Love Thy Partner -- Excerpted from FORGIVE ME, PARTNER

by Larry Cohen

It's been said that one's bridge partner can be as important as their marital partner. This saying might not score many points on Valentine's Day, but it will win master points at the bridge table.

Learning how to handle the relationship with your bridge partner will do more for your results than reading any technical book on the game. I don't care if you know the name for every squeeze, and every form of Roman Keycard Blackwood--if your partnership is no good, you are at a big disadvantage.

If I were to name the top two partnerships of the 1990's, my list would be topped by Jeff Meckstroth-Eric Rodwell and Bob Hamman-Bob Wolff. Sure, you say, those are brilliant players--no wonder they are on top of the list. But, they are great *partners.* Hamman-Wolff played a fairly uncomplicated big-club system, and Meckwell play an 800-page highly artificial big-club system. Yet, the one connecting link, is the way they are a "partnership" in every sense of the word.

When they get a bad result (and it happens more than you would think) there is no acrimony. It's always "on to the next board." No raised eyebrows, no "why didn't you do this," and absolutely no yelling, ranting, or raving. The time to discuss these things is always *after the session*.

We'll come back to this later, but for now, let's look at what goes into the forming of a bridge partnership.

My first partner

Most of us want a partner who plays as well or better than us. That's the best way to achieve good results, as well as to learn. I was lucky enough to be in this situation at the start of my bridge career. When I first started playing duplicate, at the age of 14, a lot of the people at the club were helpful. Father Robert M. Panek was a very experienced player without a regular partner. He saw that I had potential, and he graciously formed a partnership with me. He was by far the better player, and I learned plenty.

Not only did he teach me conventions, but he taught me comportment at the table. The first few times I played with him I was on my best behavior, but as often happens when you get familiar and comfortable with someone, bad traits come out. One evening at the local duplicate I put down the dummy and watched him lose a few unnecessary tricks in the play. We opened the traveler, and we had a cold bottom. Watching from the dummy I'd been suffering, because I knew that he was misplaying the hand. The anger bubbled over. "I've never seen anyone mangle a hand that badly." I still remember my exact words.

Anyone who knows me today would be shocked if they heard me utter those words. Father Panek nipped the problem in the bud. After that session he gave me a pretty stern lecture about how to behave at the bridge table. He explained how I had embarrassed him, hurt his feelings, and thrown him off his game with that "mangling" speech. He made me understand that one must control their emotions at the table, and never say a harsh word to partner.

It may sound like an obvious and rudimentary lesson, but I cannot stress enough its importance. Very few people who are reading these words are able to behave at the table. We all have emotions, and they can be tough to control. If you promise yourselves right now to try to change, you'll put your bridge career on the express train to success. Your partner(s) will appreciate you, and will consequently play better. When they can play without fear of criticism or retribution they'll give you their A-game. You in turn will be in good spirits, and give them your A-game. Furthermore, it makes for a friendlier and more enjoyable atmosphere for you and everyone else that's playing.

Choosing a Partner

Not everyone will be lucky enough to find a Father Panek. I was fortunate that he had the patience and tolerance to play with me, even though I was a novice. It was a tremendous learning experience to be playing with a better player. Furthermore, I was at an age where it was easy to absorb, and I didn't mind learning new conventions.

Nowadays, I'm reluctant to add lots of gadgets and science to the arsenal. I like to save my mind so that I can focus on the declarer play and defense. Picture a computer. There is only so much memory. If you load in one million bytes of bidding programs, there won't be any room for the program that plays the cards.

So, if I had to look for a new partner today, I'd need to find someone with a similar mind set. "Don't load me up with conventions and science, pard--that's

not me." But, some of you might love to have a full plate of conventions. You've got to try to find a partner who thinks the same way, otherwise you'll feel held back.

My ten-year partnership with Marty Bergen ended primarily for that reason. He was a mad scientist, always wanting to append the system notes. After every session we'd go over the boards and he'd want to change our methods. His suggestions always made sense, but I just simply didn't want to have to bog down my mind with constant changes and upgrades. Eventually our notes got to be so long and confusing that I couldn't take it any more. Marty's dream partner would be someone like Eric Rodwell, who has the same penchant for unending science.

My present partner, David Berkowitz, is more on my wavelength. On the "convention/science scale" if "1" means you want to play only Stayman and Blackwood, and "10" means you want to play every artificial bid known to man, I'm probably a "4" and David is a "5." Marty was a "9" or "10." There's no right way or wrong way, but you should try to choose a partner whose convention-scale rating is similar to yours.

First-time Partnerships vs. Long-time Partnerships

You'd expect that long-time partnerships have a big edge in any bridge tournament they enter. In general, that's true. There is one strange exception. It seems that the very first time two people play together, things often go better than expected. I attribute this anomaly to the fact that both players are on their very best behavior, and trying real hard. They want to make a good impression on the other player.

Also, nobody makes any "questionable bids or plays." For example, you're playing with Joe for the first time, and you hold:

K x K Q J 10 9 x Q x x x x.

He deals and opens one spade and there is a two-club overcall. You try two hearts and Joe gives you three diamonds. Hmmm. We have a pretty good hand here. Slam in diamonds or hearts is a real possibility opposite something like

A x x x x x A K x x A x x.

Maybe we should cuebid four clubs. Maybe three hearts is forcing and will allow him to further describe his hand.

Forget those thoughts. We've never discussed this sort of auction with Joe. He might not think three hearts is forcing. Four clubs could lead to confusion. Why not just bid a simple four hearts and prevent a disaster? So you jump to four hearts, Joe passes with his

A Q x x x x A J x x Q x x

and you score up your game. You and Joe go on to have a nice easy pleasant session and score up 65%.

Let's say that Nancy held that same

K x K Q J 10 9 x Q x x x x.

She's playing with her partner of six years, Tim. Tim opens one spade and Nancy bids two hearts after the two-club overcall. Tim bids three diamonds and it's up to Nancy. She remembers that she and Tim have discussed that if opener has bid a new suit in competition that he guarantees a rebid. So, she bids three hearts, (knowing that Tim will bid again) to leave room for slam exploration. Meanwhile, Tim remembers something else. He thinks back to the partnership rule that two-over-one in competition is not game forcing. If responder rebids his suit (as in this case two hearts and then three hearts) it is not forcing. So Tim passes, and game is missed. It's not clear who was wrong--there just seems to be two conflicting rules in the system notes. Nancy and Tim have a little argument after this deal, and their session goes downhill from there.

Another advantage for new partnerships is that they don't play too many conventions. Say you're filling out a card with a new partner, and they ask "Bergen Raises?" A good answer might be, "No thanks, there are too many variations and it involves too much discussion for now -- let's just play natural limit raises." Down the road, you agree to play conventions, and when they come up you'll often discover that you and your partner are playing them differently!

So, you get an idea of the ways in which Joe with his new partner will often do better than an experienced pair. Am I saying that a new partnership has an edge over an experienced one? No, of course not. I'm just trying to explain that aberration by which first-time partners have this uncanny knack of having a good session.

Conventions

What conventions should you play? No good answer to that one. If you want,you could read Amalya Kearse's classic reference book, called *Bridge Conventions Complete*, or more casually you could get a good overview by reading Marty Bergen's *Everyone's Guide to the New Convention Card*. Of course, a lot will depend on you and your partner's aforementioned "convention-science" rating scale. Don't start filling out a super-complex convention card if you are both "3's." Start your partnership out simply, even if you are "9's." Don't try to fill up your plate too fast--it's just not practical.

Most conventions have lots of ramifications which take time to fully explore. If your newish partnership agrees to play Bart, Lebensohl, Support doubles, Scrambling 2NT, and Roman Keycard Blackwood, you'll have tons of accidents. Conventions have many vagaries. Agreeing to play "Keycard Blackwood" in itself is not enough. You must discuss if five clubs shows 0-3 or 1-4 keycards. How do you ask for kings? How do you ask for the trump queen? When is four notrump Keycard, as opposed to plain Blackwood or quantitative? What is the trump suit--is it the last bid suit, or the first agreed suit? Is there always a trump suit? And so on. A similar array of questions could be attached to almost any convention you play. "What do we do if they interfere over our convention?" "Is it on in competition?" "Is it on opposite a passed hand?" And so forth.

General System Choice

Ever hear of K.I.S.S.? It's an acronym I believe in. Keep It Simple, Stupid.

I know lots of people (and sadly, I'm one of them) who were so fascinated when they were learning bridge that they tried to write down and define every auction. I spent many hours in college defining bridge auctions instead of taking notes on the lecture.

Unfortunately, no matter how diligent and thorough you are, you simply can't define every auction. There are millions of them. Even if you could define every auction, how could you possibly remember your definitions?

Accordingly, I've resolved to go the simple route. I try not to designate meanings for too many auctions. Bridge players are not computers. It's best to Keep It Simple!

It's hard to stick to this philosophy. Auctions always come up where your partner might say, "Hey, I know a gimmick for this. We can play that a jump in their suit to the four-level asks for ..." Just forget it. Don't add "Here-and-there" methods. I call a "Here-and-there" method one that was invented just to handle a specific situation that occurred at the table. You put it in your system, and then it doesn't come up for five years. By then, nobody remembers it anymore. Don't add methods unless they are for handling useful recurring hand types.

In all of my partnerships I like to develop a nice natural uncomplicated system. Sure, I might add a *few* gadgets, but the framework is always mundane. Five-card majors, weak-two bids, negative doubles, natural bidding! I've had my flings with Multi, Transfer Preempts, Relays, etc. I even once tried to learn a Strong-pass system, where an "opening" pass showed 16 or more points. Talk about artificiality! The memory strain just ain't worth it.

Besides, I think it's best for the game of bridge to use natural bidding. If the game is ever to attract large masses or become a spectator sport we've got to make it understandable. Joe Citizen is not going to follow what's going on if every bid is alertable. I take pride in the fact that David and I play a basically natural system. We play Precision, which uses an artificial one-club opening, but all of our follow-ups are basically natural. When we are on viewgraph or have kibitzers, everyone can pretty much follow what's going on.

If you're a 19-year old physics major at M.I.T. with a photographic memory, and you have a comparable partner, then by all means fill out the most complicated system card that you dare to. If you're anyone else, do yourself a favor and stick to the basics. KISS.

<u>Work and Learning</u>

A good partnership takes work. Sorry, but there's no way around it, and no substitute for it. With any serious partner there are three chores that I consider a must:

1) Maintain Partnership Bidding/system notes.

2) Practice bidding hands before important events.

3) Go over the boards at the end of the day.

David and I take our partnership very seriously. A substantial part of our income is derived from playing professionally on teams at the nationals. We get paid good money, and we feel an obligation to be prepared. Aside from the above three work requirements, we do everything else we can to give the team sponsor our best effort. We get to sleep on time the night before an important match (no partying or late nights out drinking), and we don't eat big meals before playing. Between sessions we go to our hotel room and relax. No strenuous bridge talk, and no boisterous dinner with cocktails. This is not necessarily a requirement for a partnership, but it's nice to know that David and I feel the same way about this subject.

The next three sections cover the above-mentioned "chores:"

Partnership Bidding/system Notes

The computer age has been a boon in this area. Years ago, it was very rare to find partnerships with a full set of notes. It was a pain to have various sheets of paper (tattered and frayed) with changes and crossouts. In the late 1970's I formed a successful partnership with Ron Gerard. He was a lawyer, and he'd always write up detailed system notes on those long yellow sheets of legal paper. He'd mail them to me at college, and I'd study them more than my textbooks. I ended up with stacks of these yellow pages, and after a while it became unwieldy--there was no good way to organize them.

Now, you just need a word-processing program (a little bit of page-layout knowledge is nice) and you're in business. Current statistics show that 50% of ACBL members own computers, so there's a good chance that you or your partner have access.

You first must decide how much information should go in the notes. Should you just keep a list of hard-to-remember things? Should you list what every single bid means, even a one-heart opening bid? Where do you draw the line?

I've tried many different schemes, so I'll pass on to you what I think is the best route. I like to write down almost everything.

Your first page should be a table of contents, perhaps as follows:

Table of Contents

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Slam Conventions q

Carding r

The letter's "a-r" are of course the page numbers. If you're Jeff and Eric they might run into the 800's. For David and me we don't even make it out of double-digits. Most top partnerships (the best ten pairs in the country) have anywhere from 50-200 pages of such notes. I'd estimate that 20-30 pages are more than sufficient for most partnerships.

Let's take a quick look at what might be listed within these pages.

In the Opening-bids section the only things of consequence might be bids starting with three notrump and higher. Everything else will probably not be hard to remember.

For One-of-a-minor openings I'd write a brief line or two about the requirements for one club vs. one diamond, and I'd also briefly list all the responses. (Walsh style or up-the-line ... and what are the ranges for one-notrump, two-notrump, and three-notrump responses ... what are jump-shifts ... what is three-of-a-major ... etc.). From there, I'd talk about any further agreements, such as what opener's bids mean after 1♦ - 2♣.

Things such as new-minor forcing, negative doubles, bids-in competition, I would list on "Page g" as per the schedule above. There's no reason to repeat such agreements for the one-of-a-minor section in the one-of-a-major section.

In the Notrump Section I would list the range (not that you're likely to forget), and all of the first-round responses, even Stayman. Then I'd go into more detail as to Stayman follow-ups, Transfer follow-ups, etc. You'd also discuss two-notrump (and if natural, three-notrump) openings in this space. This could be a very long section for serious partnerships. The section on interference is also very important. Don't forget to put in all agreements if one-notrump is doubled.

Continuing on you'd write all your agreements over the various other opening bids, somewhat mirroring the information you'd put on your convention card. In fact, you have probably noticed that all my "headings" approximately follow the order of the convention card.

The "Opponents open one-of-a-suit" section takes up plenty of room in my notes. There are all sorts of partnership agreements that develop, a few of which are:

1) Our direct cuebids (Michaels) and Unusual Notrump and follow-ups.

2) Our one-notrump overcall and follow-ups -- what to do if we're doubled.

3) Our takeout doubles -- what are cuebids by responder to the double, how high are we forced, equal-level conversion principles, responsive doubles, methods after they redouble, strengths involved for doubling and raising, what it means to double and then convert a jump to notrump, etc.

4) Balancing One-notrump strengths (over various openings) and follow-ups.

5) Our overcalls - are new suits forcing, what are jump-responses and raises, when are we in a forcing pass if ever, what is a jump-cue response, how do we follow-up when advancer cuebids in response to the overcall, what are jump-overcalls in balancing seat--especially two notrump, etc.

6) Agreements after they've opened and raised -- what is two notrump, how light can we double, etc.

My notes with David on this section are six full pages. These are the kinds of agreements that new partnerships don't have, but experienced ones must have.

Just a brief note here. Are you wondering why my notes have all this "junk?" After all, I said that I like to Keep It Simple. Simple and "thorough" are two different things. Our notes are not filled with complicated artificial gadgets. Instead, they are filled with partnership agreements about commonly occurring events. The longer you play with a partner, the more such "events" you can discuss. None of #1-6 in the list above are complex, but they all involve auctions that come up in the day-to-day battles, and I like to know that my partner and I will be on the same wavelength. Definitions involving these routine situations is what takes up most of the pages.

As you continue to fill in your notes you'll notice some areas of duplication, especially in the slam section. For example, splinter-bids could go in the slam section as well as under one-of-a-major. Here are some of the subtitles you might want in the slam section: Roman-Keycard-Blackwood (with a subheading for Trump-Queen asks and Exclusion Blackwood), Grand Slam Force, 5NT Pick-a-Slam, D0P1, Jumps to the 5-level, Cuebidding, Asking Bids, 4NT Quantitative, etc., etc.

Carding is probably the most overlooked and underemphasized area of partnership. It reminds me of golfers that spend 95% of their time practicing drivers and long-iron shots on the range, but never working on their putting or chipping. Defensive carding will come into play on fully half the deals you play. Any good partnership should spend time discussing as many aspects as possible. Here are the major areas, with some of my suggestions and ideas:

1) General Philosophy

You must decide if in general you are giving attitude or count (I prefer the former). Also, the overall general concept should be to *show where your values are*. I stress this, because I've often heard defenders saying "I shifted to a

diamond because you *asked* me for one." This is not the right outlook. Instead, the signal should be "showing diamond values." Then, it is up to the person receiving the signal to decide whether or not to shift to diamonds. For example,

	10 x x Q x A Q x A K Q x x		Vul: N-S Dlr: South
x x A K J x 10 x x x J x x		J x 8 7 5 4 2 K J x x x x	
	A K Q 9 x x x x x x x x x		
WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			2♠
Pass	4♠	All pass	

After opening two spades at matchpoints, South becomes declarer in four spades and West leads a high heart. East signals with the deuce--he can stand a diamond switch. West duly switches to a diamond and South takes 12 tricks. "You asked me for a switch", screams West. No. East was simply showing that he could stand a diamond switch. Armed with that knowledge, West should still try to cash his other heart. He can see that a diamond switch could easily result in 12 tricks.

So, in a good partnership signals should be used to show your hand, not for master-minding (or dictating) the defense.

2) Opening Leads. This is pretty much covered by filling out the convention card, but notable areas are what to lead against notrump from big holdings such as AKJ10x. Some people play that the ace asks for one signal, and the king for a different one.

3) Trick One. Signalling at trick one is a topic that long-time partnerships are still working on. Entire books (like the Granovetters' *A Switch in Time*) have been written about this complex topic.

4) Signalling and leads during the hand. This is also covered on the convention card, but special partnership tendencies and agreements develop throughout the years. For example, would you shift to a high, low, or medium club from 8-7-4-2 if leading through declarer at notrump? The answer could be that it depends on the rest of the deal.

5) Other methods. Smith Echo, Odd-Even, Suit-preference. Tons of concepts to discuss, and this is an area where the truly great partnerships have a big advantage. Almost every little card on defense means something. There are constant inferences to be drawn because your expert partner has followed with the 2-5-7 in that order as opposed to the 2-7-5.

I've had many discussions with my partner (usually after letting three notrump make) that sound something like this:

Larry: "I wasn't sure if this was a Smith-Echo situation."

Partner: "Yeah, me too. Since dummy seemed to have spades stopped, I didn't think you could show spades."

Larry: "I agree. Also, I thought you might need count, since it wasn't clear if declarer could get back to dummy."

Partner: "Well, it looked like he had a spade entry, but only if he had a spade left in hand. So, I guess we should assume in these situations that if a high card is in dummy that it is indeed an entry, and therefore we should give count in the side suit."

Larry: "Okay. And remember that with 9-8-3-2 we give count with the 8. The "3" followed by the "2" would show only a doubleton. Always the second highest from four.

Of course, these conversations take place long after the session has ended.

Practice Bidding Hands

This is another area where the computer has become a big help. Random-deal generators are commonplace in the market, and most top partnerships own one. Before important events I think it's a good idea to practice.

One way to practice is to play. I find this less effective than computer-generated bidding hands. True, most people find it more enjoyable to play bridge than to sit there bidding hands, but it just doesn't get the job done as well. In a typical tournament you play 52-56 deals in a day, and your side doesn't even have bidding decisions on about one third of those deals. By bidding off practice sheets we can do 50 deals in a few hours. Not only that, we can learn a lot by "talking" during our practice bidding. "I'm bidding three hearts, but I'm curious what you think it would have meant if I had jumped to four hearts. Is three hearts forcing? etc."

We sometimes will deal out random hands, but at other times will set up the deals so that we can practice a certain area. Perhaps we've made a recent change to our responses to one notrump, so we'll deal out 100 notrump openers and bid those hands.

We also are able to practice our competitive bidding. No, we don't get two other players, so you might wonder how we do it! Simple. We tell the computer to print out, say, 25 deals where the East-West hands have an eight-card (or more) heart fit. My partner and I then take the North-South hands, and we "give ourselves" heart interference. For example, I pick up the first North hand and open one club. "It goes two hearts on your right," I tell David. Then we continue bidding. On the next deal I might tell him "They overcall one heart, and then jump-raise to three hearts." We continue through all 25 hands, and whoever feels like it makes up the opponents' actions. Sometimes we pretend they opened two hearts or three hearts. This is quite an effective method for practicing competitive bidding, and you'll probably discover some even better refinements as you go along.

The only thing about practice bidding is that we don't get to work on our defense and signalling. (Declarer play is practiced by reading books -- you don't need a partner to practice this aspect!). What we sometimes do is look at old printouts of hand records and discuss how we would signal and defend. We also read lots of books and magazine articles, always keeping an eye open for a defensive situation that we should discuss.

Go Over the Boards at the End of the Day

This might not mean what you think it does. The typical post-mortem session involves a bunch of people sitting around laughing and partying. "What'd you do on Board 7?" "You wouldn't believe what this guy did against us!" I'm not talking about a social hour. Sure, it is a real fun part of the game to sit around after the session and tell stories.

What I mean by going over the boards is just you and your partner in a quiet, studious atmosphere. It should be a private almost intimate thing. You don't want other people around. You start with board one and your attitude should be: "Did anything happen in the bidding or play that I wanted to discuss with partner?" Whether you got a top or a bottom, you might want to ask about a certain bid or play, or even a hypothetical bid or play. "What would it have meant if ..." "I wanted to signal you for a club shift, but I was afraid I'd be giving count ..." "Did we change the meaning of jumps to the 4-level on this auction? ..." "How could I have told you to cash out?"

This exchange of ideas has got to be done maturely. It's a sensitive area, and you've got to set your ego aside. Try to adopt an attitude of "What could I have done to better help out my partner?" Don't try to explain to your partner what he should have done. Ask not what your partner should do for you, but what you could do for your partner.

Keep Your Mouth Shut

Hamman and Wolff are the absolute best. I've never seen them say a word during a session of bridge. Even after the world's worst bidding misunderstanding they both have totally unruffled looks; not a word is exchanged. You don't know which one of them made the mistake, and they don't seem to care. It's on to the next board.

It's very hard to do what they do. Everyone's natural impulse is to say, "Sorry, I thought that four notrump was Blackwood," or "I would have passed, but I thought it was forcing."

It does absolutely no good to make such statements. Even if your intentions and tone of voice are good, you should keep quiet instead. When you say, "I thought four notrump was Blackwood," your partner will hear, "You dimwit, didn't you

know that four notrump is Blackwood on this auction?" When you say, "I thought is was forcing," she'll hear, "You didn't know our system."

You just can't win. So many times I've seen players of all levels initiate a post mortem only to have it cause partnership disharmony. Think back to all of your uncomfortable moments at the table with partner--don't they all stem from post mortems? Because the atmosphere is so intense (especially after a bad result), even the nicest and most innocent of comments often lead to argument and dissension.

Furthermore, it usually pumps up the opponents when you and your partner discuss your bad results. Especially in a long team match, I know that I get an extra boost when my opponents are having trouble. When I get a good result against Hamman-Wolff and they just shrug it off and go on to the next deal, I don't feel any momentum. However, when Frick and Frack are going at each other, stewing in the unpleasantness of their minus 800, I feel an extra burst of energy kick in, and I'm ready to slaughter them on the next board as well. It's just the natural competitive nature of a bridge player. So, don't give *your* opponents that same satisfaction!

Listen here pard; take a lesson from the world's best pairs, and keep your mouth shut.

Zig-zagging

This recently happened to two of my teammates.

Mike held

A x K Q x A 9 8 x K x x x,

and with both vulnerable at IMPS he heard one diamond on his right. He overcalled one notrump and his partner, Paul, bid two diamonds, a transfer to hearts. Mike bid two hearts and Paul jumped to three notrump. Naturally, Mike converted this to four hearts, and this caused Paul some consternation. After long thought Paul passed, and tabled,

K Q x x J x x 10 x A x x x.

The 3-3 fit didn't fair too well, down two, cold for three notrump. What happened?

The pair had recently decided to play two-way Stayman after one-notrump overcalls. Paul had remembered, but Mike hadn't. Paul thought of going back to four notrump, but hoped instead that Mike somehow had a five-card heart suit.

Our team lost 12 IMPS on the board, but since we went on to win the match, we were able to all laugh about the 3-3 fit. Paul reminded Mike that they had recently agreed to change to forcing Stayman (only after one-notrump overcalls). Mike said that he thinks it's a silly method--that's why he had trouble remembering.

Anyway, several months later, Paul held

K Q x Q x x x A x K Q x x,

and heard one-club on his right. He overcalled one notrump and Mike bid two diamonds. Already Paul was worried. Had Mike remembered correctly this time? Paul responded two hearts to Stayman and Mike jumped to three notrump. A wave of doubt flashed through Paul's head. Did Mike remember this time? Didn't Mike say he hates 2-Way Stayman. Paul decided Mike was transferring to hearts, so Paul bid four hearts. This time Mike looked perplexed, but eventually passed. The 4-2 fit did not succeed.

This brings to mind a famous saying. "Anyone fool can make a mistake, ... but it's foolhardy to make the same mistake twice." Any partnership is going to have misunderstandings. There's no way to avoid them. The key is to avoid a repeat of a mix-up. I told Mike and Paul, "I forgive you for the first one, but for God's sake, get it straightened out so that you are on the same page next time."

Don't zig-zag. If you are on a different wavelength from your partner, that's okay. But after the session get it ironed out. Agree to do it one way or the other. Play Two-Way Stayman (Paul's way) or Jacoby transfers (Mike's way). You've got to get on the same page.

<u>Misunderstandings</u>

You're sailing along having a good session and all of a sudden a misunderstanding occurs. The opponents overcall hearts in front of you, and raise them on your left. In a competitive auction, your partner bids three hearts which you think shows a stopper. You try three notrump and everyone passes. You have Qx of hearts and dummy has two small.

First of all, when dummy hits, you must speak no evil, and see no evil. Act as calm as can be. If you start yelling or complaining or looking disgusted the opponents will run the suit in no time. As it turns out, RHO has AK9xx of hearts and lefty has led a low heart from J10xx. Third hand decides that you have ♥Q10x so he wins the heart lead and then underleads, hoping you'll stick in the ten. Instead your queen wins and you make your contract.

Lesson 1: Don't ever show emotion when the dummy hits. Always act confident.

Now, let's assume you have the same hand and the same auction. You still smile when the dummy hits, but the opponents are not amused--they quickly run five heart tricks for down one and you get a bottom. Should you say anything nasty to your partner? Should you rant and rave? Should you try to clear up the misunderstanding? The answers: No, No, and Later.

Lesson 2: Do not discuss bridge during the session.

Why wait until later? Maybe you need to clear this up in case it comes up again in the same session. Forget it. It's *extremely* unlikely to come up again in that session or that day or that week or month. It's much more likely that your discussion will upset the spirit of the partnership.

Usually, after a bad result from a misunderstanding both players are fuming inside. They each think their interpretation was correct. In the example above, dummy is *sure* his three-heart bid asked for a stopper, and you are *sure* that it showed one. In the heat of battle, neither you nor your partner will want to admit that they were wrong.

The end of the day is the time to clear these things up. If you simply must, you can ask some experts their opinion, and then form your partnership agreement accordingly. I don't recommend this tactic. No one likes to hear "I asked Paul Soloway, and he says that my interpretation was correct, and yours was wrong!" Try to logically work out an agreement with your partner, add it to your notes (if you have them) and go on from there.

What if something comes up during the session and you're afraid that you'll forget to bring it up later? Just make a note on your scorecard. After a typical session I usually have three or four little notes jotted down. Either I write the board numbers, or something like "1♦ - 1♥ - 1♠ - 4♣ -- is double for club lead?" It doesn't have to be a misunderstanding that causes you to make notes. If you're like me, lots of "what if's" will pop into your head during an auction. No problem

occurs on the actual deal, but you'd like to ask your partner what such-and-such would have meant.

I repeat. Do not resolve it at the table or during the session. Talk to your partner about anything other than bridge. Talk about romance, sports, sex, politics (well, maybe not politics), or gossip (a momentous topic in the bridge world). You'll have a much better time and you'll keep the partnership in the proper spirit.

Bidding Rules

So, you've agreed on your basic conventions. You have your card filled out, and you know that you play 2/1 Game Force, 2-Way Stayman, Five-card majors with limit raises, Negative Doubles through three spades, D.O.N.T. over their notrump, Roman Keycard Blackwood (0-3, 1-4 -- you did discuss that, right?), and 4th best leads. Maybe a few other gadgets like new-minor forcing, weak jumps in competition, etc.

A year or two goes by and you want to put in some fancier stuff. You decide to add some bids that ask for shortness. One of you has heard of Mathe asking bids. They occur after 1♥ - 3♥, a limit raise. (Or after any substitute for a limit raise, such as 1♦ - 3♣ showing a limit raise). The next step asks for shortness. So, with

x x x A K x x x x A K Q x

you open one heart and partner limit raises to three hearts. You ask with three spades and partner shows spade shortness. This delights you to no end, and you Blackwood into the cold six hearts opposite

x Q J x x K x x x A x x x.

All well and good, but how did your partner show the spade shortness? You asked with three spades, and if he had no shortness he would have "signed-off" in four hearts. To show shortness in clubs, diamonds, or spades he had three bids available: three notrump, four clubs, and four diamonds. When you agreed to play Mathe asking bids did you remember to discuss how you would actually show the shortness? This is an inherent flaw with adding conventions. (See the section called "Conventions"). Unless you discuss them thoroughly, there is room for misunderstanding.

So, what should it be? Clearly four hearts should show no shortness. Should three notrump (first available step) show shortness in the lowest suit, clubs? And then the next step, four clubs shows shortness in diamonds, and then four diamonds is shortness in the highest suit, spades? Or, you could play that four clubs and four diamonds show natural shortness in that suit, and that three notrump is used as a "replacement" to show short spades. We say "replacement" because you don't want to bid four spades (getting past four hearts) to show spade shortness. So which will it be, "Up-the-line," or "Natural with replacement?"

Pick one. There are theoretical implications as to which is better, but that's beyond the scope of this discussion.

A few months go by, and you decide to add a wrinkle to your weak-two bids. You play that after partner opens a weak-two, that three clubs asks for shortness (a somewhat popular method). Remember, you must also decide *how to answer the ask*! Say it goes 2♥ - 3♣. Clearly, three hearts should say "no shortness." What about three diamonds, three spades, and three notrump. Is it "Up-the line" or "Natural with replacement?" If it's "up-the line" then three diamonds is club shortness (cheapest suit), three spades is diamond shortness, and three notrump is spade shortness. If "natural with replacement," then three diamonds and three spades show natural shortness in that suit, and three notrump is replacement to show club shortness.

Again, there are theoretical reasons to play it one way or the other. But there is a huge reason to decide how *you* should play it. You should play it the same way as you chose to use over Mathe asking bids. Don't play it one way over Mathe, and the other over weak-two's because you think there is a good reason. It's too much memory strain.

Let me elaborate a bit on this important point. Even if you don't care about the conventions I'm using for my examples, the overriding principle will be of relevance.

There are a few things (very few) that I think are worthy of exceptions. Here's one example. You and your regular partner have agreements as to what you should do when the opponents jump overcall with an unusual two notrump. Most people play some variation of what is called "Unusual over Unusual." You open one heart and they bid two notrump for the minors. Now, three spades is natural and nonforcing, and three hearts is a heart raise, but with a minimum. "Cue-bids" of three clubs and three diamonds are used to show the forcing spade hand, and a good raise of hearts. As to which one is which, that's up to you. Some people

play "Low-to Low/High to High" (3♣=hearts, 3♦=spades) while others play that the first step is always for showing the "other" suit (3♣=spades, 3♦=hearts).

Again, without going into the science, there are theoretical reasons why you should play it one way as opposed to the other. The best way is to use the first step to show the forcing hand in the "other" suit, and the second step to show a good raise. So, let's assume you have that agreement. You open one spade and they bid two notrump for the minors. Now, three clubs shows a forcing heart hand (first step for "other" suit), and three diamonds shows a good (limit) raise in spades.

So what's this about exceptions? Say, you open one diamond and they bid two notrump to show the two lowest unbid suits (clubs and hearts). Using our partnership rules, a bid of 3♣ (step 1) would show a forcing hand in spades (the "other" suit). A bid of 3♥ (step 2) would show a good (limit) raise in diamonds. But that doesn't make sense. Our 3♥ bid has taken us past 3♦. It doesn't seem right to have a limit raise get us past our "limit." For that reason, my partner and I invert our normal meanings when it goes 1♦ - 2NT. We hate to have exceptions, but this is one we're willing to make.

It's one of the only ones. We used to have lots of other such exceptions and "flip-flops." We used to invert meanings on lots of auctions. We'd use an artificial response in notrump to show a certain feature so that they couldn't double for the lead. We'd invert our responses to Blackwood on certain auctions in order to stay below five of the trump suit. But eventually we gave it all up.

Meckstroth and Rodwell, the world's best pair, play the world's most complex bidding system. They can do it. They've played together for 20 years in thousands of events. They play together for a living, study their notes constantly, and have great memories. (Even so, they have their share of mix-ups). Rodwell is very scientific, and a great bidding theoretician. He wants all of their partnership agreements to be thought out to perfection. Even if it causes a memory problem, he wants to be playing methods that are theoretically best.

Accordingly, you'll find lots of "exceptions" in their system notes. I hate exceptions. Here's an example. When they start with a big club, and opener shows his suit, his third round of bidding is used to convey an artificial message. Usually, his first step corresponds to the lowest suit, but if clubs and diamonds are in the picture, the steps are inverted. Step one is used to show diamonds, and step two to show clubs. Eric explained the reasoning for this inversion to me, and

I sort of saw the logic. However, I'm a simple soul, and I'd rather stick to step one for clubs, step two for diamonds, etc.

If you and your partner are real scientists with great memories, then by all means load yourself up with rules, and exceptions to the rules. But, for 99% of you out there, I'd say "Forget the exceptions." David and I have had plenty of success with our modest set of rules. Every now and then we have a theoretical inadequacy in our auctions, but we don't mind paying the price. We hardly ever have misunderstandings, and it's only one time in 100 that the deficiency hurts us anyway. We don't have to study pages and pages of exceptions, and we will live longer and more prosperous lives.

Cherish Your Partner

I can't say it enough, so I'll say it again. You've got to keep your partner happy, especially during the session. Whatever it takes, remember to keep a smile on your face, and a pleasant attitude. Do not accuse, yell at, frown at, complain to, criticize, castigate, disparage, abuse, ridicule, sneer at, or mock your partner. Try to be comforting, supportive, compassionate, encouraging, reassuring, sympathetic and understanding.

This might sound simple, but it's not. It's so easy to get hot under the collar, especially when things go wrong. You're dying for a spade switch and you've obviously signalled for one. The caddy, the kibitzer and Stevie Wonder would know to shift to a spade, but that imbecile called partner shifts to a heart, minus 790. You're ready to slam your fist through the table (or partner's face) or burst a blood vessel. It's not easy to maintain your composure.

But, this is the time that you must step up to the plate and show your stuff. Keep a calm face, don't say a word. Partner might apologize (that's permitted), or he might wonder what was wrong with *your* signal! He might think it's *your* fault. But, he too should keep a calm demeanor. Maybe you can apologize, even though you "know" it's not your fault. After the session you can figure out what went wrong, preferably in private. Don't argue with your partner in front of other people.

And, especially, don't talk negatively about your partner behind his back. Again, this is easier said than done. You've had a 57% game, but you just know that it would have been 60% if partner had made that six-spade contract. A friend asks you how you did. Your answer should be "We had a good game," or "decent, could have been better." Not, "Would have had 60% if that dope hadn't gone down in a cold slam." Even if you do survive this hurdle, you have to be sure not to give the six-spade hand as a play problem to your friends.

Just a note here about teammates. The words" behind their back" are key. Don't malign them. Just like you should be a good partner, you should be a good teammate. Hardly any of us are: "Would have won with any other pair on the planet at the other table, but not those two morons." "Every time our opponents bid and made a game we lost 10 IMPS." Anyway, you know what I'm talking about. Try not to be a jerk.

Be a good teammate and a good partner--the one you'll be helping the most is yourself!