



Heather Dhondy

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Heather (born 1966) is a professional bridge player, teacher and writer. Married to bridge player Jeremy and living in Dorset, she retired in 2010 from her job as an accountant. Heather has a music degree from York University. A regular member of the successful England women's team and she holds the record of 13 Lady Milne wins. Her regular partner in the women's game is Nevena Senior.

Wins	Runner-ups
Women's World Olympiad 2008, 2012 World Mixed Teams 1996 European Women's Championship 1997, 1999, 2001, 2012, 2016 European Open Mixed Teams 2007 Lady Milne Trophy 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006 Brighton Pairs Harold Poster Cup 2001 Hubert Phillips Bowl 1997	Venice Cup 2013 European Open Women's Teams 2014 European Transnational Women's Teams 2007 Bronze Medal Venice Cup 2015, 2019 Women's World Olympiad 2004 European Women's Championships 2002, 2006

You learned as a teenager from your parents. How old were you?

About eight or nine, on a caravan holiday when it rained every day. Of course I went to university thinking I knew the whole thing. I learnt very quickly, I didn't know anything at all.

You were at York University, is that right? How much of your time was spent on bridge?

Any time we got to a bar and there were bridge players there we would all abandon our own social groups and play. Then we would play in a room or at the local club more nights than not.

And what did you do in those early years to improve your game?

Play with good players.

Did you read much?

No. I might have read about two bridge books

Did you have a mentor or anyone who was particularly influential?

David Parry in the early years after university. He was much, much better than me and taught me an awful lot. Got me out of some bad habits, and into disciplined, structured bridge. He was responsible for a big improvement from the wild days of university bridge, mainly bidding.

Suit combinations, stuff like that, how have you gone about tackling that kind of thing?

Asking, being told when I've got one wrong. In the junior squad we had sheets and sheets of suit combinations and the squad leader would go through them, so I picked up a lot of useful stuff. People tell me that left-handed people are very spatially aware and see the shapes quite naturally. I think that probably applies to me, the way my brain works.

What would you say most attracted you about the game of bridge?

In the early years I had a crush on one of the boys at university, but there was a fundamental challenge in it and the fun nature of the game and a bunch of people I wanted to hang around with anyway.

And do you still feel like that about the game now?

I think you go through that phase, when you can't get enough of it. Now I would rather be doing almost anything else. I mean, I enjoy the big competitions and World Championships and Europeans but I'd much rather be walking, or playing tennis or playing my piano than playing bridge.

What would you say you least like about the game?

The things that really upset me are being wronged, people cheating against me. I don't mind them making mistakes, I make mistakes myself, but that doesn't get to me as much as people who feel that it's okay to just basically cheat.

What would you say are the key qualities of a good player?

Temperament, obviously technique, judgment, concentration, stamina... You've got to be able to put bad situations behind you, you can't afford to let a bad start turn into a catastrophe. You've got to see the long game, keep a sense of perspective. I don't know if that's all temperament.

What is the right temperament for bridge?

You've got to be calm, you don't play at your best if you get too nervous or upset or angry. You've got to try and remain level, you're more likely to play your best and get the best out of your partners.

And would you say, then, your temperament is quite suited to it?

I was a bit hot-headed when I was younger, but I've calmed down. I think a lot of people do.

At what point do you think that change happens?

Things start happening that seem more important, getting married, my sister having children, you suddenly realise there are more important things in life. You get a different perspective.

What would you say separates a world class player from the really good players?

Judgment has a lot to do with it. People who are not quite there sometimes make strange decisions, I look at dummy and think, 'Blimey. I wouldn't have done that.' And sometimes technical inferiority in defense or declarer play. They could have ruffed a loser before they drew trumps. You see it immediately and they haven't and that's part of the difference. Some of the psychological stuff can be coached, people can go to the sports psychologist and get useful advice. But it probably comes down to the person, and the partnership is very important.

You used to play with Liz and she used to be a bit of a difficult partner. How did you cope?

I think we both found it quite difficult to start with. As we played it turned into a friendship and we became more supportive. I was very sorry when we stopped playing. I think neither of us had that much respect for each other at first. She used to call me the idiot child! We possibly both thought we were trading down a bit. I don't know. But as the partnership grew so did the respect.

When she called you the idiot child how did you feel at the time?

Silly old bag! [Laughs]

Did you retaliate at the time?

No, but we were all just sitting in somebody's room and she said 'idiot child bid 4Hx'. Jimmy and Jill [Arthur] came up to me afterwards and said 'we can't believe she said that'.

Do you think you have to be friends with your partner in a serious partnership?

I think I do. I'm not sure whether everybody does. I think it definitely helps and, after all, you are trying to have fun. Playing with somebody you don't like is going to be pretty hard going.

For you, then, what makes a good bridge partner? And how important is the system?

Somebody who is a similar standard and has a similar sort of philosophy, how you work on your system, and styles. Being good friends, I think, mutual respect. The system in itself isn't necessarily important, as long as you are both comfortable with the amount of artificiality, or

how aggressively you preempt. If you think your partner's always doing bonkers things, then it can be a bit harder.

And do you think you can agree to disagree, or do you think that just doesn't work?

The ideal is that it doesn't matter which side of the table you are on: you would be making the same bid. You have complete understanding about what sort of hand your partner might have. That would be the ideal, but it rarely happens. Nevena [Senior] often makes slightly more aggressive bids than I do.

How important do you think it is that you've got access to the sports psychologist?

I took from it what I thought was useful. I would encourage anyone else to see her because she said things I still use. If I was feeling nervous she would tell us to put both feet on the floor, rest our arms, feel the weight of our limbs, breathe deeply and then think of a bright light in your head. That's supposed to switch on your brain while your body is in a state of calm. So I do that if something horrendous happens on the first board and I feel my heart beating. Nutrition, not eating anything heavy before you play. Eating carbohydrates after the day's play is over. Fruit and protein during the day. Taking some exercise.

What would you say you would consider your strongest points as a player?

Technically I suppose. I am a good team member, I think, I've got a lot of experience, I've been there, a million times. Advice for anyone new in the team from an old hand.

Can you give an example of what sort of advice would you give to somebody new to the team?

Only the sort of things we've been talking about. Put bad boards behind you, mentally screw up your scorecard and start again, don't be rushed when you've just had a bad board. Take a few deep breaths or go and get a glass of water. The last four boards, that's where the English pick up all their IMPs because other people take their eye off the ball. Keep your concentration going until the end.

What are the qualities then of a good team player?

Encouraging people, not putting them down. I've made a big thing with Fiona [Brown] and Susan [Stockdale] of being three equal pairs, we're all going to play two sets a day, tough teams as well as easy. We've all got confidence in everyone. I think they like that, the full responsibility on their shoulders.

And what about team spirit, what is it and how important is it?

Well, I like it. I like to party and have a few drinks and have a laugh with the team afterwards. I think it's helpful, kind of nice. I think it helps us all feel good about each other and enjoy each other's company. You have a lot more sympathy, I think, well, you know, it could have been me.

I asked about strengths. Are any parts of your game not so good that you'd like to improve?

I'm sure. Sometimes I get a fixation about a board, and when evidence comes up that contradicts my original thought I don't change tack when I ought to. Sometimes I could be more open to new ideas about system. I don't want to play a massively complicated system where the thing on my mind is that I might forget it. Nevena feels similarly to me. She plays with so many different people, so we're both happy in that respect. I probably had more system agreements with Nicola [Smith] and Liz [McGowan].

You talked before about getting into the zone before a match. What is your pre-match routine?

Do I have one? Perhaps just as you're walking to the table noticing your feet feel heavy, trying to relax and switch on the light. We had this routine of putting on Nicola's lavender oil. I don't know if it is supposed to be lucky. It didn't do anything, it's just part of the preparation. On the bottle it says 'Avoid direct contact with skin.' I only read that after I'd been using it for a year.
[Laughs]



How did you decide to become a pro?

It was actually more about wanting to free up my time. I was getting a bit sick of working full time, using up all my holidays to play internationally, being too tired, and I decided I wanted to work for myself. I got ill in 2002 and spent a lot of time in hospital, and decided I was probably burning myself out. I moved down to three days a week at the office and started a bit of bridge teaching and found I really enjoyed it. Then I did eight days a month for quite a long time. Obviously, I work quite a few weekends now, but then I have time off during the week and play tennis, play the piano, go walking.

And do you miss the accountancy job?

I miss the people. I enjoyed the job but it was too restricting, even though they were as flexible as they possibly could be. It was becoming harder and harder to find eight days that I could fit in.

In general, what's your view of professional bridge?

I changed my view over the years as to what I thought it was about. I thought it was the punter going 'Wow', and you hogging contracts and doing fantastic things and achieving results they could only dream of, but in reality it doesn't work like that. Occasionally you do see professionals making complete idiots of themselves by jumping to 3NT, not bidding their hand properly. But I think being a professional is to impart confidence and you should be actually very sound. Don't preempt with jack to five because they'll never trust you, so when I put down dummy I always like it to be a good dummy. If it sounds like a horrible misfit, I'll try to play those myself. But if there's a nice contract for them to play in I'll happily put the dummy down.

The more hands partner can play the better because it gives us plenty of stuff to talk about afterwards. I want them to feel they've learned something.

What are some key qualities that you like in a client?

To have fun, particularly a bottle of champagne after the bridge. *[Both laugh]* I don't really care much about how good or bad they are, someone who wants to wine and dine me is a good client.

You don't really care what their level is? Even for the Lady Milne Trials?

No. Well yes, obviously I would rather play with somebody where I thought we had a chance of qualifying. But would I play with someone useless? Why not? It's a job.

Yes, that's fair enough. Is bridge to you now just a job?

Club bridge is. If somebody says 'Would you like a game?', the honest answer is, 'No, I wouldn't.' *[Both laugh]* It's much easier now I've gone to Dorset to say I'm just not up in London. Before, people would see me at the Young Chelsea or Robson's and get the diary out, 'Fancy a game?'

Is it quite unusual to work for quite a long time and then become a pro? That way round?

I wouldn't have thought so. It's easier to become a pro once you've made a name for yourself. If you're a youngster trying to make your way without credentials, people may not want to employ you.

Would you say it's very different being a female pro to being a male pro?

I suspect there are some male clients who might think 'A woman pro, will they be good enough?' On the other hand, I think some female clients prefer a woman.

Why would they prefer a woman?

I don't know. Maybe the social side, a girl to natter to. One client, we always drink champagne after we've played in the afternoon. Certainly for me, for her as well, part of the experience, going through the hands, talk about life, it's not quite the same as if it was a mixed party.

What do you see as being the advantages and disadvantages of your new lifestyle as a pro?

I've actually found that I've got unexpected strengths. I was terrible at creative writing, failed English literature, just scraped through English language, but I do write now. I was very shy and introverted as a child and people wouldn't have thought of me as standing up and talking in front of large groups, so I've enjoyed finding other sides to me. I've found I'm quite good at communicating and people find me interesting, I'm glad to say. I enjoy the adulation that I get from being a bridge pro, whereas when I was an accountant there was nothing special about me. Here I'm treated a bit like a hero, so that's quite nice. And flexibility: I can do as much or as little as I want. Even travel is less of a problem. I used to suffer from jetlag terribly, but I hop over to China and back all the time now. I went on Tuesday and came back on Thursday this week, flew straight into Edinburgh yesterday morning.

Can that affect your bridge, jetting around like that?

I guess, yes. I actually don't always sleep that well, so if I miss a night like I did on Thursday it won't affect me, but if I can't get over jetlag for four or five consecutive nights, it does begin to affect me.

Do you see any difference between being a bridge pro in the UK and in the US?

You earn a lot more in the US. At US Nationals you get paid \$1500 a day or so, more than double the UK. Every team there has a sponsor and you often find deals being made, 'If you play this set, I'll play this set', that sort of thing, so that sponsors only play each other and don't have to play against two pros which they feel more scared about.

What do you think about women's bridge?

It gives me an opportunity to play internationally, so why would I talk it down? I don't know why there is women's bridge, but there is, so I might as well take advantage of it.

What do you mean by that?

Well, women's bridge can be as good as men's, so why should you make a difference? In sport men are physically stronger and capable of throwing a ball further and running faster, but there's no reason why women shouldn't be as good bridge players as men. They don't have lower IQs so I don't see why we shouldn't just have one game. I can understand juniors and seniors but I don't really understand women's - but once you do I might as well play.

Even though, when you look at the statistics, men are generally better than women, you're saying that there is no particular reason why their brain is different, so why are men better?

Don't know. Partly to do with learning in boys' schools, but I don't know why boys especially. I don't know how many boys learned at school; learning younger might help. What do you think?

I think there's lots of social reasons, we're not brought up to be so aggressive, and you have to be fairly aggressive, single-minded, women socialise in different ways, all sorts of reasons...

I agree with all of that, it might even be social as much as innate that women have to be able to think about six things at once. Perhaps women have to have half an ear for your baby crying, or something. If you're concentrating on a hand you'll still hear your buzzer beeping to say the bread needs to come out of the oven, or something. Whereas the men probably won't.

You play women's and open and have men and women partners. Do you see a difference?

I can't think of any in particular, they're all different players. Is there anything that groups men and women? I don't think men get emotional other than frustrational anger, they rarely get upset, so there is that. I quite enjoy having heated discussions with Brian Callaghan, because neither of us will ever take it personally, but we have a bit of a shout sometimes and it's quite refreshing to find a partner that you can do that with. I can't do that with Nevena, I couldn't do it with Nicola and I can't with Jeremy [Dhondy] because you don't want to row with your husband. it will last days.

That brings me to another question. What is it like when you and Jeremy are playing together?

Stressful. I play with him as little as possible. We play ten boards in the Hubert Phillips once in a while, that's about it really. I just try and avoid it.

I read that it is a record 13 Lady Milnes won, out of how 15 for you. So what's your key to success?

Good teammates. We always used to pick good teams, in the days before punters. Everybody played in their partnerships, something close to the best team possible. Now it's nothing like that. [Laughs]

When did that change?

About 2007 when I gave up playing with Nicola and started playing with Nevena, Then Nevena played with clients so I played with clients and Sally [Brock] played with clients, then Nicola didn't want to play Lady Milne anymore and the bubble burst and everyone tried to make some money out of it.

Is that a shame for England?

Yes, I think it's a bit of a shame. I always used to like the Lady Milne. I liked the social side of it, but I don't think we'll ever get back to the England glory days. I think they've disappeared.

You don't think it could go back to that?

I would be prepared to be part of it if Nevena wanted to play, but she goes to Iceland with Sandra so she won't even be in the country during the Trial. But if, say, Nicola, Sally, Susan, Fiona were going to play at the Trials, and wanted me to find a proper player, someone like Gillian Fawcett, I would.

The World Championships in Bali, what was that like?

Well, we started off playing two matches each and felt it was going OK. We were slightly confused as to why we were struggling. Other times when we've struggled there's been one pair not playing very well, but we didn't really feel like that. We knew playing USA1 was going to be a challenge. The sponsor was quite weak, she played the first two and we got off to a good start and were about 60 up, but the third set turned out to be the key. The sponsor didn't play and we won another 29 and that put the final nail in the coffin for them. Then we just had to sit tight.

Having said that, that's what we wanted to do against USA2 and we lost 48 IMPs in the second-last set. Both rooms had a bad start, I think we lost four double figure swings in the first five boards. You like to think, with a lead like that that it can't go away, but of course it can. We were 84 up against China in 2008 and we won by one.

Can you remember what that first set felt like at the table? Did you realise?

First of all, it's hard to say. They played in 6Cx and 7Cx was good, so you think, will the girls be in it? I'll try to assess it. But you've got to trust teammates. Then we went down in a solid game, so that's ten out as well, you do start to think that your lead is not quite so big.

There was a hand where I let through 3NT. I might have let it through anyway if I just led fourth from K Q x x - declarer had A x x in dummy and J x in her hand - but I led the queen for attitude and Nevena encouraged and then I led small, but that ran round to the jack which let it through. At that point you could see the Americans really getting the bit between their teeth and immediately after that board, they went to the loo. I think they wanted to leave me stew.

What would go through your mind?

Just that you've got to be calm. Whatever happens at the end of this set, we'll still have something to be fighting for. So in the meantime don't try and get anything back, just try to steady the ship.

The 3NT I remember thinking it wasn't laydown. I was aware of feeling it was slipping away and the opponents getting stuff right. Like the 4Sx that was definitely going to be a swing out. Didn't know about the first board and didn't know about some of the trickier ones but some you just know are swings out.

Then you had the final set and it was neck and neck. You said, I think, that Susan didn't want to play?

Yes. We all had our preferred sets to sit out: Nevena and I the first set, the girls the second set and Nicola and Sally the last. So the girls would normally have played one and three but Nevena and I started off. We knew Nicola and Sally couldn't play two and three because Nicola would get too tired. So we had to change everything round because the girls didn't want to play the last set. In retrospect perhaps we should have just continued with everyone playing the sets they were comfortable with. We gained a bucket, lost a bucket and then had a relatively close one.

When you were going to score up, did you know?

Yes. As soon as you go out you see the score on the big screen, you can't avoid that.

Did you prefer the old days when you didn't used to know?

They're gone. When the technology is there, somebody will be looking on their iPad anyway. [Laughs] Yes, there was something exciting when it was genuine news to everybody when we scored up. It was certainly fun to do that, particularly last set of the Europeans when you were in contention.

What did it feel like to just miss it by so few?

At the time, the first thing I thought about was the K Q x x of diamonds. If I had my life again I would have played the D x K next and that would have done it. Probably everyone is thinking that, there were 100 boards we could have done something about. You feel a bit flat, although you keep saying silver's good. I don't know how many times I've heard 'Congratulations and hard luck.' People don't know what to say. But it is good. I would have settled for that, I would have settled for bronze.

When you say the first thing you think about is that hand, how then do you cope with that?

Well, it comes in a dream and I've actually played the king. [Both laugh]

Was it an actual error?

I don't know. Probably, because if declarer had something like 10 x x x they probably would have won the first one, so partner can't have jack doubleton. If partner's got J x x, I had the entry. I didn't think about it deeply enough perhaps.

But you are saying it still haunts you a bit now?

Yes. I can't remember a single other hand from the set. But it will disappear. Time heals wounds and stuff. It will go. I'll find something else to think about.

How many Venice Cups have you played?

I've missed one since 1995, so about seven. I did go to Brazil but we didn't qualify. We couldn't even get in the back door. That was after Pau. We didn't qualify in Europe.

What about the role of the non-playing captain? How important is an NPC and coach?

I don't think they're strictly speaking necessary. [Laughs] But it's nice to have two hangers-on, friends, etc. We used to have Martin Jones and either Christine Duckworth or Sandra Penfold.

Martin did the systems, the line-ups etcetera and Sandra or Christine was basically the team's friend, go to the supermarket for us, find out about this and that, get cups of coffee. It was nice to have. Jeremy and David were both doing serious bridge roles, but they had time to do things like that as well.

Is it awkward then the fact that Jeremy ...?

He's not going to do it now, he's retired, we'll have somebody else. In some ways it's nice and in some ways not so nice. Nice to have him there, but on the other hand I want to be with the team, breakfast and dinner and at the team sessions. I have to make sure I'm not ignoring Jeremy. If it was somebody else, I wouldn't feel that divided loyalty. When I've had poor starts and there's been mutterings in the team, I wouldn't want that sort of thing to become an issue. You don't want people to feel the only reason we're being played is because one of us is the NPC's wife.

Did you consider becoming a bridge pro earlier?

Yes, I did. Jeremy and I discussed it and thought it was too much of a financial risk. It was only when I could afford a reasonable drop in income without it affecting us too much. We didn't get married until Jeremy was 40 and didn't buy our place until the year after, so we didn't want a 25-year mortgage. With a 20-year mortgage the payments were quite high and we didn't really feel we could do it until the mortgage got paid off. I suppose now that I am, I would have liked to do it earlier because I would never go back to an office job now. I would just get too tired.

Going back to women's bridge and men's bridge, do you think bridge is a sexist game in any way?

Yes. I think the men feel they're better and want to hang on to that so they do belittle the women's game. I listen to the men on the selection committee, I'm talking about the pompous ones, going on about some of the women players and you just want to hit them. Just rubbishing their ability, and they're not so much better than the players they're talking about, but because it's a woman, the first thought is that they cannot possibly be playing as well as their male partner.

Have you ever played in Camrose?

I've played in various Trials, been reserve twice, but I've never played Camrose yet. Now, I play with Brian Callaghan, but the twice that I've been reserve was with Rob Cliffe.

How is it that you've not actually managed to get to play?

I don't know. Well, it's about time. Plenty of people who are a lot worse players than me have played.

What advice would you give to an aspiring player trying to get better?

Play with good players, talk to good players, pick up stuff wherever you can, go abroad and play in the European Pairs and Teams. You're not going to learn what foreign bridge is all about sitting here playing against Acol weak notrump, get out there and play against people who are not only playing Polish Club and stuff, but, short club, Precision, different leading methods, signalling methods. Get used to the fact that when they lead a two they haven't necessarily got an honour. You have to realise that people lead low from doubleton and it's completely normal for them and the English used to think they are all cheating. *[Both laugh]* They're not. But go abroad and work, work, work on your partnership, make sure your agreements are solid, you are confident in what your partner means by bids.

And for you, what are your final ambitions in bridge now?

The Venice Cup. Got to tick it off. I would like to play Camrose, and I would like to win the Gold Cup, I suppose. Those are my realistic ambitions.

Top Tip

In a competitive auction, try to involve partner in the final decision of whether to bid on or defend. Make descriptive calls that allow partner to judge, and then respect that judgment.
Avoid guessing yourself if possible.

Top Tip

Get some fresh air before playing bridge, and if possible some gentle exercise. Oxygen to the brain = more brain power.

This interview illustrates the chapter material from the following book:

Punch, S. (2021) *Bridge at the Top: Behind the Screens*, Toronto: Master Point Press.