

The Fine Art of Kibitzing

By Jared Johnson
ScoreCard Editor

Bridge isn't primarily a spectator sport. As a mental contact sport, most of the action takes place inside the head, and you aren't going to have quite the action "on the field" that you do at football or basketball or hockey.

Still, some people do watch the game. They are called kibitzers. And people have different reactions to kibitzers. An early writer on bridge, Albert Ostrow, once suggested that "card players consider kibitzers the lowest form of animal life."

It is not uncommon for a kibitzer to sit down at the table and have someone comment, "You're not playing?" Is there the vague hint of disapproval? You couldn't find a partner?

Sometimes having kibitzers is considered a compliment. Presumably the kibitzer thinks play at the table will be interesting. Especially at regionals and nationals, the top players may have so many kibitzers crowded around the table, that later arrivals may have difficulty finding a spot.

And it may even be that the kibitzer is a little resented because everyone knows he knows more about what is going on at the table than anyone else. Normally the kibitzer is seated at the corner of a table, and even though technically you are only suppose to kibitz one hand, a kibitzer can often see declarer's hand, one of the defenders' hands, and dummy, and thus knows the entire layout.

Maybe you're sitting there with a

kibitzer to your left. You hold a good hand with seven spades to the ace-king-jack and once partner has shown some values, but has never supported spades, you are thinking about shooting out four spades. But is there a miserable spade stack lurking to your left?

You don't know. But the kibitzer already knows.

It's All Risk Free

And there's an art to being a kibitzer. You can sit there and evaluate the hands, and decide upon your bid or line of play, and all at no risk whatsoever. You won't be the one ending up looking stupid. Of course, you can easily convince yourself that you would easily have come to the proper line of play even if you couldn't see one of the opponents' hands.

Marshall Miles once wrote, "Let's face it. A good game of duplicate bridge is rougher than anything you do for a living." He has a point. Most people are probably relatively comfortable on their jobs. But at bridge you must make another bid or play, another decision, every few seconds. Your ego is constantly on the line. But not for the kibitzer in his ivory tower.

And of course, being a kibitzer can be hard work. Watching all the horrible things that take place. And you are supposed to hold your tongue. Good manners require that the kibitzer not comment. (Not all kibitzers have good manners.) You must be Marcel Marceau. No nodding or smiling, no frowning or scowling. It could give away information about the hand. Not even a chuckle can escape your lips. You can only think

to yourself, "You're not going to open that piece of junk, are you?"

As *Menagerie* author Victor Mollo once observed, "Kibitzers should be paid the proper rate for the job. Nobody should be expected to watch man's inhumanity to man at his own expense."

The Omniscient Kibitzer

And then there is the cardinal sin for the kibitzer. The instant post-mortem. It is considered bad form to offer unsolicited advice. From his perch on Mount Olympus, often knowing all four hands when he is kibitzing declarer, the kibitzer then proclaims after declarer has embarrassingly gone down, how it was obvious to hook left hand opponent for a jack on the first round of diamonds, ruff out clubs, throw right hand opponent in with a heart at trick 10 and force him to execute a suicide squeeze on his partner.

Yes, yes. The game is so much easier when you know all four hands.

Victor Mollo further noted, "What is the most intractable problem at bridge? As any expert will tell you, it is, without doubt, the kibitzer evil. He holds power without responsibility and can plague all the players all the time, sitting back happily in the knowledge that no one can hit back."

There are lessons to be learned from being a kibitzer. For instance, what often fetches bad boards is concocting bogeymen in the head during the auction or play that deters you from the normal course of action.

What you most often learn from kibitzing is that the book bid or play is usually the right one.

The Dangers of Being a Kibitzer

And there are dangers to being a kibitzer. Declarer has just gone down in a thin game that he probably shouldn't have bid and could have made. He turns to you and inquires about the dummy partner laid down, "Would you have opened that?" He speaks with an air of expectancy, as if surely you will agree with him. But you are in trouble either way. If you say no, you have insulted his partner. If you say yes, you have insulted him. The best diplomatic strategy is evasion, the non-committal answer. "Well, I don't know. Some people might open that hand and some people might not. It depends. It's only 11 points but there are nine cards in the major. It might depend on what type of game you're having, blah, blah, blah ..."

The idea is to talk as long as possible without taking a definite

position, hoping that someone will speak up to change the subject and take you off the hook, or that the director will call the round. Saved by the bell.

Yet another awkward moment scenario: you sit down to kibitz a couple of friends. They are having a killer game. Until your arrival, that is. Then it's one bad board after another. It's not your fault of course but there is bound to be a twitch or two and an uneasy silence as your friends enter yet another minus 790 or minus 1100 on their scorecard.

Watching a major disaster can be uncomfortable. Declarer goes for 1,400, a self-inflicted wound, and you know declarer is even more embarrassed to have an extra witness to the carnage.

The only solution? Excuse yourself to get a drink of water - and not return.

And there is one more disadvantage to being a kibitzer. You can't win any masterpoints.

Lou Ann O'Rourke, Grand Life Master

Excerpts from the Daily Bulletin



Lou Ann O'Rourke has advanced to exalted status of Grand Life Master, a rank requiring at least 10,000 masterpoints and a win in a major NABC+ event. Lou Ann, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz. and Portola Valley, Calif., won the 2007 Open Swiss Teams. She has numerous second-place national finishes including the Vanderbilt Knockout Teams in 2007 and the Championship Flight of the Grand National Teams, representing District 17, in 2002.

Mrs. O'Rourke began playing seriously in 1999 when her husband retired. "He is my biggest supporter," she says, "Besides him, I'd like to thank my partner, Marc Jacobus of Las Vegas, and all my other partners and teammates who helped me achieve this."

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