



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

NPCs, Coaches and Development: Top Player Perspectives

BAMSA Summary Report 2023

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This BAMSA research is based on 52 interviews with top bridge players (from USA & Europe) as part of the [Bridging Minds](#) study. The report facilitates reflection by players, coaches and NPCs on how to get the best out of partnership and team performance (see full report on the [BAMSA website](#)).

The findings relate to four topics:

The Role of the NPC

The Role of Team Coaches

Advice for Aspiring Players

Player Regrets

What Makes a Good NPC?

- The success of the role of an NPC includes: the personal attributes of the NPC, interpersonal relations with the team and the relationship with the national bridge organisation.
- NPCs have a difficult job which requires a balance of practical, technical, organisational and interpersonal soft-skills to manage relationships and communicate effectively with individuals, partnerships, teams and organisational bodies.
- They manage teams who are facing emotional pressures in high stake environments and must keep a level head in order to communicate and manage teams effectively.
- NPCs must be willing to adapt strategies to the needs of the team, but also require resilience to make difficult decisions that may upset players in the short-term for the good of the team.
- NPCs may face an uphill battle when entering new teams as some players express negative or neutral opinions about the role of the NPC.
- NPCs are not immune to societal influences of favouritism, unconscious bias and discrimination.
- Many players prefer an NPC to ask about their preferences and then to take an active role in deciding which pairs to play when, rather than just rotating three pairs which tends to be considered a lazy approach to captaining.
- Greater levels of support and training on key aspects of the interpersonal and skill-based element of the NPC role may help to encourage more positive experiences for NPCs and players. Raising awareness of the challenges involved in creating team cohesion and cooperation may lead to greater efficacy for improved performance and team wellbeing.

The Role of Team Coaches

- Factors that facilitate the role of a coach: interpersonal and team-based skills, bridge-based skills, and player perceptions of the challenges and benefits of coaching.
- Coaches must balance interpersonal and practical bridge skills to act as mediators between players, partnerships and NPCs.
- Successful coaches are self-aware, willing to teach and learn and must balance their technical knowledge, experience and soft skills in terms of partnership and player management to be most effective.
- Coaches often 'learn on the job' as there are no formal training procedures in place.
- Often coaches are an integral part of bridge communities and are valued for their on the ground knowledge and research skills
- Coaching can be viewed as 'giving something back' and can keep players engaged and communicating effectively.
- Coaches acting as 'teachers' have opportunities to develop areas of their own game and improve their own weaknesses as players.
- The social nature of bridge also motivates coaches as they often have social connections in the bridge world that are strengthened by attending in-person events and matches in their capacity as coaches.
- Finding enjoyment in the coaching role is also viewed as important, particularly given the long hours worked and erratic schedules that are a part of the job.
- Coaches are not immune to bias (conscious and unconscious) and other social factors such as their upbringing, gender and generational differences. These factors can be at the root of conflicts, shape relationships, perspective on a problem, and may influence coaching decisions.

Advice for Aspiring Players

- Different areas of advice by top players for aspiring players include: player motivated actions, team dependent actions, bridge-based advice and limitations for player development.
- Player motivated actions include: studying, setting goals and playing often. These are important aspects of a player's development, which are especially useful early on in a player's career. These factors require self-motivation on the part of the player and have a relatively low drain on club or NBO resources.
- Team dependent actions include: learning from others, playing with better players and finding the right partner. These are more dependent on players having access to a network of high-quality players and support from partnerships and teammates. These aspects are dependent on where the player plays, who is in the team, how willing people are to share their knowledge and how well players work together to maximise each other's potential.
- Bridge-based advice includes: coaching, mentors and technical skills. This may involve access to formal or informal mentoring, coaching and training at club or NBO level. Not all players are able to access formal coaching or training, and many are expected to source this for themselves through bridge (social) connections and networks or by paying for private tuition.
- A player's geographical location or club affiliation, gender, and age can impact opportunities available to them to develop. Further exploration is needed to explore the different

perceptions in accounts of the women's, open and mixed categories and the reason for there being fewer women playing bridge professionally.

- There are disparities in opportunities available based on a player's geographical location, or club and national affiliation. Funding is not distributed evenly, and a joined-up approach to providing online resources could mitigate some of these inequalities.

Player Regrets

- The main kinds of regrets identified by top players include: personal regrets/decisions that impact career development, team-based regrets, and work ethic.
- Players struggle to balance the demands of bridge with family commitments and work, particularly amateurs who have non-bridge full-time jobs.
- Many players feel they could have done more to develop their skills had they found a better bridge-life balance. Players often regret not working harder on their game (studying and not making the most of training, support and coaching)
- Training initiatives are often reserved for junior players. Extending these programmes to non-juniors could improve later-start players' progress and assist in their development as players. It could also provide juniors with access to experienced players and mentors.
- Bridge is a very social mindsport and relies heavily on the interpersonal relationships that exist between pairs and the wider team. Positive relationships and effective communication are key for productive partnerships.
- Having a good work ethic can enable players to continue to develop, to study and learn from mistakes.
- In our study, older players are more likely to feel overwhelmed by the pressures of balancing bridge and family/work commitments. In this sample, younger players express more concerns around having a poor work ethic.

Implications for NBOs

- A one size fits all approach to training and development may allow players with potential to fall through the cracks. Tailored support could be offered to older and younger players to help to support their development based on their different needs.
- Not much attention has been given to the potential benefits of a 'good' NPC and coach. Training for the roles of NPC and coach for national bridge teams would be beneficial.
- Aspiring players can benefit through raising awareness of the potential dynamics that emerge between NPCs/coaches and bridge teams. Greater reflection on player and NPC/coach interactions can improve overall team performance in high-pressured contexts.
- It may be advantageous to have a formal, structured approach to NPC and coach selection. The importance of developing longer-term relations with players and raising awareness of the potential team impacts of NPCs and coaches could be useful.

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