

Passion



Play

Sure it's nice being a giant in the world of psychology, but sometimes Marty Seligman "just can't wait to get to the bridge screen." BY BARBRA SHOTEL

Back when Martin E. P. Seligman Gr'67 was eight years old, his mother, an avid bridge player, would sometimes keep him home from school to be a fourth in her games.

Missing those classes doesn't seem to have done him any harm. Seligman, currently the Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology and director of the Positive Psychology Center ["Degrees of Happiness," May/June 2010], still managed to grow up to earn worldwide renown for his research on learned helplessness and positive psychology, become a best-selling author with 200 scholarly articles and a score of books to his credit (*Flourish*, his next, will be out in April), serve as president of the American Psychological Association, and accumulate numerous other professional honors.

But that early exposure *did* spark a lasting passion for what he calls "the world's finest game." For Seligman, the appeal of bridge "is simple: it is great entertainment."

While its appeal may be simple, the game itself is anything but. For the uninitiated, bridge is played with a standard 52-card deck by two pairs of partners (North/South, East/West). Each player gets 13 cards and players bid according to the value and number of spades, hearts (major suits), clubs, and diamonds (minor suits) they have in their hand. Each pair

attempts to win "tricks" (four cards, one from each player) for their side by laying down either the highest card of the suit being played or the highest trump card. (Trump is the suit of the winning contract and is used to "trump" a trick by a player who cannot follow suit because he or she is out of that suit—unless, of course, it is a No Trump contract where no suit has control.)

The resulting possible permutations are practically limitless, devotees say, touting bridge's endless variety and mental challenge. The writer W. Somerset Maugham called it the "the most entertaining and intelligent card game the wit of man has so far devised," while investment guru Warren Buffett (who sometimes plays with fellow billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates) has been quoted as saying he "wouldn't mind being in jail if I had three cellmates who were decent players and who were willing to keep the game going 24 hours a day."

Young Marty was a natural. By the time he was 13, he had surpassed his mother—she was "not a good player, but it was a family sport," he says. As an undergraduate at Princeton in the early 1960s, he even flirted with the idea of turning pro, when the captain of Penn's bridge team suggested that he and Seligman, then the captain of Princeton's team, become partners. "I really thought about it, but declined," he recalls.

As with Gates and Buffett in their respective fields, it's probably just as well that Seligman ultimately opted for a career in psychology—though his standing in the bridge world is superior to that of either the Microsoft founder or the Sage of Omaha. However, he quickly notes, they are "not doing it for achievement," adding as well that he—Seligman—will "never be a world-class player," and that none of them will ever "be in the category of bridge as we are in our respective professions."

Of course, if you're them, that still leaves a lot of room to be pretty darned good at bridge.

"In psychology, the cards fly off my hand, whereas in bridge, it is hard," Seligman says modestly.

Though he calls himself a "low expert," Seligman is an American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) Diamond Life Master—having earned 5,000 Master Points as of 2009, which put him in the top two percent of league players. (Today, he's closer to 6,000 points.) He also holds a World championship online team title, and is the co-owner of a record-setting 88.61 percent game.

It was in 1999 that Seligman, along with the late Paul Soloway ("one of the great players of all time," Seligman says, with whom he partnered for 15 years), Eric Rodwell (also considered one of the world's best players), and three

other Americans won the Internet World Bridge Championship Team title. The tournament was sponsored by the website *OKbridge*, with 172 teams from 33 countries competing in online matches until the finals, which were held in person in Boston. Seligman and company's win over the Russian team was "terrifically exciting," he says, calling the title "the closest I've ever come to stardom."

He's a bit more ambivalent about his other main claim to bridge fame: on Christmas Day 2009 Seligman and his partner Meyer Kotkin played in a 37-pair, 12-board event on another popular site, *Bridge Base Online (BBO)*, and achieved what *New York Times* bridge columnist Phillip Adler, writing it up in the April 23, 2010, issue, described as "the highest-ever score on the Internet—unless you know differently."

Kotkin, a professional bridge teacher and mathematician with a PhD from the University of Michigan, who lives in South Jersey, describes that record-breaking game as "a surreal session." He explains the meaning of an 88.61 percent game this way: "The percentage per board represents how many of the other players sitting in your direction you beat. Of the 12 boards we played, the lowest score was 71.4 percent."

Kotkin attributes their success to a combination of "luck, excellence, and the generosity of our opponents." That they ended up as partners was unplanned. "We both just arrived on the site at the same time, around 5 p.m., and agreed to play together," he says. "The stars were aligned."

Seligman, on the other hand, calls the high percentage "a fluke," comparing it to golf: "It's like making three holes-in-one in one game." Before that game, he says, his personal best was "82 percent, and *that* was 30 years ago."

As is probably clear by now, bridge players no longer have to scramble to organize a game around the kitchen table as Seligman's mother did. The Internet has embraced the game and players have reciprocated. Certainly, Seligman has.

He plays bridge online three to four hours per day, he says, "often sporadically, and sometimes interspersed with work" in his home office or at Penn. Don't

call his devotion an addiction, though. "If I stopped working and stopped seeing my family to play bridge, it would be an addiction." Rather, "bridge is entertainment, and a major part of my life. A place I go, to be comfortable and warm, especially after a hard day," he says. "I just can't wait to get to the bridge screen and start playing."

On several occasions this past summer, Seligman allowed me (a novice bridge player) to observe as he played online. Seligman lives in the Philadelphia suburb of Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, and his home office is carved out of a corner of his rather large living room, allowing for dogs, children, and his wife to pop in and out.

(Unlike the young Marty, Seligman's own children have not taken to bridge but are "picking up chess," he says. After some gamesmanship soul-searching, he has concluded that his preference "has something to do with partnership, how well the pair is doing, and the game's complexity. There are many more bridge combinations than chess combinations. Mathematically, bridge is vastly more complicated.")

At his desk, Seligman has arranged four large monitors two by two. I watch from a spot just behind his right shoulder. One screen displays the colorful bridge website, where the names of Seligman, his partner, and their opponents appear around a virtual table. Seligman's partners vary, and include Chris Compton from Texas; Gunnar Hallberg, a Swede who resides in Bristol, UK; and Murray Melton from Las Vegas. He uses his real name online, but many players go by a moniker—humorous or otherwise—to conceal their identity. Both Warren Buffet and Bill Gates adopt pseudonyms when they play on *BBO*, though they revealed them to the readers of a bridge magazine last year.

Other screens variously display Seligman's email inbox, an academic article he is reading, family photographs, the *Times* or another news source, or, at the moment, an image of a glorious hot-pink rose in full bloom, which Seligman thinks "might be a Chicago Peach," but he isn't sure, "as a half a dozen look like that in my rose garden."

(Gardening is another of Seligman's passions, though one he finds "far less rewarding" than bridge. "I don't get plea-

sure out of gardening. It's just something I do because I like the result—the flowers," he says. "Bridge is much, much more serious. I don't know anything about gardening, but I know something about bridge.")

While multi-tasking and playing Speedball (a set of hands timed to allow about 4.5 minutes per hand), Seligman provides a running commentary about his hand, his strategy in bidding and playing once the contract is bid, and why he thinks his partner does what he does. It is impressive, and I try to absorb his words of bridge wisdom.

Every once in a while, Seligman interrupts himself and says: "Okay, now I have to concentrate," or "I have to go into the tank," or "We're back in the hunt." Seligman "can usually play a hand without thinking," but "when something new happens, about one out of three or four hands, I have to go back and review all the bidding and review all the cards that were played up to that point before I can make a decision," he says. "When you go into the tank, that's a lot of work; but the better the player, the less frequently they have to go there." On the other hand, "being in the hunt means the chance for possible winners."

One day when I'm with Seligman he's playing online with Chris Compton as his partner; he explains that they

will also be partners in the Open Pair partner event in the upcoming 2010 World Bridge Series Championship in Philadelphia. "Chris is handicapped by playing with me," he says, when I ask him to assess their chances. "If he were playing with one of his peers, he could be in the top nine or 10 pairs."

Seligman and other lesser lights will sometimes sponsor (pay for) another, better player (Compton is a World Grand Master and ACBL Grand Life Master with over 20,000 master points) to partner with them in tournament play—which is allowed because no prize money is awarded in bridge. Asked about his preparation for the match, Seligman repeats some advice from Compton: "Success at bridge is only five percent the system you play; 95 percent is actually knowing the systems you play."

In bridge, there are systems and conventions ad infinitum, created by players for describing the length (of each suit) and strength (number of points) of



Seligman with Penn students Jimmy Wang (right) and Kendrick Chow, who were on the Penn bridge team that won the Summer Grand Nationals in 2010.

a hand. The more systems and conventions partners use, the harder it is to remember them, which is what Compton was warning Seligman about.

Conventions are often named for their creators, and I ask Seligman if he has ever discovered one or if he would like to see his name attached to one. “I never thought of a convention that was worthy of being a *Seligman*,” he says. “I’m not nearly good enough. That’s for the high experts.”

Seligman does make a valuable discovery that day, however, as Compton reveals that he has been playing from the backseat of a car, being driven to New Orleans for a tournament by his wife. This technological possibility has never occurred to Seligman before, and he’s suddenly like a kid in a candy store at the prospect. “I will not take short plane rides to an out-of-town lecture or meeting anymore. I will sit in the back of a chauffeur-driven car and play bridge online,” he says. “This will change my life.”

Over his “50, almost 60 years” of bridge playing, Seligman says he has seen “a tremendous change” in the game, trending toward “a science of bridge.” It has become a game of “pinpoint accuracy,” he says. “All the action is in bidding

and getting to the right contract.” Old-time bridge players, he says, wouldn’t stand a chance against today’s players.

One evening I sit down for pizza and pasta with Seligman and two young players—Jimmy Wang Gr’14 and Kendrick Chow EAS’13, of the University’s bridge team—before the four of us participate in a game at the Bridge Club of Center City. Seligman had suggested that we meet prior to the evening game so that he and Wang, who will play as partners, can agree on their bidding methods.

Along with teammates Zhiyi Huang Gr’14 and Naijia Guo Gr’14, Wang and Chow represented Penn in the 2010 Summer Grand Nationals in New Orleans, defeating Yale to win the collegiate title. Wang, 20, graduated high school in Beijing at age 15 (“unusual,” he says), and is now a student in Penn’s doctoral program in applied mathematics and computational science. He’s been playing bridge for about five years. Chow, 18, is from San Francisco, started playing in high school, and is a Penn sophomore studying chemical engineering. He is to be my partner—and, therefore, clearly, a good sport.

A number of people at the club recognize Seligman from his accomplishments in psychology, bridge, or both

fields, and seem impressed that he is there. There are some very good players at the club, but Wang and Seligman come in first of six North/South pairs, garnering 1.33 Master Points (MPs). Chow and I came in fourth of six East/West pairs (no MPs for us). Afterward Seligman and Wang rehash their hands and do so with total recall.

Seligman describes himself as “a natural pessimist and a depressive, but a learned optimist,” applying the psychological techniques he has developed to his own life. It’s perhaps not surprising that he has also brought those techniques to bear on bridge—specifically, in a contest pitting science against intuition in determining the outcome of a tournament. The contest—part prank but also “a serious endeavor,” he says—was dubbed *The Hog versus the Scientist*.

The Scientist was Seligman and his friend of 40 years and fellow bridge player, Barry Schwartz Gr’71. The Hog was Ron Anderson, “one of the great bridge players,” Seligman says, who “predicted his winners like you do in betting horses. Essentially, he handicapped them based on his knowledge of their game, while we used numbers.”

(For the record, Anderson named himself “the Hog,” Schwartz notes.)

In advance of a 1987 world match, Seligman and Schwartz used Seligman’s Attributional Style Questionnaire—the “classic test for determining one’s level of optimism and pessimism,” he says—to predict who the winners and losers would be. They wrote to all the participating bridge players and asked them to fill out the questionnaire in advance and return it to them. They then combined the players’ talent and their level of optimism to make their choices, beating the Hog’s predictions “probably 13 out of 16 matches,” Seligman recalls proudly.

Schwartz, now professor of social theory and social action at Swarthmore College, met Seligman when Schwartz was a graduate student in psychology at Penn. As a bridge player, he says, “Marty is after the bold stroke and is not interested in the run-of-the-mill play. He wants to do something surprising and brilliant.” They were once regular partners, but don’t play as much now. While Schwartz “can hold his own when at the bridge table with Seligman,” he says, “Marty has played more seriously and has gotten better, and I’ve gotten worse.”

Over the years, Seligman has observed the emotions of other bridge players and how positive or negative thoughts can affect one’s game. “In general, my academic research shows that men are very stony, don’t react much, and are less reactive to depression and anxiety,” he says. This seems to hold true even among championship bridge players. The “great men bridge players do not get upset, but the great women players do,” he says. As for himself, “I am pretty stony” when playing bridge, but “reactive as well” and “not as good as the really good players” because of that.

Having partners who are overly negative or critical can also affect a player, says Seligman, who has at times been on the receiving end of such “atrocious” behavior. “Soloway used to yell and scream at me all the time. So, I would play only about 90 percent of my game. I’d be covering my ass not wanting to get yelled and screamed at,” he recalls. “Rodwell would never raise his voice, but when you did something wrong, he’d say: ‘Oh, well, you made it.’” But what that really meant,

Seligman continues, was, “You didn’t get the overtrick, you jackass.”

The ideal partner brings out the best in you. Murray Melton, with whom Seligman shared the number one and two positions on OKbridge for two or three years, used to yell and scream at him, Seligman says—but his behavior changed when he faced a life-threatening medical condition. “Following his cancer treatments, he’s become so much nicer, and I really do a lot better because he doesn’t yell at me anymore.”

As for his own abilities in nurturing fellow players, Seligman says, “I am a good teacher of psychology, but I don’t think I am very good at teaching the basics of bridge.” Perhaps trying to be supportive of my future bridge endeavors, he adds, “I’d rather teach bridge to someone at your level,” implying that I was *not* a rank beginner. (It made me feel better, anyway.)

It’s Saturday morning, October 9, 2010, the first qualifying round of the Open-Pairs event at the World Bridge Series, where Seligman and Chris Compton are competing. Hundreds of world-class players and wannabe world-class players sit around tables in a ballroom at the Philadelphia Convention Center—240 pairs to be exact, or a total of 480 players in this one event.

Seligman and Compton are seated at Table A1, which is tucked away in a corner at the far end of the room. I sit just behind Seligman’s right shoulder—my same position as when I sat watching him play online. The players use cards from a bidding box to bid their hand and then play the hand. The table and pairs of players are divided, separated by a diagonal wooden partition with a doggie-door-like opening in the middle that allows the players to slide a rectangular box through to the other side with their bids. The purpose is to prevent cheating. Seligman has told me of some of the most notorious bridge-tournament cheating scandals, so I understand the necessity of the odd contraption.

In one hand, Seligman and Compton win the bidding. Compton, the declarer, will play the hand and Seligman will be the “dummy.” They open the door before Seligman lays out his hand, lining up his cards in rows by suit from highest to lowest with the trump suit on his right, fol-

lowed by the other suits. Compton will verbally indicate to Seligman which card to play from the dummy for each trick.

Just as Seligman completes laying down the cards, with no warning to me, he nonchalantly inquires of Compton and their opponents if it would be within the tournament rules for me to play the dummy’s cards while he goes to the restroom. It’s fine, they all agree, and Seligman leaves. I take his seat, feeling butterflies in my stomach.

OK, I may be the dummy, but still, a not-quite-rank beginner, I am playing in the World Bridge Series. With a touch of smugness, I silently repeat to myself, “I’m playing in the World! I’m playing in the World!” I play the cards as Compton calls for them and do so without messing up, but just as Compton makes their contract, reality returns, as does Seligman with a napkin full of rich, gooey donuts. He nods to me, takes his place, and gets ready to bid the next hand.

Seligman and Compton would go on to qualify for the semi-finals of the Open Pair event, ranking 63rd out of 240 pairs with a 52.68 percent game. In the semi-finals, they ranked 126th of 172 pairs with a 48.29 percent game—not good enough to make it to the finals. However, they then entered a Regional Open Pair event, where they came in second with “about a 62 percent game,” recalls Seligman, earning “maybe 10 MPs.”

Though to me he seemed relaxed when playing in both the qualifying round and semi-finals, Seligman claims he was more nervous than he expected. On the positive side, he got to meet Gunnar Hallberg, one of his partners on BBO, face-to-face for the first time. He said what a “genial fellow” he was, and—generous in his recognition of other players’ abilities and achievements—noted that Hallberg had won the senior teams event just a few days before.

Still, not making it to the finals was a bit of a disappointment, he admitted. “We were outgunned,” he said, when I asked him to evaluate his and Compton’s performance. “I learned that I am not good enough to win at that level. The competition was just better than ever before ... just super.” ♦

Barbra Shotel CW’64 is a lawyer and freelance writer. Having played bridge for two years, she hopes to increase her accumulated 12 Master Points this year to 20 to earn the ACBL’s rank of Club Master.