

The Larry Cohen Interview

Larry Cohen has won more than 25 National Championships and holds two world championship medals. In 2002, the ACBL named him Player of the Year, and in 2011 Honary Member of the Year. He was recently listed on their Top 10 Living Most Influential People in Bridge.



In addition to writing best selling bridge books, Larry also lectures on land and at sea.

BB *What led you to a career in bridge?*

LC Wealthy players were willing to pay me to play on their team. I was in my 20's and the money got to be more than my "day job" so I gladly decided to make my living from bridge.

BB *What personality traits do you and Marty Bergen have that made your partnership legendary?*

LC We were very good friends and worked hard on our partnership, but we are actually very different people. Marty drove the partnership with his aggressive style and I just went along. We were in the right place at the right time in the 1980's. Our style was somewhat unique and the other experts hadn't quite adjusted to it yet. We were fearless at the bridge table and it worked well back then. Nowadays, it is harder to get away with that style.

BB *Do you prefer a sound or an aggressive approach to the game?*

LC Great question and I'll try to give a great answer. I have no preference. I've played both styles and even in-between. I play the style my partner wants. The actual approach doesn't matter. What matters is that you and your partner know each other's approach.

BB *What conventions, for regular partnerships, do you recommend?*

LC In order of importance, Negative Doubles, Stayman, Jacoby Transfers, Blackwood. Beyond that, I'd recommend only a few more, but I think with just those 4 that any decent players would win their fair amount of the time. Of all the top players/writers, I am probably the most anti-convention of them all. Players add conventions and forget them and mess them up—less is more.

BB *What encouraged you to leave the competitive arena and focus on bridge teaching?*

LC Getting paid a lot of money was stressful. I felt that I let the sponsor down if I had poor results. I was getting anxious at tournaments and eating/sleeping poorly. On the other hand, teaching is much more enjoyable and a better lifestyle. I travel the world with my wife helping me, surrounded by wonderful interesting people.

BB *You and Marty won the Cavendish Invitational Pairs, the largest money bridge tournament in the world, twice! Could you share some of your experiences playing in such a high-stake game.*

LC Honestly, I felt less pressure there than I did playing for pay from a sponsor. I had only Marty and me to answer to, so I was much more relaxed than normal. It was a thrill to win, but it was a bigger deal to "beat the best" than the actual financial gain.

BB *What changes in the game do you think would be worthwhile?*

LC I love the ACBL's KISS approach—trying to keep things simple for newer players. It is overwhelming enough to get into the game. To then have to cope with "alert, alert, alert" – scares new players away. Anything that keeps it basic/simple, I am for. Of course, at the high levels (National/World championships), I am okay with allowing more complexity. I also want even stronger anti-rudeness, zero-tolerance policies. It appalls me to see the way some players behave.

BB *We know the game is competitive. Is there a place for players who focus on the experience without a strong regard for the results?*

LC Good question. People don't change. Most bridge players are competitive and want to win. It is that competitive drive that helps them succeed. Still, I encounter many laid-back people who just want to play, enjoy and have fun. They are the ones who get turned off by the fierce competitiveness of others (which sometimes manifests itself into poor manners). Often, these two groups are in the same game—it isn't always possible to separate them.

BB *How would you describe your partnership with David Berkowitz?*

LC We were very compatible in that we both were happy to keep it simple and play a fairly conservative (by modern standards) style. We are good friends and learned how to discuss partnership/bridge without agitating each other. In retrospect, it was a great partnership, and I feel badly for David that I left it. I decided to stop playing competitive bridge in 2009. Had I kept playing, David was definitely the partner for me – he didn't do anything wrong to cause my retirement.

PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS AND PREPARING A DUCK

Larry's book, *Tricks of the Trade*, written twenty years ago and republished this year by *The Bridge World*, has stood the test of time. The book is insightful and uniquely practical. Here are two excerpts showing some of Larry's *Practical Advice*. –BB

CASUAL AND NEW PARTNERSHIPS

In order to gain a footing for our discussion of how to make decisions about agreements with a regular partner, consider a scenario where you are forming a casual partnership, maybe even a first time partnership. You're filling out a convention card with a friend, boss, enemy, peer, whatever. All too often, I hear a discussion go something like this:

"Bergen Raises?"

"Yup."

"Inverted Minors?"

"Sure."

"Roman Key-Card."

"Yes: I like 1430."

In that brief conversation, huge cans of worms have been opened. If you want to have an effective partnership, you can't just put conventions like those on your card without serious discussion. Not that those aren't sound agreements to have. On a technical basis, they are fine. Nonetheless, absent adequate discussion you're better off without them. For Bergen Raises there are many variations and different interpretations. Are they on or off in competition? By a passed hand? For Inverted Minors, you need to know a lot more. There are not only the usual competition and passed-hand matters but also questions about how high a single raise is forcing, does it deny a major, how does opener show a minimum with or without length in the minor and on and on. In a

new partnership, Roman Key-Card Blackwood is an accident waiting to happen; if Kantar can write an entire book about it how could a new partnership play it effectively without any discussion?"

In another part of the book the information is one-of-a-kind and amazingly useful. We all know that it's a challenge for new, or even experienced players, to find the best way to practice when two maxims collide ---- like second hand low and cover an honor with an honor. It's tempting to delay play, if only briefly, to try to figure things out. This hesitation, even though almost invisible, can be an advantage for more experienced opponents.

In the following excerpt, Larry gives advice that is almost guaranteed to make playing in a duplicate game so much more enjoyable. –BB

HOW TO PREPARE A DUCK

Consider this situation:

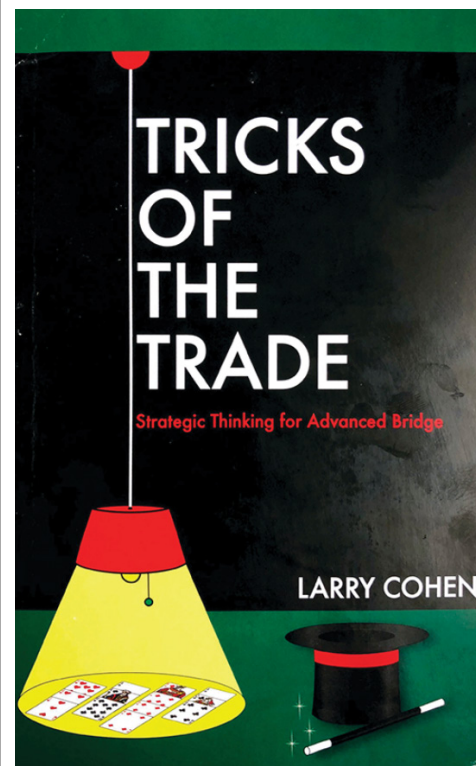
| | | |
|------------|---------------|------|
| | NORTH (DUMMY) | |
| | ♠ A 10 9 | |
| WEST (you) | | EAST |
| ♠ Q 5 2 | | |
| | SOUTH | |
| | ♠ J led | |

A good measure of a defender's experience is how smoothly a low card is played in such situations: newcomers always give the show away, the most successful players never do, everyone else's behaviour falls somewhere in between.

No one would contest that following suit in normal tempo is an excellent idea when there is no good reason to cover. It is less obvious that the same procedure is best when the defender cannot be sure of the correct move: *When in doubt, duck smoothly.*

Why is the smooth duck a winning strategy? Part of the time, it will be technically right. Part of the time, it will be the winning move on the lie of the cards. And part of the time it will not be clear, even upon extended analysis, what is best, *and declarer will go wrong because of the smoothness of the defender's play.* In fact, in an expert game, ducking smoothly can gain when the defender's current play is irrelevant except insofar as it may give declarer information that will be useful in playing some other suit.

Yes, now and then, playing low, in any tempo, will be a losing move. But those instances will be statistically few compared to the winning case. Further as a player gains experience on defense more and more of the clear-cut cover situations will become apparent.



Cover art for the reissue of Larry's book. To order your copy, call Baron Barclay at 1-800-274-2221