



# Bridge: A MindSport For All

## *Connects People, Challenges Minds*

### **Elite Bridge Players: Motivations**

Punch, S., Russell, Z. and Graham, E. (2021) 'Serious Leisure Experience in a Dyadic Pursuit: Elite Player Motivations and Participation in Tournament Bridge,' *Leisure Studies*, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02614367.2021.1942524>

#### **Summary**

Elite level tournament bridge is a unique context to explore the dynamics of serious leisure experience. The paper presents sociological research regarding top players' motivations to play bridge throughout their life. It explores their participation in bridge through the academic lens of the serious leisure perspective (SLP), a framework that conceptualises the sociology of leisure. It is based on interviews with 52 elite bridge players from the USA and Europe.

The paper suggests that the rewards of winning, competition, thrill and flow are worthy of more consideration in the serious leisure perspective. The social world of elite bridge includes both professionals and top amateurs, who face different opportunities and constraints regarding their participation. An exploration of the rewards, costs and constraints of elite bridge offers insights that can assist in understanding complex leisure experience. The paper contains many interesting quotes from well-known bridge players.

#### **Findings**

The paper illustrates how bridge has an 'elite' level, which exists at the top end of the tournament level. The paper considers how this elite level can be analysed through what is called the 'Serious Leisure Perspective'. The paper discusses what motivates elite players, which includes rewards for playing and costs associated with playing, that one is motivated to avoid.

The paper suggests that academics need to understand elite bridge as a distinct 'social world', and that within this social world there are two sub worlds, amateurs and professionals. When thinking about what motivates players to continue playing high-level bridge, this sub-division should be taken into account.

The elite level includes top amateurs (who have or had other employment and are not paid to play) and professional players (paid to play on a full-time or part-time basis), alongside high-profile sponsors. The elite category is where skill level in bridge is at its highest, and where the lines between leisure and work blur through the professionalisation of bridge. The implications of this are not well understood.

Previous research has focussed on casual and social bridge, and the benefits seen from playing, particularly within the older population. However, there has been little research of bridge at elite level.

- **Motivations:** The quoted motivations for playing reveal the problem-solving aspect of the game, including how each hand presents a new problem. The pleasure found in competition is mostly, but not exclusively, linked to the possibility of winning. Players also enjoy the feeling of playing well and the multi-faceted aspects of the game.
- **Rewards:** Players experience both personal and social rewards. Personal rewards include the thrill gained from the challenge and ever-evolving nature of bridge. Social rewards come from the social connections and interpersonal dynamics of playing as part of a partnership and team.
- **Team dynamics:** The players discuss team dynamics, and how the three best pairs do not necessarily make the best team. They also discuss the differences between professional bridge and top-level amateur bridge, e.g. that professional bridge is more cutthroat.
- **Partnerships:** There are quotes from players about partnership dynamics, e.g. how you can feel as if you have been let down by somebody who is supposed to be on your side, or how partnerships can bring out the worst side of players, as each tries to dominate the other. The highs and lows of bridge are experienced in partnership.
- **Full-time professional players:** consider that bridge is central to their lives. Conversely, the elite players who do not necessarily see bridge as the most important aspect of their identity are the amateurs or part-time professionals who have other livelihoods beside bridge.
- **Barriers:** In some countries bridge is more professionalised than others. Scandinavian players may for instance have to travel to the USA to play as paid professionals, and within countries professional bridge can be isolated to specific areas, such as London in the UK. The paper also describes how for some elite level female players there are barriers to increasing commitment, both financial and related to childcare responsibilities.
- **Professionalisation** is not linear, meaning that top amateurs will not necessarily become professionals. Professional players commit to and persevere in their role and have the confidence of intense periods of practice and play compared to amateurs. On the other hand, there are well-established amateur players who may be more skilled than many professionals and for whom their commitment to the pursuit includes actively resisting professionalisation, which is viewed as incompatible with what they value from participation in bridge as a leisure activity.

The paper concludes that leisure experiences of winning, competition, thrill and flow should be considered as key rewards for those who engage in serious leisure pursuits.

## Further research

The paper recommends that further research into the gendered dynamics of elite bridge would be useful to highlight the challenges associated with creating more inclusive leisure experiences. Any future research of leisure activity that relies on partnership would benefit from a more explicit consideration of power relations between participants. A greater exploration of the recent professionalisation of bridge would also be fruitful.

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