

By Jared Johnson
ScoreCard Editor

A quarter million bridge hands? Half a million bridge hands? A million bridge hands? Helen Shanbrom of Tamarac, Florida, believes she may have played more bridge hands than any bridge player in history. She could be right.

Shanbrom won more masterpoints in club level games last year than anyone else in the country, a record setting total of 826 (with 781 in 2008). That would be an impressive total even for someone playing a lot of tournament bridge. She has won her Ace of Clubs category (most masterpoints won at the club level)

18 out of the last 21 years. She has over 22,000 masterpoints. There are other players with more than 20,000, of

course, but those are mostly tournament players where top place finishes in regional or national tournaments can net 50 to 200 masterpoints in one fell swoop.

Shanbrom has been playing duplicate bridge since the 1930s.

And even if you are playing a lot of bridge (she estimates about 600 sessions a year in recent years), you still have to be doing well on a regular basis since club level awards are much smaller than tournament awards.

So, let's do some math. We will use that 600 sessions a year average for the past two decades and multiply by 20 to get us to 12,000 sessions of bridge. The average session of duplicate club bridge is 26 hands, which gets us to 312,000 hands. Round down for an even 300,000. And that doesn't count all the bridge from the 1930s to 1980s. She has to be over half a million.

A Million Bridge Hands?

How many yarboroughs do you pick up along the way? The technical definition of a yarborough is a hand with no card higher than a nine and the odds are 1827 to one against. If you revise it to the more commonly used definition of no face cards or aces (no high card points) it is only 274 to one. That means well over 1,000 yarboroughs just in the last 20 years.

One would hope there was an equal number of rock crusher hands to compensate.

Here is part of the conversation from early one recent Sunday morning

Q: When did you first start playing bridge and then duplicate bridge?

A: *Since I was a kid. I come from a small town where everyone played bridge and I would be asked to fill in as a fourth when I was eight or ten. I got out of high school in 1936 and my first duplicate game was at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in*

1939. (After that she taught for three years in Missouri, and taught high school math another 32 years in Detroit.)

Q: Any particular interesting stories from over the years?

A: *I played a couple of times with (Supreme Court Justice) John Paul Stevens.*

Q: How many bridge hands do you think you've played?

A: *I used to think about a million but then I think it may not have been quite so many. A few years I didn't play so much.*

Q: Have you seen the same hand twice yet?

A: *I've seen 'em all.*

Q: Are you playing bridge today?

A: *Of course.*

And, by the way, she's 91 and still going strong, planning to win that Ace of Clubs award a total of 20 times. She may play that millionth hand yet.

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When Bridge Hands Attack!

Many things can happen with a deck of cards. Years ago at an NABC in Toronto, the Daily Bulletin featured a hand with the title of "A Record That Can Never Be Broken." In one event, one particular pair had bid to 7NT with no clubs in either hand. It didn't make. However, in the next day's Daily Bulletin, it turned out someone did even worse. One pair bid 7♣ with no trumps in either hand.

How could such a thing happen, you ask? The particular partnership had the explicit agreement that cuebidding the opponent's suit twice revealed a psyche, so even though one opponent had preempted clubs, when the next player ended up bidding clubs twice, the second time at the seven level, to get his partner to choose among the other three suits, his partner took the agreement literally and passed. And the outstanding trumps didn't even break well.

In our second installment of Bridge Hands Gone Wild, two of the hands are constructions, but maybe they will actually turn up someday at the table.

Making a Grand Never Taking a Trick with an Ace or King

Can you imagine making a grand slam where during the play, you never take a trick with an ace or a

king, and only once with a queen, despite the opponents' best efforts to thwart that objective? What that means, of course, is that you must have all the aces, king and queens between your hand and dummy, otherwise a defender could simply lead a queen (or the suit his partner has a queen in) and force you to win a trick with a king. It also means that during the play of the hand you will be discarding (from one hand or the other) all four aces and all four kings.

Here is one possibility:

None vulnerable, South dealer

	North		East
	♠AKQJ10987		♠32
	♥AJ		♥5432
	♦KQ10		♦5432
	♣----		♣432
West		South	
♠654		♠----	
♥9876		♥KQ10	
♦9876		♦AJ	
♠65		♠AKQJ10987	

Work it out. No matter what suit is led, given the proper order of play and pitches, you can make seven notrump, never winning a trick with an ace or a king and in fact, having to win only once with a queen.

Example: Diamond lead. Play the 10 from dummy, win jack in hand. Play the five lowest clubs, jack on down, while pitching the three top spades from dummy, the ♥A

and ♦K. Lead the ♥10 to dummy's jack.

Play ♠J in dummy, pitching ♦A from hand. Dummy is up.

Grand Slam on Five HCP

What is the fewest high card points you can have between your hand and dummy and still make a grand slam on the right distribution, but assuming maximum defense? We slightly tweak the Duke of Cumberland hand to get this layout.

All vulnerable, South dealer.

	North		East
	♠AJ1032		♠Q
	♥----		♥J109
	♦765		♦109843
	♠87432		♠10965
West		South	
♠K		♠987654	
♥AKQ		♥8765432	
♦AKQJ2		♦----	
♠AKQJ		♠----	

In our fantasy world, South, with his seven-six yarborough, opens 7♣. An enraged West doubles. All pass. West is about to become more enraged.

The contract is cold on any lead. Basically, trumps are drawn in one round, three hearts are ruffed in dummy, setting up the suit, and South gets back to his hand with another ruff to cash four good hearts.

East-West can do nothing but watch and gnash their teeth. The defense has 35 high card points and no defensive tricks!

Don't count on seeing this hand in the real world anytime soon. It's just an object lesson. But it does show that strange enough distribution can neutralize high card points.

Think about that the next time you're about to double the opponents' game on your 20 high. They may roll it.

Grand Slam on an Endplay

How about a grand slam on an endplay? Impossible you say? Logic dictates the solution. The endplay must be at trick one. The hand was reported in *The Bridge World* over 65 years ago.

None vulnerable, North dealer

	North		East
	♠J65		♠983
	♥AKQJ54		♥8763
	♦72		♦4
	♠J7		♠109832
West		South	
♠Q1074		♠AK2	
♥1092		♥----	
♦865		♦AKQJ1093	
♠K54		♠AQ6	

North-South overbid to seven notrump, but poor West was on lead and endplayed in all four suits. Any suit gives South access to dummy. If South started out having to lead from his hand, he couldn't get to dummy without surrendering a trick. Nifty, eh?

There's always something new in the bridge world, even if it's something old.

Next time: Notrump monstrosities.

Greed Is Not Always Good

By Jared Johnson
ScoreCard Editor

"Greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works."

-- Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in "Wall Street"

Greed on Wall Street hasn't worked out too well for the country's economy.

Alright, let's see what greed gets us at the bridge table.

Both vulnerable, North dealer

	North		East
	♠K 10 3		♠J 6 2
	♥A 5 4 2		♥Q 10 9 3
	♦5 3 2		♦A 7 4
	♠A K 7		♠Q 10 4
West		South	
♠Q 8 7 5 4		♠A 9	
♥K J		♥8 7 6	
♦8 6		♦K Q J 10 9	
♠J 9 6 5		♠8 3 2	

You are South. Partner opens 1♣. You bid 1♦. North bids 1♥. You bid 2NT, inviting game. Partner accepts, bidding 3NT. The opponents are silent throughout. West leads the ♠5, fourth best from the only unbid suit.

The greedy and shortsighted player thinks only about the high probability of winning three spade tricks.

West may well have led from the queen-jack, and you have a fair chance of the first trick riding around to the nine. Or the spade honors may more likely be split, in which case East will play his queen or jack at trick one, and the other low honor in West's hand will be finessable.

So, you call low from dummy, East playing the jack. You win the ace. Of course, West's queen can now be finessed for all three spade tricks. But you have only one heart trick and two clubs. That's six. You need at least three diamond tricks.

You play the ♦K and West plays the eight to signal high-low to show a doubleton. East ducks the ace and ducks again when you continue with the queen.

You are now finished. East will win the third round of diamonds, and you have no entry to your hand.

East pretty much knows this. You have shown up with the ♠A and the rest of the diamonds. If you had the ♥K, you would have bid 3NT yourself.

Your hand is dead. You have eight tricks, those three precious greed-driven spade tricks (but only if you take the spade finesse instead of playing a third round of diamonds because you are in your hand for the last time), two clubs, a heart, and two diamonds. Down one.

The solution? You must analyze the hand as a whole, not just one suit. It is tempting to wait to see what East plays to trick one. It is sometimes said that honors are meant to capture other honors and you hate for the

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Editor's Desk

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Masterpoint inflation. It's been going on for decades. Maybe we need Alan Greenspan at the American Contract Bridge League. Virtually every tournament player would acknowledge that masterpoints are much, much easier to win today than even 30 years ago, much less when the masterpoint was invented about 80 years ago. Some recent ACBL statistics drive the point home. Jeff Meckstroth won more masterpoints last year than anyone else, an impressive total of 3,189 even taking masterpoint inflation into account. That fetched him the Barry Crane Top 500 Trophy (formerly the McKenney Trophy).

The trophy was first awarded in 1937 and it went to the biggest name in the history of bridge, Charles Goren. He won 179 masterpoints that year. You can win more than that for a single national championship nowadays.

As late as 1962, it took only 713 masterpoints to win.

The 1,000 masterpoints in a year barrier was first broken in 1963 by another legendary bridge name, Oswald Jacoby.

Masterpoint inflation soared in the 1970s and 1980s, and the number of masterpoints it took to win the Barry Crane Top 500 trophy soared with it. New records were set 12 times in a little over 20 years. The all time record of 3,584 was set by Jim Barrow in 1999, and it's taken over 3,000 to win five of the past seven years.

The last time it took under 1,000 was 1968 by Paul Soloway.

Meckstroth is now the top masterpoint holder in the country, having surpassed the lifetime masterpoint total of the late Paul Soloway. Meckstroth has somewhere around 67,000 masterpoints.

Modern Culture: Maybe it's just modern culture. Everything has to be bigger or at least sound bigger. In the 1960's, a thousand points probably got you a free play on a pinball machine. Now it can take a million.

And even though it wouldn't remotely change the strategy, it might make the game of bridge seem more exciting if we just add three zeroes onto everything, raw scores, matchpoint scores, victory points, you name it. You can now score 200,000 matchpoints on a 156,000 average at duplicate.

And it would make it harder to utter some of the commonplace excuses. Instead of saying, "Sorry partner, I dropped the overtrick, but it was only a couple of matchpoints," it will be, "Sorry I dropped the overtrick, but it was only 2,000 matchpoints."

And of course, going for a telephone number sounds bad enough when it's minus 1,400. Now it will be, "Sorry partner, for losing one million, four hundred thousand points!" Perhaps people would tighten up their bidding.

Then again, maybe not.