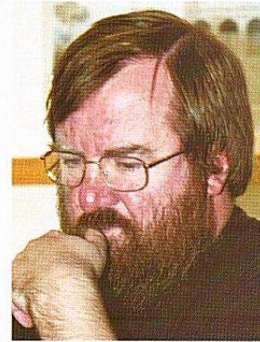
Percentage bridge is easy to define, though very difficult indeed to implement. It consists in taking, every time it is your turn, the action that maximises your chances of success assuming that everyone else at the table is acting rationally. In theory, a computer could be programmed to 'know' what action will work out best in the long run given any position that might occur at the bridge table (in practice we are a very long way indeed from creating such a machine). Four such computers pitted against each other would play the best percentage bridge the world has ever seen – but would anyone consider it 'great bridge'? Would anyone even watch it?

Imagine a world championship final contested by two teams of computers. At the end of 160 boards the match would be a 0-0 draw in IMPs, but at least the spectators would not be bored, for with current processor speeds the event would be over in

about ten minutes. Of course, the computers would need to play an infinite number of extra boards to decide the title, but everyone would have gone home to watch *Strictly Come Dancing* instead (a competition in which the outcome is decided entirely by the judges' and the public's flair for selecting people who cannot dance and encouraging them to demonstrate this as often as possible at the expense of people who can).

Flair is less easy to define. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that it is 'power of "scent"; sagacious perceptiveness; instinctive discernment.' In bridge terms, this means that flair consists in picking the right moment to do the wrong thing. Because bridge – even duplicate bridge – is not a game of pure skill, it is always possible that by doing the wrong (anti-percentage) thing you will obtain a better result on a single occasion than by doing the right (percentage) thing. This does not mean, of course, that you should do the wrong thing on every deal just in case it happens to work out well; the percentages will in that case work inexorably against you. What it does mean is this:

Game All	♠ K 7 5 3
Dealer East	♥ K 8
	♦ K J 9 7 4
	♣ 3 2
♠ 10 4	♠ A 9 8
♥ Q 3	♥ J 10 6 5 2
♦ 5	♦ A 10 2
♣ A J 10 9 7 6 5 4	♣ K 8
	♠ Q J 6 2
	♥ A 9 7 4
	♦ Q 8 6 3
	♣ Q



David Burn

THE DEBATE

West	North	East	South
Meckstroth	Helness	Rodwell	Helgemo
3♣ <sup>1</sup>	Pass	1♥	Pass
4♣	Pass	3NT <sup>2</sup>	Pass
		5♣ <sup>3</sup>	All Pass

<sup>1</sup>Invitational with clubs; <sup>2</sup>The right contract; <sup>3</sup>The wrong contract.

North led a diamond, and you or I or some computer would have won with the ace and played a heart, hoping that the opponents would not find a switch to spades (not that computers can hope, but computers would be in 3NT anyway). Meckstroth didn't do that: he called for dummy's ten of diamonds, won by Helgemo with the queen. Obviously the Norwegian maestro could have broken the contract by playing either major, but he returned an innocent diamond. Meckstroth pitched a heart, won in dummy, played a heart, and made his contract.

Was this good bridge? No, not by any stretch. Was it great bridge? Undoubtedly – this deal arose in the 1997 World Championships and on the morning when the details were published in the daily bulletin, the talk among the world's finest was of nothing but the wonderful play Meckstroth had made (if Rodwell had any comments on his partner's bidding, he kept them to himself). I've seen a lot of bridge, but that ten of diamonds – not the two, which would leave a dangerous holding in dummy, but the ten – remains the greatest play I have ever seen.

In short, if you always play the percentages you will be a good bridge player. But to be a great bridge player, you need flair. Victor Mollo opened my address for me; it is only fitting that he should close it. *Those who do the right thing and lose cannot forgive their betters, who do the wrong thing and win.* □