

Rick's Tricks

SEPARATE and UNEQUAL

By Rick Roeder

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In 1892, the Supreme Court sanctioned Jim Crow in America as the landmark court case “Plessy vs Ferguson” opined that “separate but equal” schools within a district were permissible. 62 years later, a subsequent Supreme Court said that there was nothing equal in practice and relegated the landmark Plessy decision to the scrap heap.

Bridge magazines focus almost exclusively on bridge hands and technical subjects. I have to admit “backwash squeezes” do sound pretty cool. All this detail gives short shrift to one of the most important parts of the game: the psychological dynamics of a partnership.

If the technical abilities of both partners are roughly equal, this dynamic is often quite promising. In every partnership, difficult hands should be discussed after the session. If the partners are relatively equal in ability, there is a greater likelihood that neither one will be overly defensive. In my view, a partnership can flourish when both parties are candid and objective about the good things and not-so-good actions taken by the partnership.

However, not all partnerships are equal in ability. Prime examples are husband-wife partnerships or pro-client situations where the difference in ability could be measured in light years. In my opinion, any unequal partnership puts added pressure on both partners.

For an unequal partnership to thrive, the better player among the “unequals” has to go light on the criticism. Trust me, this is easier said than done as good players tend to be very competitive and do not react well to poor results. In a perfect world, any constructive suggestions should be done in the absence of opponents at the table. This is not always possible if the lesser player will not remember the particulars of the hand 15 minutes after the session (thank you, hand records!). Criticism should avoid personal attacks. “Only the village idiot would do what you did” might feel cathartic in a moment of angst but will usually be counterproductive.

The better player also has to remember that the lesser player will often be nervous and a bit intimidated. A smile at partner or a sincere compliment after a good action can do wonders. The lesser player usually feels a lot of pressure and nervous energy. Any way to alleviate stress is a good idea. Now, a true confession that will have purists shaking their head in disapproval. I sometimes bid a hand differently when playing with a “lesser” than with an expert. An example:

You hold: ♠KJxxx ♥A9x ♦Ax ♣J9x. I have a bidding decision to make after this auction:

Pard	You
1♦	1♠
2♦	?

In my partnerships, the opening bidder will raise to 2♠ with 3 card support and a ruffing value (thank you, Spiral convention!). If playing with a top-shelf expert, I would bid 3♣. My heart holding suggests

that if we wind up in No Trump, playing from Pard's side will sometimes be a good idea. An expert partner is more likely to appreciate a heart holding of Qx or Jxx as useful in a 3 No Trump endeavor whereas a non-expert partner might not. Intermediate players often do not fully appreciate the wisdom of playing No Trump from the "Qx side." If playing with a "lesser", I would haul off and bid 3NT, hoping for the best. Part of my thinking is that this hand may be a challenge to play, especially at matchpoints. Also, if I can give my partner an extra hand off to rest as dummy, they will have more mental resources available for the following hands.

I cannot emphasize this last point enough. Experts have to use less energy on numerous hands because of their wealth of accumulated experience in similar situations. Less experienced players do not have the same luxury. Generally, the "lesser" has a finite amount of mental bullets in their arsenal. For every backwash squeeze in bridge, there are literally hundreds of routine ground balls to the shortstop. Excessive chatter about a past hand or "bullet exhaustion" makes it a bit less likely that the next ground ball will be fielded cleanly.

Sorry, purists, but here comes another hand I would bid differently with an expert and non-expert:

You hold a monster in 4th chair, playing IMPs:

♠AKQ10xxx ♥void ♦Ax ♣Qxxx

The auction:

LHO	Pard	RHO	You
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1♦	2♣	P	?
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With an expert, I would confidently bid 5♥, exclusion Blackwood. With a non-expert, I would be worried about a misunderstanding and would choose another path. Then, after the game, I would talk about how to bid the hand.

One could write a book on playing with your significant other. Bridge can be a very intense game. My observation is that if a relationship has some issues away from the table, those issues will manifest themselves in numerous, often subtle, ways at the table. (Sometimes, not so subtle—In a duplicate game, my dad was aghast at my mom's defense on one hand. He left the table and literally started pounding his head against the nearest wall. Pre zero tolerance days!). I really admire those husband-wife bridge partnerships that have ongoing harmony at the table. In January, one of my teammates in the Australian National Teams was Barbara Travis—considered one of the Outback's best players for decades. When I asked why she did not pair up with her expert husband, she replied, "If we played, we might not stay married."

The "lesser" player also has certain responsibilities in a viable partnership. Try to avoid the "delusion of grandeur" syndrome particularly when your "better" partner makes a mistake. NEWS FLASH: Every expert makes mistakes. When this happens, the expert should immediately apologize and not get defensive. Several decades ago, there were two experienced husband-wife couples in Southern California where the "lesser" partner was constantly giving grief to their henpecked spouse. I just wondered how their marriage survived. The lesser player should also be putting in some time away from the table in honing their skills. If the expert sees that the non-expert is genuinely trying to improve, greater harmony will result.

I write this article with due humility as I know there have been times I could have been a more understanding partner. In nirvana, I truly believe that your partner becomes your very best friend

during a session. IF you cannot stomach that concept with said partner, Smokey Robinson & The Miracles offered some great advice 60 years ago: “Shop Around.” [□](#)