



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

NPCs, Coaches and Development: Top Player Perspectives

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Introduction

The Sociology of Bridge is an emerging field of interest in the academic world. Bridge, a card game which can best be described as a mindsport, is currently understudied despite the prominence of the game in casual social environments and competitive tournaments globally (Punch et al, 2021). At the top level, bridge can be a professional card game played full-time by experts who are sponsored to play in teams (Russell et al., 2022). By taking a sociological approach to bridge, it is possible to gain new insights into different kinds of social interactions surrounding the nature of the game itself and those who dedicate a large amount of their lives to playing it (Punch and Snellgrove, 2021).

This research focused on elite bridge players (mainly from the UK and US) and is part of the *Bridging Minds* study (see Punch, 2021). Fifty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with players who have represented their country at some stage in their bridge career or won a major national title. These interviews are part of wider ongoing research on the Sociology of Bridge conducted by *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) at the University of Stirling (see <https://bridgemindsport.org/>).

The aim of this report is to provide a resource to facilitate reflection by players, coaches and NPCs on how to get the best out of team performance. The report summarises the findings relating to four topics that emerged in the interviews with top players: the roles of NPCs, coaches, advice for aspiring players and regrets. The first section focuses on players' experiences of 'non-player captains' (NPCs) operating within elite level bridge teams (see Table 1). It outlines players' perceptions of the value and challenges they encounter when working with or in the role of NPCs at elite-level bridge. However, it should be noted that the majority of the players here are discussing their views of the NPC role, without having experienced that position themselves. Only six players interviewed have been an NPC and could speak from that perspective.

Table 1: Key themes and sub-themes

Key themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: What makes a good NPC?	NPC Behaviour deemed positive or negative by players; People management skills; Mutual respect; Good communication skills.
Theme 2: Professional and Practical duties of NPC	Bridge based skills (strategy, decision-making, player or NPC experience); Administrative skills (organisation; reliability; adaptability; creature comforts; time management).
Theme 3: How the NPC manages internal politics and performance of the team.	Dysfunctional relationships/working relationships; Team cohesion and cooperation.
Theme 4: External factors: Procedural rules; social norms and values; generational, and gender divides in attitudes impacting NPC player/team relationships.	Unacceptable behaviours; Unfair procedures for complaint; Age/Gender divide; Favouritism or prejudice.

The Role of NPCs

What makes a good NPC?

Theme one encompasses players' experiences of either being captained or acting in the role of NPC, and establishes what makes for an effective/ineffective, 'good' or 'bad' NPC. It reflects the 'personal' elements of 'What makes a good NPC' including a discussion of people management skills, mutual respect and communication skills.

NPC behaviour deemed positive or negative by players

This section focuses on the qualities of an NPC which can be useful for those undertaking the NPC role. However, it is also helpful for players to consider the diverse ways that different NPCs approach their role in order to be prepared for a variety of NPC behaviours. Many of the participants share similar views on behaviours deemed to be positive and negative for a successful NPC. For example, lack of empathy and being overly critical are not considered to be conducive to having an effective NPC, player and team relationship, and are viewed by some players as a potential distraction. For example, participants describe several experiences where non-player captaining had 'gone wrong':

And by the end of the event, he had completely undermined Gary's confidence and, you know, he was there to prove that he was a better player than we were which is not what you're looking for in a captain. (Alan Mould, England)

Our preferred NPC wouldn't be the type of NPC who would go over every bad result. Like, we're much of a team that thrives on our momentum, so we don't want to hear bad stuff, it's like raw poker players, we don't want to talk about our bad hands we lost, we want to talk about the hands we won. (John Kranyak, USA)

You get some NPCs who can be too active in making decisions and changing things around. (John Matheson, Scotland)

These examples suggest that NPCs must navigate complex interpersonal relationships, taking account of how different players prefer to be captained and carefully balancing the desires of players, partnerships and the wider team with strategic and performance demands. Players prefer captains that are empathetic, positive in their communication with the team and who do not drastically 'change things around' at the last minute. However, dealing with so many different personalities, communication and playing styles, it may not be possible for the NPC to keep everybody happy. As such, compromises must be made on all sides for a team to function effectively.

Furthermore, there are several accounts of people describing unpleasant experiences being captained by the 'wrong person', or people lacking preferred behaviours. Several participants also expressed mixed feelings about the NPC role as a whole and their usefulness to the performance of a team. The success of an NPC was repeatedly described as being dependent on intangible characteristics rather than tangible qualities such as the day-to-day duties of the NPC. For example, Ciara, John, Tony and Chip describe difficulties experienced in the past with NPCs:

And for the NPC to make a judgment as to how my partner and I were going to do was wrong - let us play first. I could see it, if we'd played a match and been horrendous, then he maybe could have made it, or a couple of matches, then he could have made a decision, but to take us aside before we even started, it was fairly grim. (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)
Well sometimes they're critical of things which I think can add to problems that the players

have focusing. (John Matheson, Scotland)

The NPC is one of these roles where they, it's a slightly negative answer to the question in that in general they tend to do more damage than they do good. But a good NPC is an asset and there are a few about. (Tony Forrester, England)

Particularly I think some people have been bad captains and have actually been a distraction to the players. (Chip Martel, USA)

Although a large proportion of the participants have neutral, mixed or negative views towards the NPC role as a whole, most participants saw some value to a 'good NPC'. For example, Nevena suggest NPCs are not that vital: "I don't think they're strictly speaking necessary. But it's nice to have two hangers-on, you know, different people, friends, etc." (Nevena Senior, England). Whereas Chip promotes that a good captain works away quietly behind the scenes if they are doing a 'good job': "In some ways if the captain is really doing a good job they're almost invisible" (Chip Martel, USA). Ciara and John expand upon these sentiments:

They ought to be a fairly neutral influence. As I said, what happened to us at the Europeans when an NPC can be quite a negative influence. [The next NPC] made them a much more likeable bunch. (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)

Our NPC in Dublin, he was a good NPC. Quite an extrovert, hyperactive sort of chap which can be overdone at times, but I was fine with that. You get some NPCs who can be too active in making decisions and changing things around. That can be overdone. (John Matheson, Scotland)

These examples emphasise the difficult role of an NPC, as many people may have preconceived ideas about how they want to play, or have had negative experiences with NPCs that make it difficult for a new NPC to penetrate a team that feels negative towards the role in general. There is also a distinction made between a 'good' NPC for the juniors versus other categories, with different approaches employed regarding discipline, and support:

The role of the NPC – it's different in the Junior Open. With the Juniors you've got to get them to bed, you've got to make sure that they're not drinking and eating and discipline them a bit. They're basically good and they somehow don't know, they don't really realise how bad it is to have a beer, even just one beer or two in the evening, so you've got to do that. (David Gold, England)

I think your job as NPC is primarily to get the best out of your team. This means getting to know them as best you can and trying to make them feel comfortable and confident and to do what you want. Now, I don't think I've ever succeeded in doing that, I think it's very difficult. I think one captain will suit one pair and not another pair. It's very difficult to be all things to all men. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

At the junior level, NPCs are often required to serve a dual role in relation to providing guidance and discipline, as well as tactical and strategic support to a team. However, David does not explicitly state the age ranges of the players he captains. These approaches will likely vary significantly for juniors who are children versus older adult juniors. In addition, lack of experience is mentioned as a potential issue impacting the efficacy of the NPC. The necessity for on-the-job learning appears to add complexity to an already difficult task, that has substantial room for error for the novice NPC.

I know what I'm doing you know so I'm happy enough but before I probably didn't think so much about what I was doing because I really didn't know what I was doing. I guess like a lot of things we learn on the job, don't we? No one teaches you to be an NPC, no one teaches you to be a teammate. (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)

Well, it's a game that requires mental maturity and experience, and you just haven't been around or playing long enough partly at that age. You haven't seen enough situations, played enough people and just seen enough, there are exceptions of course. (David Gold, England)

Several positive and negative behaviours have been outlined as undesirable and preferable by participants with many players expressing negative, neutral and mixed feelings towards the NPC role. In addition, a distinction has been made between 'good captaining' for juniors versus senior level bridge, suggesting there are nuances in the types of behaviour expected of an NPC dependent on the context. 'On the job learning' is also suggested to add complexity to the role of the NPC with experienced NPCs preferred by players, but not always an option given limited resources.

People management

Another sub-theme that emerged from the interviews is the perceived importance of 'people-management'. Some players consider it to be helpful if the NPC has an emotional distance relative to the rest of the team. This potentially enables them to be better placed to make rational decisions regarding team and pair selections, where the players may be too emotionally involved to step-back and see the bigger picture. These sentiments are illustrated in the following examples:

The NPC is much more person-management, I think. It is important unless you're going to simply rotate the pairs, I mean, which some NPCs do, in which case why the hell do you have one? (Alan Mould, England)

I said to the NPC we should definitely sit out now, so he said no, you are still playing really well, I want you to play the next set. And that's the sort of the difference really that he could see dispassionately that we were still playing better than one of the other two pairs. He still wants, still has more confidence in us than he has in the others.

Whereas if that had been a team of six scenario without a captain, I wouldn't have played the next set, somebody else would have done. Maybe they have a better plan than I have in my mind, 'cos after all they are not weighed down by the problems of actually having to play. So, they should be able to see a wider dynamic than I could see. (Tony Forrester, England)

Heather and I played like complete idiots and there was a very short time in between the second and third match. I think our non-playing captain took the right decision to take us out because we were still too upset about the previous match. (Nevena Senior, England)

People who weren't really ready to play were being asked to play so I think just those sort of logistical things can certainly make a difference as to how people perform. (Chip Martel, USA)

NPCs must attempt to draw a line between friendships and their professional duties. They provide a valuable resource to players offering a fresh perspective. They also help to adapt playing strategies, particularly when players cannot think clearly about their next course of action. Bridge events also tend to run over many hours and having a fresh pair of eyes can help partnerships and teams optimise their performance, as expressed by Tony in the example provided above.

Motivation is also deemed to be an important aspect of the NPC role according to David: “I mean you motivate your team, that’s very important” (David Gold, England), particularly in terms of ‘support’ to maintain the optimum performance of pairs and the wider team. This can be illustrated with the following examples:

The skills you need as a captain is you have got to manage your players, you have got to do the job of kind of making sure the players are all up, making sure the players are all fit and raring to go. (Alan Mould, England)

If the non-playing captain is basically barking out the orders and says you must play Tony, with so-and-so. I haven’t made that decision so therefore it is somewhat easier for me if there is somebody there who is making that decision. But you have got to be good at it. (Tony Forrester, England)

I think that a captain can spend some time with his players and maybe try and sort of get them into a better frame of mind. I think it’s a very important role and very difficult and I’m not saying I’ve ever achieved it, but I think a captain can make a big difference. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Alex and Ciara emphasise the complexity (for the NPC) of having to balance team selection with the ‘hopes and dreams of players’, team performance and longer-term team morale:

The one that I had the most control over was the knockout match. So I got to pick pairs over a long duration and I clearly could have played a pair as much as the rest and that pair would maybe have come in and played a blinder in the second set. But then I picked them for the final set probably a little bit guiltily and I probably should have dropped them and picked the other pair again. I don’t think it would actually have made any difference, but I don’t know. Having that sense of not just responsibility, I don’t feel any responsibility necessarily to the SBU [NBO] but its more to the taking on of other people’s desires for playing. And they have a clear idea of probably what participating in this event is about to them so trying to balance that is, It’s kind of like their hopes and dreams. (Alex Wilkinson, Scotland).

That one person in that partnership wouldn’t necessarily know why he ought to be sitting out. So you had to sit him out because you wanted to give your team the best chance at playing. And you know that they’re coming over and not getting the boards that they expected to get. But again, if you’re going to be a good NPC you have to make that decision regardless of whether you like the person or not. (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)

Emotional distance is an important characteristic for NPCs to possess that allows them to successfully manage a team. Provision of support, motivation and encouragement to individuals, partnerships and the wider team are also an important part of the role. Some issues are inherent to the role of NPC, such as balancing players’ desires with the needs of the team as a whole. These factors are difficult for NPCs to navigate and may lead to frustrations with the team if poorly managed.

Showing mutual respect

Mutual respect between the players and the NPC is essential and directly impacts the efficacy of the NPC. A lack of respect for other players in the team and/or for the NPC can result in a range of tensions and potential conflict, which intensifies under the pressure of an important event. Interestingly, this appears to be a salient issue explicitly for the older men in our sample. For example, Alan discusses these issues in more detail:

I don't think a good captain is capable of making the team play better. But I think a bad captain is capable of making the team play a lot, lot worse. And I suppose part of my thesis for that is the only time I will ever play European, which was Malta in 1999 when we were captained absolutely appallingly. Just appallingly, to the extent that halfway through the event I ended up having a stand up screaming match with the captain in a public place. When we were screaming at each other.

Somebody asked the French captain why they were doing so badly, and he said, well the problem with this current French team is that they all tell me there is one world class player and five complete morons. And yeah, the guy made the obvious question, which is the world class player? He said, all of them. And that, that was the problem, the French team got themselves into a mind-set where every single one of them thought, I'm the only good player, these people are complete idiots. I have contempt for them. And so even though I'm a great player, I'll just toss cards around 'cause they're all morons. You've gotta have a kind of mutual respect and you've gotta believe that. (Alan Mould, England)

Mutual respect in relation to 'good captaining' is strongly associated with the performance of players. In the previous example, Alan expresses having strong emotional reactions to 'bad captaining' that resulted in arguments and tensions with the NPC in the middle of a tournament. Additionally, a mismatch in the evaluation of player competencies (NPC versus player) can lead to frustration for both the team and the NPC and poorer results overall. In terms of mediating these difficulties it is evident that NPCs that possess 'good communication' skills can potentially mitigate some of these barriers for team performance.

Good communication

Effective communication is raised as a key component of successful NPCs by the players interviewed. Clear communication, in high stakes and high-pressure environments (such as elite bridge tournaments) may foster more productive and stable relationships between partnerships, NPCs and the wider teams. In contrast failures of communication and misreading the needs of the team can result in frustration and resentment. Alan suggests in his statement below that NPCs who are unable to read body language and who do not 'read the room' well can struggle to engage a team. Tony also discusses some frustrations experienced with a previous NPC:

You want to score up with your teammates. I don't want the captain to be saying to me as I walk out the room, well you're 17 down or whatever and by the way with the last board. Piss off! I want to score with my teammates. And [xxxx] seems to be incredibly bad at that. And if you want to talk to a player, you do not bleeding talk to them ten minutes before they go into play. [xxxx] is very bad at picking up very obvious body language about what the team do and do not want him to do. I mean, if I was a member of the team, I would find it really irritating to be told what the score was.

The following morning as Gary was going in to play, he pointed out to it again. He could've made this tricky three no trumps. That's not what you're looking for in terms of the captain. And he just held us in contempt. (Alan Mould, England)

In general, I try and work with them [the NPC] away from the rest of the team making sure they are doing the right thing which is what I did with [xxxx], but that had no effect. After that it's extremely hard and what more can you do? You can't start doing their job as well as your own and I'm not arrogant enough to believe that I am definitely right. I mean, I will think they are making a bit of a mess of it, but it doesn't mean to say that I think that I would do would be better. (Tony Forrester, England)

Some players prefer knowing in advance the NPC's plan of who will be playing which set. Sabine (Germany) said her NPC: "decided the evening before basically on our plan, which could be changed if a pair had not done so well or something happened". However, most seemed to prefer a flexible plan which could be adapted given the results or feelings of the players as the event progressed. The important point is that the NPC communicated their approach to the players so they knew what to expect during the competition. Good communication also involves knowing what different players' preferences are before the start of the event. For example, Sabine likes to play the first set, but other players might prefer to have a sleep in during the morning:

Both Roy and I like to have sort of a set schedule, but let's say when there are three matches a day and everybody plays two matches and say we play one and two or one and three or two and three, for me I like one and three because I don't like sitting out in the morning, it's such a long time. I wake up at six o'clock in the morning and I have nothing to do all the time. (Sabine Auken, Germany)

In terms of 'what makes a good NPC?' players are relatively consistent in their views that some behaviors are particularly undesirable (excessive criticism, negativity, inconsistency), and that 'mutual respect' plays a key role in effective team functioning and performance. The examples provided demonstrate strong emotions can be elicited in players when these expectations were not met. In addition, good communication between NPCs and the wider team and having a rounded understanding of the personalities involved may be the most important mitigating factor to alleviate team difficulties, frustrations and to improve overall performance and functioning of the team.

Professional and Practical duties of NPC

Theme two encompasses the participants' descriptions and experiences of the professional and practical duties of NPCs. Two sub-themes are identified as distinct: the bridge decisions and the organisational skills of the NPC. The 'professional' elements of the NPC role are bridge knowledge, tactical soundness, strategy and skill level which are different from the day-to-day administrative skills or practical duties of the NPC.

Bridge related skills (strategy, decision-making, player or NPC experience)

Key practical components of the day- today activities of the NPC have been identified in relation to the application of bridge-based knowledge involved in team selection, incorporating 'strategy', and decision-making mediated by the experience of the player and the NPC. Several participants note that having an adequate strategy in place is essential for the smooth running of the team. David discusses this issue in more detail:

Picking the line-up and the right people to play are important and the captain. I've played on teams where the role of the captain can cost or gain Victory Points for the team. I've had championships where I would say the captain cost us 30 VPs and I've had ones where I would

say the captain gained us 20-30 and I can think of results due to poor or good captaincy decisions. I think the first European I captained, I didn't think I did a bad job, but I probably cost about 15 VPs.

There was just a couple of matches where I think if I'd done something different, we would have been better off, and it wasn't trivial to do so, but I think, yes, I probably was answerable. That was a particularly difficult tournament to captain because I had to decide to break a partnership up as well. I think if I had broken it up a day earlier, we would have had some more VPs as well. (David Gold, England)

This shows that the captain can feel the pressure of making the right decisions, as well as facing the uncertainty afterwards of the extent to which their decision led to a poor team result. Some players reflect on NPC decisions that they considered changed the momentum in their team progress. However, it can be easier in hindsight to explain the impact of decisions that went wrong, which are made in good faith at the time:

When he sat us out after we had two decent sets, we were finally starting to play well, and you can feel when you are playing well, coming on pretty strongly. We'd had two decent size wins, nearly all at our table, and it was so clearly right because we needed the points, so clearly right for us to start the next day, particularly as it was a relatively weak team. But because it was against a relatively weak team he sat us out, thought the other four could win and then lost to a relatively weak team.

So that was catastrophic on two levels, all those points are gone they are not coming back, and secondly our partnership is now fed up because we weren't playing. We are now coming back in having lost a bit of that energy and that enthusiasm. Also, we're into a far worse scenario than the night before, when we were sort of thinking one more good win and we are into the top eight. Now all of a sudden, we are back into 13th again and another bad team has disappeared off the books. So occasionally you get into that scenario, and I would just say I get frustrated with it all and it was just a very easy decision to make and the wrong one was made. I know it's a bit in hindsight, but you feel it was a wrong decision at the time and then events prove it was the wrong decision. To me it was the wrong decision. (Tony Forrester, England)

In addition, a fundamental role of the NPC is to make sometimes unpopular (but necessary) decisions for the good of the team and in service of the overall strategy. NPCs also have to navigate the more subtle social elements of evaluating the strategies of other teams and obtaining insider knowledge of team strategies to inform their own, as described by Ciara, David and John:

If the four that had been playing had a good set, you'd say, well I'm happy enough to continue with it. But you probably wouldn't say, well I think they're better than you, because I don't think that's good team spirit. (Ciara, Northern Ireland)

I think when you are a captain it's a small world, you often will be good friends with somebody you are captaining, but when you are a captain there has to be some separation. You have to decide based on what you think is right, rather than just purely being human and accept you might upset somebody. (David Gold, England):

Will he be finding out what the opposition is up to?

Yeah, he's like all over that. I know 'cause he is the type of guy that when he gets into something, he's like super into something. He is awesome and as soon as something comes up on the Internet, he's got his spreadsheets ready and he is doing something. I think nobody really realised how good at that he would be. (John Kranyak, USA)

Alternatively, where there is an absence of a strategy or a lack of resources that limit the ability of the NPC to fulfil their role, issues may occur. Liz refers to an incident where she had to fulfil multiple roles alongside her NPCing due to limited resources:

I don't know. It's hard to tell if you weren't there, would they get results? It's really hard to tell but I think that a good captain can certainly produce better results by just putting the right people in at the right time. Some of the time for the Scottish team the last time we just had four players, there wasn't anything we could do except try and sort them out between matches, which was very difficult. But I remember down in Torquay, and I went there with the juniors, there was only me and I was scoring and I was coaching and I was captaining and it was an absolute nightmare. It wasn't until Joan Mercer arrived, Brian Claridge took over scoring for me. And I was able to take Martin Bateman and Dermot Coyle to one side and explain to them that psyching at every board was not cutting it. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Well-resourced teams may have the luxury of having a separate coach as well as an NPC, which enables them to share tasks. However, most NBOs are not in a position to provide an NPC and a coach for each team, so the NPC has to take on multiple functions.

Administrative skills

The administrative practical duties of the NPC include being proficient at 'practical things' and being well organised. These are important for the role of the NPC:

You've got to manage the practical things. You have got to ensure that the players are at the table at the right time and know where they are. I mean, [xxxx] is I think a bit over the top, the idea that everyone should be there half an hour beforehand is an initial idea which I did manage to kill off fairly quickly. And that everyone should be there at the end of the first match even if that means you hang about for an hour and a half. (Alan Mould, England)

Sometimes some of them have been not so organised so that people didn't always know when they were supposed to be playing or had things change at the last minute. So, people who weren't really ready to play, were being asked to play, so I think just those sort of logistical things can certainly make a difference as to how people perform. (Chip Martel, USA)

Similarly, Heather suggests that providing creature comforts and being a 'friend' of the team can be beneficial to creating a positive environment:

Sandra or Nevena were basically the team's friend, they would go to the supermarket for us, you know, find out information about this that and the other, get cups of coffee and things like that. So, I'm sure we didn't actually need a second person, but the other person was looking after our creature comforts, which is a nice thing to have. You have two people. Although Jeremy and David were both doing sort of serious bridge roles, they also had time on their hands to do things like that as well. (Heather Dhondy, England)

The NPC must be organised and effectively communicate their plans to partnerships and the team ahead of time. This is important so that players know who they are playing against and so that strategies can be communicated appropriately to players. Frustrations and resentments can occur within the team dynamics when players feel that the NPC does not fulfil both the 'skill' and 'administrative' duties of the NPC. Whilst enthusiasm and admin skills can be beneficial, NPCs also need to have other skills: "He's fine on the enthusiasm stakes and he's fine on the general admin, but

I just don't think he's got some of the other skills, that's my personal view. But would I be any better?" (Alan Mould, England). In contrast, John feels that NPCs help out by doing the admin: "I've never done it, but to do the administrative tasks and take the weight off the team and just be encouraging" (John Matheson, Scotland). Ciara also suggests that rotating pairs is a lazy approach to captaining:

In the Europeans after about 10 matches, he just rotated the team which did my head in because - rotating the team is lazy captaining! Because you ought to be able to think right well this pair - because you've gone to Europeans it's not a hard schedule or anything-, so its lazy NPCing just to say right you're out - you're out one set every three. And we were doing quite well and the team was doing okay, and we came back and we went to score up with our team and they'd lost 25-0 to Belgium. And then when you're away for 2 weeks, it's hard to actually keep yourself going as much as anything else because the team - every time you sit out the team seems to do fairly poorly. (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)

What is clear is that there is not a one size fits all approach. Players have different reasons for preferring a particular style of captaincy, which suits their individual needs. Hence, the challenge for an NPC is striving to fulfil individual, pair and team needs, which at times could mean the group needs conflict with those of an individual or a partnership.

NPC Management of Internal Politics and Team Performance

Theme three explores the complexities of 'internal politics', described by participants in managing inter-personal relationships, team politics, and NPC management of team performance. These include the management of dysfunctional and working relationships, and the impact of team cohesion and cooperation on the NPC role and functioning.

Dysfunctional relationships/working relationships

Theme three encompasses a number of factors involving internal politics and team dynamics, which play a part in fostering dysfunctional or poor working relationships within the bridge community. Several of the issues experienced by players and NPCs are characterised by tempestuous interpersonal relationships between partners and/or team members. Such interactions can undoubtedly have a negative impact on player morale and the performance of the wider team. The example from Alan explores these issues further describing a difficult relationship, frustrations with team members and conflicts at an event that impacted team performance:

They thought they were perfect and they thought they should be playing all the time. And just would not accept, despite the fact that they were actually hovering at zero on the cross imps. [xxxx], I don't know if you know, she's not the easiest woman. She's very aggressive both at and away from the table. It was their first European and they were a new partnership. They were doing fantastically well as a partnership, but there was some sniping there 'cause [xxxx] likes to just bat her partner around like a punch bag.

And then we hit this solid mass of good teams and of course we weren't getting the results and we lost a couple of matches and the team confidence just fractured completely. There was a lot of sniping going on and there was a lot of bullying going on and people were having a go at other people, both within and with-out partnerships. And the whole thing fell apart and we ended up not qualifying. It was an unhappy experience. (Alan Mould, England)

Team cohesion and cooperation

It is evident that the NPC cannot function without team cohesion and cooperation, whereby roles assigned are acknowledged and accepted. Team members need to be willing to cooperate with the instructions or requests of the NPC. The below example demonstrates how a lack of cooperation can impact the functioning of the NPC to carry out their duties. Tensions with individual players can add to the pressures an NPC may have to face and is not in the spirit of creating a harmonious team.

[xxxx] waged war against me and last year I was NPC and he wouldn't answer any emails. I was asking about his shirt size, what flight he wanted to go on and he said that because the selection committee that appointed me wasn't properly constituted, he didn't want to. I just thought it was his issue not mine, you know? At the end of the day, I wanted the team to do as well as they could do, and the rest of the team were fine you know? At the end of the day everyone was more than pleasant, and we get on well as a team by and large. (Anonymous)

The team has to be sort of supporting one another and the captain has to be there on the ball and [xxxx] I thought was a good captain. But he didn't go down well with other people, and I think if you've got other people with strong personalities and strong views, they may well clash. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

In addition, inexperienced players or new partnerships can add to team pressures and may alter working relationships or lead to frustration.

The team was substantially worse, firstly this was the first competition that I played with Heather, so we were a new partnership and the third pair was way below and that made a huge difference. But on top of that [xxxx] were having not a very good tournament. (Nevena Senior, England)

Team cooperation and cohesion appear to be important factors to consider in terms of the efficacy of the NPC. When personal differences between an NPC and players impact their ability to fulfil their duties this can have a damaging influence on team motivation and the performance of both players and the NPC. For the NPC to be successful, appropriate experience and technical knowledge are seen by players as particularly useful. Furthermore, early identification of difficult relationships may enable solutions to be found that promote a more balanced and positive team environment.

External Factors

Theme four discusses participants' descriptions and experiences of conflicts of social and institutional norms and values i.e. generational differences in attitudes, gender divides and institutional procedures and rules that govern the behaviour and rules for elite bridge players (the governing body in Europe the EBL.). The 'external factors' that emerged in the interviews include: intergenerational perceptions of 'unacceptable behaviours', age and gender divides in attitudes, perceived unfair procedures to raise concerns with governing body, perceived favouritism in team selection.

Unacceptable behaviours

There are several scenarios and experiences outlined by participants whereby the behaviour of others falls below or outside of what they would consider to be appropriate or within their scope of 'social norms and values'. These can sometimes be as straightforward as misunderstandings around player etiquette, or can involve more tempestuous personality clashes:

[xxxx and xxxx] are very, very unpleasant at the table and you know the etiquette of the screens, who pushes and who, so I just push. And he's on my right, I think he may have been North and he said something to me, and I said, well I won't touch it again then! I think I pushed the tray through.

He said, well I was only asking, I said, well it wasn't what you said, it was the manner in which you said it! And my non-playing captain started laughing so hard that he had to get up and leave! Because it's that sort of thing that - what's the big deal about pushing a tray through? So they're unpleasant as well. But it wouldn't bother me anymore because I think if people are unpleasant to you then you're a threat! (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)

Players and NPCs operate in high pressure environments with a wide range of ages and a mix of genders which means that conflicts inevitably can occur. It is difficult to establish from the data to what extent these factors are due to differing social norms and values, or are limited to personality clashes, failures of communication or more deeply rooted issues. Clarifying codes of conduct for players could be useful to reduce the risk of conflict and mitigate issues experienced between players and NPCs. However, this may result in oversimplifying a complex issue that requires further examination.

Age/Gender divide

Several age and gender-based clashes are referenced by participants. A number of women players suggest that both subtle and overt gender-based prejudice is present at some level in their experience of the wider bridge community (see also [Punch et al., 2023](#)). For example:

I think that there was a certain amount of sexism there. I think the non-playing captain certainly didn't know me. And I don't know how well he knew my partner, but I think that made an assumption without actually - I think you should let someone prove themselves rather than just presume that because they're two women that you don't know how to play. He didn't know me because I was from the North. But to actually do that, I thought was pretty horrific.

I don't think that very many men hold women in high regard in bridge. The first time I played Camrose, very young, I was 25 and the lovely [xxxx] said that he'd never thought a woman was good enough to play Camrose and nothing that weekend had changed his mind! (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland)

This is a complex issue, as the bridge community is a microcosm of society as a whole. As a result, many of the issues that occur more generally in society (gender bias, discrimination etc,) are also likely to occur within the bridge community. However, the age gaps present in partnerships and teams may provide an arena for these conflicts to occur, as these groups may hold different social norms and values around polite, impolite or appropriate behaviour.

Unfair procedures for complaint

In addition, there are notable mentions of unhappiness with the wider procedures in place to deal with complaints, with two participants describing unsatisfactory outcomes and dissatisfaction with the wider handling over their specific experiences:

The whole thing was a train wreck. The NBO actually commissioned a report into that and the blame was laid. It was all the captain's fault! (Anonymous)

The captain has to send a confidential report to the selection committee. So I wrote one. ... What I didn't know was that the NBO's definition of confidential seemed to be anybody who

wanted to read it. (Anonymous)

I did an NPCs report complaining about his behaviour. I thought it was quite pathetic, he didn't speak to me for the whole weekend. And I wrote a letter of complaint and there was a possibility that he was going to be banned but he wasn't. (Anonymous)

Favouritism in team selection

Finally, favouritism, or the appearance of favouritism has been identified as a barrier for the role of NPCs. Bridge is a social game and many NPCs have a wide range of professional and social connections in the bridge community. As such, despite the best of intentions, NPCs sometimes struggle to remain emotionally distant from their team, which can lead to conflict:

I was accused of over playing one pair because I was coaching them and therefore I was favouring them etc. etc. which was gonna happen, it was bound to go and happen. So I was quite upset at the time and I was quite wound up about it at the time. (Anonymous)

Even the last day we had chances of qualifying, we needed not three 25s, but three wins and he should have sat them out and they weren't having a good tournament. I think at the end it was bad captaincy and he should have let us play all the last day but he didn't because there was some personal interest. (Anonymous)

NPCs bring their own style to the role and some skillsets are better suited to people management. Liz's quote below indicates that however hard an NPC tries not to show favouritism, inevitably if decisions are not popular (regarding who plays and how often), then accusations of favouring one pair over another can occur:

Really don't know what the magic thing was but he seemed to be able to focus her on what she was supposed to be doing and talked to her in a way that she appreciated. He just seemed to be able to do better than other captains had done. It's almost impossible to be a captain and not appear to show favouritism in your team selections and stuff. I know that you feel you could have done better. You always feel you could have done better and I'm terrible at the paperwork. I was appalling at the paperwork. Which is why Sandy is captaining. But I think it's very important to at least try to listen to what your players want to do. Try to listen to how they feel about this, that and the other. And try and make them feel that you can rely on me, I'll be there, if you want to do this, you'll be doing this, it will all be fine. But as I say it's something that some people are obviously better at it than others. And there isn't a magic bullet because it depends on the content of the team. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Most NBOs face challenges regarding the funding of their national teams. Some countries require their players to contribute towards their expenses. Limited funding may impact decisions that the NPC makes in terms of how much each pair plays during the event, as Alex illustrates:

Bridge itself isn't really about winning at the moment, it should be about experience. So, you should play everyone an equal number of times, and you could say that people have come along, paid their own money to play generally speaking and you should just play them an equal amount of times and it's about their enjoyment of it you know? That's fair enough in a way! (Alex Wilkinson, Scotland)

'External factors' including differences expressed in the social 'norms and values' of team members (precipitated by factors such as age and gender) can be challenging for an NPC to navigate.

Additionally, dealing with institutional procedures (i.e., complaints) can be particularly contentious, leading to unsatisfactory outcomes for players and NPCs in some instances. Furthermore, funding limitations and barriers can add complexity to an already challenging role, where NPCs must balance player desire with practical decision-making for the good of the team.

NPC Conclusion

In conclusion, this report has discussed several key areas and themes that can draw light on elite bridge players' perspectives of what makes a successful NPC. Broadly these can be divided into personal attributes of the NPC, interpersonal relations and the overarching institutions and governing bodies. NPCs are in a challenging position as they have to manage relationships with individual players, partnerships and the team as a whole, as well as dealing with any broader issues within the wider bridge community. In addition, they are making decisions and managing the team in a competitive environment where everyone is striving to perform their best under pressure. Emotions can be fraught, particularly when involving a partnership game of mistakes (Punch and Russell, 2022). This complex interplay of people management in an emotionally-charged setting does not lead to a simple solution as different players suit different styles of captaincy. It can be helpful if the captain knows the players well and understands the partnership and team dynamics, but this is often not possible. Furthermore, the needs of individuals or pairs may be in conflict with group needs and what is best for the team.

In the interviews, top bridge players expressed more neutral, mixed and negative feelings of the NPC role than positive. Many participants allude to the benefits of the non-player-captain including their ability to retain some emotional distance, and their having a wider perspective of the overall team journey. A number of areas of concern include the difficulty of managing interpersonal relationships and people alongside a lack of available resources and funding. Gender and aged based differences may represent a deeper-rooted issue, especially when dealing with younger bridge players. For example, with junior teams is it more important to strive to win or to develop a culture and environment where players are given the opportunities to progress, learn and train? For some national teams, the priority may be to achieve the best results even if this means benching players for much of the event. Making difficult decisions is part of the NPC role and these are not always welcomed by players. The potential culture clash of gender-based discrimination appears at some level to be present within the wider bridge culture (Rogers et al., 2022), though it should be noted that this may reflect issues in society as a whole.

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

This section summarises the interview findings regarding participants’ experiences of coaching within elite-level bridge teams. The themes identified are: The role of the coach on an interpersonal/team level; The role of the coach at a skill-based level; and the challenges for coaches, and benefits of coaching for the team (see Table 2).

Table 2: Key themes and sub-themes

Key themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Role of coach: interpersonal/team level	Team and partnership management; Mediation role between NPC (non-player captain) and wider team; General coaching skills
Theme 2: Role of coach: skill-based level	Preparing players; Experience level; Strategy and tactical skills
Theme 3: Challenges and benefits	Learning on the job; Social factors that influence coaching role i.e., gender differences; age etc.; other

This section establishes the qualities that ‘good coaches’ possess; if, how and by what means coaches facilitate better team, individual or partnership performance; and the issues coaches and players encounter routinely working in elite level bridge. A distinction is made between the specific role of the coach relative to the NPC (non-player captain) at both a practical level (day-to-day activities), and in relation to coaching skills at a technical level. As many teams do not have access to both coaches and NPCs, the distinction between these roles appears to be particularly salient in terms of understanding the benefits and pitfalls of access to coaching. This could be useful for uncovering the specific settings and for whom coaching can be most beneficial, particularly when there are limited resources (people, money, time) available. The themes uncovered incorporate both the interpersonal elements of coaching, the technical (bridge skill-based) elements as well as the issues encountered by coaches via social and institutional pressures of the bridge community.

Role of Coach: Interpersonal/team Level

The first theme identifies the role of the coach with a particular focus on interpersonal relationships (i.e., between individual team members and partnerships), how coaches may function as intermediaries between the wider team and the NPC and the practical skills that are preferable to players.

Team and partnership management

Particularly for older male and female players, ‘team and partnership management’ is characterised as an important component of the role of ‘the coach’ at top level bridge. For example, Alan suggests that it is the job of the coach to resolve miscommunications between a partnership having difficulties with their system: “The coach should have picked that up and should have sorted out the players, or said to them, go and sort this out, find out what you play.” (Alan Mould, England). Whereas David

states that 'player management' and 'preparation' are key: "The main thing was to make sure that everybody was prepared to face whatever it was that they were going to face." (David Burn, England). In addition, familiarity with players is seen as a benefit for coaches for buffering issues with players in the role of the coach suggesting good interpersonal relationships are an important aspect of a successful coach-player/team dynamic:

I knew all of them reasonably well except Jeremy and Robert, who would be more likely to talk directly to Priday – the same generation of players, they had known each other for donkey's years. So the dynamics were quite interesting, but the whole thing was a great experience, watching a World Championship. (David Burn, England)

One of the participants makes a distinction between support that is 'appropriate' to be offered by a coach, relative to 'professional support' offered by someone like a sports psychologist. This suggests that whilst providing psychological support (for players, partnerships and teams) may be considered part of the coaching role, there are aspects of 'support' that are deemed to be outside the scope of the role of coach, as illustrated by David:

The women actually, some of them I think still use proper sports psychologists who have done a lot of work with some of the British pairs. Well, I mean, my role is psychological in the sense that perhaps, more so than the Open Team, as a leaning post for people who are feeling rotten and want to talk about something. That's very much part of the role but not in any kind of professional, psychological capacity. I wouldn't know how to begin. Listening is a skill that obviously psychologists have to have, but it's a good idea for bridge players to have too. But that's not really something that you can train yourself to do, it's something that you need to do a little bit more naturally – to listen. (David Burn, England)

The input of coaches (as a buffer/mediator) may sometimes be required to diffuse issues with difficult partnerships, as shown in the following example:

It was fun, but they were like two opposites. Zia would try and get Bob to do some work. But they had the time difference problem, and Bob is always involved in work. Bob would show up some place and have to cancel at the last minute. So it was driving Zia crazy. And Bob started to forget a lot of system things. And Zia, not always the easiest partner, he was actually one of the few people who'd get Bob riled up at the table. At one point Bob really wanted to leap across the table and strangle him. (Eric Kokish, USA).

Whilst generally participants' views of coaches are positive, there are some instances where participants voice less positive experiences of coaches and their impact on wider team morale/performance:

He was the non-playing captain but he was their personal coach as well, and he didn't dare sit them out. Even the last day we had chances of qualifying, we needed not three 25s but three wins and he should have sat them out and they weren't having a good tournament. (Nevena Senior, England)

Interestingly, this example suggests a significant entanglement between players' views of the role of coaches versus NPCs. There appears to be a level of crossover in terms of the duties they are expected to fulfil, particularly regarding intangible aspects such as 'people management' and the more tactical elements i.e., team selection or managing interpersonal relationships with individuals, partnerships, and the wider team. These dynamics and the adaptive role of the coach as chief 'mediator' (between players and the NPC) are discussed in more depth in the following section.

Mediation role between coach, NPC and wider team

The second sub-theme identified from the participants' responses relates to the important role of the coach as a mediator or buffer between individual team members, partnerships, the wider team and the NPC. This aspect of the role seems to be particularly salient for older male players, relative to other age groups and genders. David recounts the sense of collaboration he often experiences with NPCs in terms of duties such as team management and team selection:

Jeremy has been the captain for the last couple of years – well, different captains have different styles. I mean, most of them have been pretty much their own person knowing what they do, but they always checked whether I had opinions and we sit and watch the match together generally. I didn't have as much input on the line-up with Jeremy as I have had with some other captains. Not all, I had virtually none with Tony, who did his own thing very much and Sandra Landy was much more talkative - told us about what we should be doing before we did it. It varies from person to person. (David Burn, England)

The coach is often perceived as being an important mediator between the team and the NPC. They are viewed as a 'go between' or a buffer between the player, and the NPCs.

The other essential aspect for me is that, as the coach, you are a kind of go between, between the players and the captain, and between the players and the other players. So there are some things that the players don't want to talk to the captain about, but are prepared to talk to the coach about. The coach would say, look do you want me to have a quiet word with the captain and either they would say yes or no. (Alan Mould, England)

Part of my job was to sort of act as a buffer between the team and the captain, and to be the person to whom the team came to let off steam, or to express views as to how things were going. The most important part of the role while I was there was just being somebody that the team could talk to about anything, without necessarily having to put their views to the captain. I think generally players prefer the captain to tell them what to do. We don't want these long discussions about who wants to play and who doesn't want to play. (David Burn, England)

Similarly, coaches are viewed as playing an important function as a sounding board for players, or someone to 'blow off steam' to:

Well, he wouldn't come back to the table and berate his teammates or anything and he would always say, well we could have done better. But behind the scenes he had his share of gripes and I would be a sounding board. He'd call nine o'clock in the morning at tournaments and rant for an hour. He didn't want to talk to anybody else about it. (Eric Kokish, USA)

In addition to the coaches' role as a mediator, there are additional factors that are characterised by participants as important in relation to aspects of 'general coaching skills' for efficacy of coaching.

General coaching skills

Many players referred to the 'general coaching' skills as being part of the role of a 'good coach'. For example, one participant emphasises the unique nature of coaching in bridge, relative to other sports and suggests the methods have been developed through undertaking the role:

Certainly coach means something very different in bridge than it does in any other sport I think. I've actually said to a number of people, I'm coaching whoever I'm coaching, Scottish women or English women or whatever, and they say, oh right so you're setting five-mile runs? No. So

you give them two hundred hands to bid? No. So you look at their system? No. So it is different from that. The role in this country I think has more or less been single handedly developed by David Burn, who I think was the first coach of any England teams. We all sort of nicked from him. (Alan Mould, England)

Furthermore, the role of the coach is highly dependent on the personal and professional relationships with individuals, partnerships, or teams that they are working with. The successful coach may need to possess a great deal of high-level coaching knowledge alongside specialised skills. However, largely participants' experiences are described as positive when working with coaches [in contrast to the NPC role], for example:

There are some who can be a bit sort of prima-donna-ish and, yes, harder to get through what you want to get through than others, but it's not a huge spectrum in my experience. Maybe I've been extremely fortunate, but all the teams that I've coached have known each other, respected each other, even if they're not, you know, particularly the kind to warm with. (David Burn, England)

Coaching skill level and experience are deemed to be important factors in terms of the success of coaches. Similarly, having players receptive to coaching and to taking on board suggestions is seen as a potential enabler/barrier to success for coaches. It may lead to potential frustration, for example:

I think different people therefore bring to it different things, depending on the skill set and what they're prepared to do. There is a certain minimum thing that you have to do. One is the systems analysis, so the nature of the coach is to make sure the players go to the table and there shouldn't be anything that's come up that they don't know about and they don't know what's going on. They shouldn't arrive at the table and the auction starts one heart – pass - two diamonds which is diamonds or strong spades or hearts and clubs two suiter or balanced ten to twelve. They're going, whoa, what does two of diamonds mean? (Alan Mould, England)

I mean, obviously you can coach people – you are coaching people who are actually listening to you. It's frustrating if they're not, but then you can stop coaching them, or maybe they wouldn't have picked you to coach them in the first place. No, I don't see any downsides. (David Gold, England)

'Teaching' as an aspect of the coaching role is identified as a potentially useful skill. However, the role of a coach as a teacher is seen as slightly contentious for some participants. In contrast, teaching and coaching are viewed by others as synonymous and an opportunity to promote bridge and improve engagement with the mindsport to new players, as discussed by David and Liz:

I don't really like teaching. I mean, I can coach good players – that I enjoy, but teaching people how to play bridge – I think is just better suited to some other people. I'm not particularly good at getting the point across and it's unrewarding I find. Not many people come to bridge lessons that you really feel you can achieve something with them, unless you are lucky and you get some group of young, maybe really young people. But usually if you start bridge lessons, say in a bridge club, you get people who are taking up bridge really, if I'm honest – I'm not trying to be discriminatory – they are just too old, they should have started earlier. It's too difficult to take up bridge when you get past a certain age, in my personal opinion. (David Gold, England)

It was way back probably in the 80s, I went to a women's trial and I looked round and I was the only woman there from the East District. I thought this is bizarre because, although there are all these women in the West District who have played a lot in the Lady Milne, there are quite good players in the East District and they are not here. Why are they not here? I don't

know. What I'll do is I'll go back and I'll say are you interested in playing for Scottish ladies, let's have coaching sessions. So, I would do a coaching session for people and I suppose it was a bit pushy on my part. But I just felt there should be more women from the East and I thought it was lack of confidence that was causing them not to enter rather than a lack of ability. So, 54 women turned up. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

People management, acting as a mediator, and general coaching skills are viewed as important components of a 'good coach'. Teaching players can also act as an effective tool for coaches. However, this opinion varies from coach to coach and some coaches prefer teaching more than others. There are also a number of bridge-related skills that have been identified as important to the role of the coach.

Role of Coach: Developing Bridge Skills

The second theme relates to the role of the coach regarding the development of bridge skills, with a focus on: how players are 'prepared' for tournaments; the experience level of the coach, and how they deploy the use of 'strategy' and 'tactical knowledge' of bridge to gain success with players in tournaments.

Preparing players

A key function of the role of the coach is to prepare players and partnerships for important tournaments: "Well, what he does for us, preparing for the World Championships, is useful" (Eric Rodwell, USA). However, 'preparation' is also mentioned in terms of changing systems for players, involving high level knowledge of the mindsport, strategy and tactics of bridge in order to be successful:

I'd never done any of this before and never even knew what the role of a coach was. So I said, yes I would. It was a World Championship which in those days was just eight teams, so there wasn't an enormous amount of preparatory work to do except that three New Zealanders and one pair of Brazilians were all playing Stone, and Swedes as well, were all playing strong passes, which were more frequently used in those days. There were less restrictions on them for a start and more people were using them. In fact, Flint and Sheehan, the older generation, invented one of their own. So, there was a lot of work to be done on that aspect of things, but John Armstrong and Tony Forrester had made great studies because they were playing one of these themselves. It was something we knew a lot more about then than we do now because you hardly ever see such a system nowadays. (David Burn, England)

Additionally, it is noted that having a coach dedicated to taking on the role of 'preparing players' tactically and mentally, can improve the performance of players and has a positive impact on performance, providing a valuable resource for players to rely on in high pressure situations:

The difference that it makes is to help the team function, it just gives them an extra resource so that they're not thrown back on themselves the whole time in situations that are difficult. There's somebody there, somebody extra there, to help. (David Burn, England)

However, some participants view the role of the coach as of varying importance depending on the context, who the team is and mediated by experience of the coach, for example:

The coach's importance varies. It was very useful with us because especially since Justin's got plenty on his mind remembering what we're playing, he likes to be told the defence to something that should be obvious, like he likes to check what we're playing even over a club, pass, a transfer, right at the last minute. It's better if it comes from a coach than from me anyway because as much as I try and put the family relationship out of it, there's still a bit of business: oh you're always right, I'm always wrong or something! If one person writes the system and the other one struggles to learn it, it's usually the person who does write the system who is right, it's not something personal to say I'm always right! But for other people it's less important because they know what they're doing but still to have people point out what everybody is doing. And occasionally if you're that busy playing bridge, just having somebody to run an errand for you, so it's quite important for me because I've now realised that every time I play. (Jason Hackett, England)

Whilst for other participants the role of the coach as a 'researcher' holds more significance, as they are someone on the ground who could gain insider knowledge that could be used to players' advantage, especially against unknown opponents:

Well, he does a good job. He doesn't do a lot for our system, but especially for us, if we're in a World Championship, he does extensive research and gives us a scouting report on all of our opponents. So, even if it's a pair we've never played against, he'll research, find hands and so we can see examples and get a feel. He'll tell us what he knows and he knows players from all over the world. It's really helpful to have a little insight into how someone plays when you're going to play against them.

Any downsides?

Well I don't think there's anything that could be a downside. It's just an added bonus having a guy that's helping me. (Jeff Meckstroth, USA)

An important role of the coach is: Preparing players for events (tactically and mentally); ensuring players have a strategy in place to optimise player, partnership and team performance; and gaining 'insider knowledge', researching opponents, partnerships and other 'on the ground' practicalities. However, the success of a coach may be mediated by their experience level, as discussed in the following section.

Experience level of coach

In addition, to 'preparing' players for high-pressure tournaments and environments, the experience level of the coach appears to play an important factor in success of the coaches. Experience of both winning and losing and how to manage both well features heavily in accounts from coaches' perspectives. Eric illustrates this using an example from his younger playing days:

It's almost the same as when I was a player, when in 1978 we lost the world open pairs on the last session. We'd been leading for four sessions. Alright, from nowhere. And we're playing really well and the last day they posted a bunch of things to us and we finished just above average. And the Brazilians had about a 75% game and passed us at the wire. These were a couple of guys on the team when I was coaching in '85 and I knew them from '78 when they'd beaten us and we were very friendly. I didn't feel like we'd lost. It's sort of bad to finish second when you could have won but we'd put so much into it and that sort of gave us a little bit of a reputation and we got some professional opportunities. But I wasn't as deflated as I thought I was going to be if we lost. I still felt we'd done really well and I was proud of how we'd played. If I look back on it now, we probably didn't play that well. But at the time it felt like a victory. So I guess I projected that into some of the other situations where the team didn't win but they

played well and tried to convince them that they were on the right path and if they kept at it they would do well in the future - not to take this too hard. (Eric Kokish, USA)

Playing in an important event where they were ahead and fell behind can be hard to cope with. Eric used his personal experience to help other teams deal with tough situations under pressure. He coaches them to adapt to these pressures, and to recognise the feeling of pride regarding what they have achieved even in a losing situation.

Strategy and tactical skills

Furthermore, bridge strategy and tactical skills are deemed to be important for many players, with adaptability and flexibility in methods considered to be an advantage:

So you'll maybe change tactics as a team if it was a weaker or stronger team or if you are a lot ahead or a lot behind?

Yes, we might adjust the line-ups to deal with a perceived match situation. That would be more of a discussion between the captain and the coach rather than the players. I suppose that's a situation where you might adjust your thinking and not just rotate the pairs, which is mostly what we do in a round robin, because it's a comfortable thing to do. Pairs get into the routine and the young ones go out in the midday sun and do the lunchtime shopping and all the rest of it, and then the old ones sort of play two matches in a row, which would seem more relaxing for them.

You would have to abandon that in a knockout match pretty sharpish if things went poorly in the early game. If things went well, you would probably stick to your routine, although there is always the psychological advantage if you put on a big load in the first set, then the opposition won't want to see the same two pairs back again for the second set, so that's generally what you give them. That's about the only way in which you actually go around adjusting things according to the needs of the situation. You have less time to recover from catastrophe in the first set of a knockout match, so you would change your thinking in that respect. (Jason Hackett, England)

Coaches provide a resource for players to talk through their own playing style, and to better understand the best defense to make in different situations. They may also help remedy when things go wrong with communication or bidding misunderstandings in partnerships, for example:

The other two partnerships have come to me and said, what do you think we should do about this? We're defending against this, we're not sure what's the right defense - can you give us some thoughts? What I try and do then is to try and fix it within their general agreements, 'cause everything's always easier to work out if it's in with your general agreement. (David Burn, England)

Coaches must carefully balance the needs of individual players, partnerships and the team when recommending changes to strategy and tactics, whilst also adhering to the wider leadership structures involving the players, captains and NPCs. Jason describes this complex interplay in his comments. David also uses his bridge knowledge to offer suggestions that do not require drastic changes to 'general agreements' allowing for subtle tweaks to a strategy rather than drastic overhauls.

Challenges and Benefits for Coaches

The third theme regarding the role of the coach relates to the challenges coaches face and the personal and professional benefits of coaching for both the coach and players. This includes learning on the job and social factors that influence the coaching role.

Learning on the job

It is evident from the interviews that there are few formal training programmes for coaches operating in top level bridge. Many coaches use pre-existing approaches or adapt their own style as they learn and develop as players and coaches. As such, 'learning on the job' is identified as a potentially 'challenging' factor by both older men and women in terms of developing as coaches.

That was my first assignment and it was thrust upon me at fairly short notice when the European Championships finished at the end of June and the Bermuda Bowl started at the beginning of October. So, I hadn't got much time to do the work. But we did it and everybody said "Great job" and come to Venice for the Olympiad with the same team. So, I did that and then, you know, carried on being the British Coach in one respect or another.

How did you learn the role and what do you see it as now?

Well, very much on the job. I spoke with the Ladies Coach and he was very helpful - preparing stuff on what the opposition did and that it also helped to watch them to see whether or not they actually did what he said they did. And how they deviated from the methods when they were signalling particularly because that's not something that's disclosed terribly well on convention cards. Just to get as much advance information as you can before you play a particular team. The way I present stuff to the team it has been copied by other coaches, which is always good. It's just been a learning process like all bridge is a learning process. (David Burn, England)

Furthermore, some participants find that acting in the coaching role can be beneficial to their own development as players:

I would say if it did anything it helped being at a world championship where you get to see the best people in the world doing what they do. You are always learning stuff from the bridge that you play, or the bridge that you watch so you get a chance to see all sorts of things. Whether or not you can put them into practice is largely a matter of luck, but I certainly wouldn't have said it's got in the way of my game. (Eric Kokish, USA)

'Teaching' as a component of coaching is also identified as a beneficial skill for personal and professional development of coaches as players:

Most of them came not because they wanted to play in the Scottish women's team but just because they were quite interested in the idea of getting some coaching. I wasn't prepared for that, but I then ran a series of weekly things for women, they would come along on a Thursday afternoon and I would teach stuff. I found that teaching was a very good way of learning. I hate reading card combinations, it just turns me off completely. If you have to teach them, you have to learn. You have to know them and it was a good way of improving my own game with teaching. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Liz promotes teaching (in the context of coaching) as an enabler for focusing on areas of her own game that require attention or are not fully developed. This suggests that coaching can provide an opportunity for players of a high level to improve their game, become more rounded and balanced

players and to fill in the gaps of previous learning to continue developing as players.

Social factors that influence the coaching role

Several factors are also identified in terms of wider societal, community based and institutional dynamics that can have an impact on the wellbeing, performance, coaching style, and levels of success for coaching. For example, David identifies 'being a part of the scene' as an important social factor for coaching, whilst managing the social expectations of being a part of the bridge community:

It's just being part of the scene. Also I have friends all over the bridge world and these occasions mean physically meeting each other instead of posting messages on forums or sending emails or whatever, so there's a social aspect.

I thoroughly enjoy it. I mean, it's work because you need to be around when people want to talk to you and sometimes you have teams – some of them get up at 7 o'clock for breakfast and go to bed just after the sun goes down, while the others carry on drinking and socialising until it's time for the first lot to get up for breakfast. Well, it's not quite that bad, but it's a kind of candle at both ends job, but that's fine. I don't sleep that much anyway so that aspect of it isn't a problem. (David Burn, England)

Similarly, one participant frames 'coaching' in terms of the community aspect of 'giving something back' and the sense of fulfilment from passing on hard earned knowledge to the wider bridge community:

Coaching, well, effectively now you can feel you've achieved something, because when you're coaching people, they're already good at the game and you're helping to get them even better and you know you can do that. Also, I've had a lot out of the game so I'm very happy and always wanted to give something back. It's been great for me. With coaching people, you feel like you're giving some of the knowledge that you're lucky enough to have acquired back in helping people and it's a good thing to do. It's quite fun as well. (David Gold, England)

Some older women note gendered aspects to their experiences in the wider bridge community and how their communication style is interpreted due to their gender. Additionally, the dynamics involved with gender and generational divides in the wider bridge community may impact interpersonal team relationships at both a micro and macro level, as described by Liz:

Men would tend to be more reticent about stuff. But I'm possibly too blunt, I will say what I think, I'm not going to hide behind politeness or politics or anything like that - and maybe that upsets people. Occasionally I can tell that he's upset but he doesn't make a big thing of it. I mean a woman would be much more inclined to show it. I think maybe that's the reason I'm not so aware of it because men are more likely to just not say anything.

I would be very reluctant to suggest that my sex was more emotional than men. And I don't think we are, I think it is nurture. I think men are, especially men of my generation or even the older ones, even the following generation were expected not to show emotion. You know, you didn't cry, whereas the modern man is much freer I think, he's allowed to show emotion, he's allowed to cuddle people, he's allowed to show affection, he's allowed to look after his baby. So, I think it is a nurture thing, which I think may change. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Being a part of the bridge scene and 'giving something back' are viewed as important aspects of coaching that drives motivation and a 'sense of achievement' for coaches. 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 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that to be successful, coaches must possess a broad array of both practical and technical skills. They require adaptability and self-awareness in order to navigate the complex social and professional interactions that encompass their role. This section has evidenced a number of key themes: the role of the coach (interpersonal and team-based); the role of the coach (bridge-based skills); and challenges and benefits for coaches, that may be useful in terms of framing aspects of coaching that are distinct from the role of NPC and broader sports psychology professions. Coaches often act as mediators between the players and NPCs, prepare players for critical events (tactically and psychologically) and develop players' technical-skills and resilience.

Coaches are often also players, and the act of coaching can provide several benefits in terms of their own learning and development. In addition, this section has illustrated where coaches can be most useful, particularly in environments where resources may be limited or in areas where uptake of the mindsport by new players is poor. Finally, it is evident that coaches do not operate in a social vacuum, and that often coaches are deeply rooted members of the bridge community. They are not immune to the social factors such as gender and age divisions, which can add a level of complexity to coaching relationships, and success of team performance.

Advice for Aspiring Players

This section summarises the findings regarding accounts of ‘advice’ offered by elite bridge players to developing bridge players (see Table 3). The statements represent ‘advice’ they themselves have received (as they develop as players), or that they would offer, now, to the aspiring player.

Table 3: Key themes and sub-themes

Key themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Actions players can take to improve (personally motivated)	Study; Setting goals; Just play.
Theme 2: Team dependent actions/factors	Learn from others; Play with better players; Play with the right partner.
Theme 3: Bridge based advice/limitations for improvement	Coaching, mentors and technical skills; Geography, gender, age and social factors.

Player Actions to Improve (personally motivated)

The first theme identifies actions players can take to improve, that are ‘personally’ motivated: studying, setting goals, and playing often.

Studying the game

‘Studying the game’ is a key piece of advice offered (according to participants) to aspiring players who are looking to improve. Older and younger male players are quite uniform in their ‘advice’ that studying bridge through reading bridge books and magazines is key to accelerating one’s development as a player. In addition, observing top players at events and following their actions is perceived as helpful. For example, Liz and Andrew suggest ‘there is no substitute for reading’ and that reading a lot, observing top players and generally looking after oneself during a tournament is a route to success:

Study. There’s no substitute for, if you want to play better, defend better there’s no substitute for books. Also as far as bidding goes, you need to form a partnership and it’s probably a good idea to get a mentor or somebody to help you with improving your bidding. If you’re relatively inexperienced you will want to have someone to help your partnership. But I think as far as improving your card play and defense goes it’s up to you, you’ve got to read the books and do the quizzes and that sort of thing, I don’t think anyone else can teach you. You can go to coaching sessions, anything like that will help, but when it boils down to it you’ve got to study the stuff yourself. I don’t think anyone else can do it for you. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Read a lot. Watch BBO, the top players. Obviously play with as good players as you can play with and follow internet forums and talking about hands or read magazines and, yes, set yourself a high bar and try and come to the table and give every hand your best and try and sleep reasonably well. (Andrew Robson, England)

These sentiments are echoed by others who suggest tuning in to commentary and match analysis for tips and building a rapport with bridge partners to hone skills. Whereas access to coaching and studying systems are mentioned as important by other players:

Nowadays, besides reading a lot, they can look at BBO matches, especially if you can get some good commentators. I was watching the Cavendish which was being played in Monaco and sometimes they have top class commentators. It is good to watch how top players play the dummy. (John Matheson, Scotland)

Reading and watching. I'd say if you go play pair games the hand records are a great thing. Instead of going over the auctions, look at what you could have done. Go to your partner, ask them why they led this card, what you could have done to help them – that's the big thing. What card should I have played to make the defense easier for you? (Mike Passell, USA)

I think that there are some that will put in a fair bit of study when they are given access to a coach. They'd do a fair bit of work then, but I think on a day-to-day basis they won't put in any time actually studying. It will just be a bit of brushing up on the system before the event. (Mike Bell, England)

'Studying the game' is a core piece of advice offered to developing players. Actively studying bridge skills (reading books, watching matches and observing top players) can help players understand both the practical and technical demands of the game and can be a good strategy for those wanting to improve their skillsets and understand the subtleties of bridge. Observing top bridge players at events can also provide a greater sense and understanding of the practical and technical requirements to improve as a player and helps players to understand flaws in their own approaches. Additionally, 'studying' can be a self-motivated action that uses publicly available resources and requires little investment on the part of NBOs. As such, this may be a useful starting point for players who do not have access to tailored training programmes, coaches and mentors. 'Goal setting' is also seen as important for player development and is discussed in more detail in the following section.

Setting goals

Older male and female players identify 'Goal setting' as an important element for success of the novice or developing bridge player. For example, Andrew suggests that setting high and realistic goals can be a recipe for success:

Set yourself high goals but don't try and get them all in one go and, yes, be hard on yourself in a way. (Andrew Robson, England)

Additionally, Tony notes that understanding what level you want to play at could be important in terms of achieving goals:

I think one of the major things is you have got to decide what kind of level you want to achieve. Just how high do you want to go in the game 'cos the higher you want to go, the more effort it is going to be and the more disappointments there will be along the way. (Tony Forrester, England)

Hard work and goal setting are also established as important factors for developing players:

I think to get to a certain degree of competency anybody can, but it requires hard work and it does require the desire to do that. If you just want to enjoy it, you can enjoy it and play at quite a low [ish] level. But if you want to get to play at a decent level, you have to put the work in, there's no shortcut. (Samantha Punch, Scotland)

Goal setting is deemed to be an important element for improving over time and for sustaining motivation by seeing and achieving small steps regarding progress. Many participants also suggest that getting as much game time as possible is beneficial: “The more situations you see, the more familiar it gets” (Tony Forrester, England).

Just play

‘Just playing’ emerged as a prominent piece of advice to developing players. Getting experience in competitive settings is seen as a practical way by many players for people to improve their overall game: “you just need to play a thousand after a thousand after a thousand hands until so many of these things become automatic to you, some of these things you don’t need to think about” (Alan Mould, England). For example, one participant suggested that getting game time was more beneficial than just reading about bridge. However, playing needs to be accompanied with post-match analysis:

Just play. You learn stuff by doing it, not by listening to people talking about it, not by reading it. We remember about a fifth of what we hear – we remember about 95% of what we actually do. Get online and play. Keep playing and analyse what you do – the review sessions are the greatest path to learning. You finish a set of boards, go through them one at a time in as much detail as you can. Suddenly you say, crikey, I shouldn’t have done that. Bridge is a game unlike any other – and you hit the ball into the net every second shot. It’s the nature of the game, it’s a game of mistakes. (David Burn, England)

Most agreed that playing with and against better players is a key way to improve. However, Tony suggests that playing against and with weaker players is also important for learning how to make decisions as a player:

I mean most people dismiss playing with weaker players as being something that you should never do, but actually it is quite important, ‘cos you learn to be more than half the partnership. You learn to make more decisions yourself and realise when the right and wrong time is. And then obviously playing with stronger players is self-evident to improve your game. (Tony Forrester, England)

This sentiment was echoed in relation to getting ‘hours at the table’ and finding people who are more experienced to assist the learning and development of players:

That work could be that you learn by hours and hours playing at the table, or it could be that you learn through reading books, or it could be that you learn through discussing with players better than you. There are different routes but you should have somebody that you can ask, who you respect, who’s a decent player, that can point you in the right direction. (Samantha Punch, Scotland)

‘Just playing’ is a practical and useful approach for players to take when they are looking to improve. Playing with weaker and better players and getting as many hours as possible of real-world experience can benefit aspiring players, help them to develop their technical skills and assist in (organically) developing mentoring relationships within the wider bridge community. As such, there may be benefits for aspiring and experienced players (regardless of skill-level) to be ‘fielded’ at non-critical events. This would allow a greater number of opportunities for player development and for players to organically learn from each other in these contexts. This also does not necessarily require a high level of financial investment at NBO level but rather a consistent approach that gives players more opportunities to get experience playing at events and in different partnerships.

Team Dependent Actions for Improvement

The second theme identifies advice that is dependent on the co-operation of the team and availability of top players to learn from in wider bridge networks: learn from others, play with better players and play with the right partner.

Learn from others

Older male and female bridge players agree that 'learning from others' can be a good practical resource for improving as a bridge player. However, this requires cooperation from a team or wider network of 'good players' potentially to be a useful resource for developing players. For example, Jason suggests that asking advice in addition to studying can be beneficial for improving as a player:

I'd say first of all, if you're ever unsure about something, try and get the views of people who know what they're talking about, and the other thing is read and watch. That helped a lot for me - looking to see what other people have done because if you've played in a big championship you can see all the results of the auctions. If there's been any Vugraph action, you can look at that. If you're not sure whether you've done the right thing, you can see what Bocchi and Helgemo have all done on the hand and if they all do the same thing and you've done something else, there's a fair chance that you're wrong. (Jason Hackett, England)

Working constructively with a team, listening to advice and feedback, self-reflecting on strengths and weaknesses, and 'enjoying playing' are drivers for improvement for players:

If you make a mistake, don't shrug it off. Go through all the boards with your partners, teams, listen to them and don't be shy to say, you know, admit your errors and ask why should I have got such and such right. Yes, you're on the way to greatness, potentially. (Andrew Robson, England)

Work on your weaknesses, whatever they may be, have fun. It's a question of taking it seriously but not taking it so seriously on an emotional level that it's detrimental. (Eric Rodwell, USA)

Many players have found post-match analysis or directly asking for feedback from other players to be a useful resource for improving their skills. Getting different perspectives and advice from other players can help to focus players' efforts on areas they need to improve and can be invaluable:

I spent some time asking players their views. I had the opportunity to do that a lot, and it improved my game tremendously. Even just try to sit and watch and then try and discuss things with them afterwards if that's possible. One shouldn't be shy, many of the good players like discussing bridge. And that makes a huge difference - trying to understand how they think. (Sabine Auken, Germany)

Learning and 'picking up' on different methods in a team environment is also a potentially useful resource for improvement:

Precision, stuff that people are playing, very different leading methods, signalling methods and stuff you have to get used to, such as the fact that when they lead a 2 they haven't necessarily got an honour. You can tend to think too much like an English person and you have to realise that people lead low from a doubleton and it's completely normal for them to do so. (Heather Dhondy, England)

Learning the game and studying the technical positions is considered important alongside learning from others by asking questions and hearing their views. These aspects require a level of self motivation (from the player) to learn and improve but also cooperation from and access to experienced players that are able and willing to share their skills. Nevertheless, the greatest level of performance boost is perceived as coming from the opportunity to play with better players.

Play with better players

Playing with better players is a common theme that emerges from the interviews as a route in terms of strategies for player development. This is a view more commonly held by older women, relative to other groups. For example, Jill suggests a good approach is to play against the best competition: "Play verses the best competition and learn from your mistakes" (Jill Levin, USA). Similarly, having the confidence to play and to ask for help is viewed as important by Ciara: "I would tell them that they should have the courage of their convictions, and ask better people to play with them, don't be afraid of people, because it's the only way to get better is to play with good players." (Ciara Burns, Northern Ireland). Combining hard work and playing with good players is seen as a vital component to improving as a player:

Play with good players talk to good players, just pick up stuff wherever you can. Go abroad and play in these competitions, play in the European Pairs and European Teams. You're not going to learn what foreign bridge is all about by sitting here playing against Acol weak NT. Get out there and play against people who are playing Polish Club, short club, Precision. I would advise you to go abroad and work, work, work on your partnership and make sure your agreements are solid, you are confident in what your partner means by bids when they come up. (Heather Dhondy, England)

These sentiments are echoed by both younger and older male bridge players suggesting there is uniformity in this advice across all gender and age ranges, for example Joel states: "If you really want to get better, you need to play with someone who's good." (Joel Woodridge, USA). Whereas Brian proposes that playing with better players can lead to improvement: "Play with better players whenever you can." (Brian Senior, England)

Play with the right partner

Playing with 'the right' partner is an important piece of advice for player development. Artur suggests that having a partner at a similar level is important in order to develop as a partnership:

The problem is that you have to have a partner or team of your level or about your level to continue improving, because professionals are not the solution. You can get better yourself but you still need one or two people at a good level who are asking the same questions. If they choose to play with top professionals, they are improving but they are still becoming kind of sponsors because they can't be in a partnership because they don't have anybody on their level to be in a partnership.

With professionals you don't have a proper partnership, they play with you when you pay them or even if it's for free it's not proper partnership. So you have to find somebody else as committed as you and build that partnership close to your level, it is the only way to do it really. (Artur Malinowski, England)

Whilst Artur acknowledges that playing with a professional can be a useful way to improve as a player, it is not necessarily a longer-term solution. He suggests that players can develop together as a partnership if they are keen take their game to a higher level. Similarly, wanting to learn, motivation and commitment can be a key barometer of success for partnerships looking to improve their game

together as Jeff points out:

Get a good partner. It's a partnership game. You can grow together with your partner. That's one thing with Rodwell and I, we've learnt so much from the other one. We're both very different and we've learnt. I've learnt so much from him and he's learnt so much from me, just because we think about things in a different way. (Jeff Meckstroth, US)

Play with someone else who also wants to improve, if you genuinely want to learn there is a lot of internet bridge fora around where you can simply post questions. (Frances Hinden, England)

Then pick the right person to play with who is not just going to try to play all the hands. Somebody who has actually got a vested interest in making you a better bridge player. But before you do any of that, really, it's a question of where do you want to go? (Tony Forrester, England)

If you are lucky enough to play with someone better than you, then do ensure that they know you want to develop and improve, not just achieve good results through playing with them. As Tony's quote suggests, you need to know what level you are trying to achieve, and how much work you are willing to put in. There are various routes to reach your goals and to some extent that will depend on available opportunities. This may include developing alongside another aspiring player who has similar ambitions and/or playing with better players who are willing to point you in the right direction and share their advice.

Bridge-based Advice and Limitations for Improvement

Coaching, mentors and technical skills

Older male and female bridge players suggest that gaining access to coaching, a mentor and developing technical skills are positive steps for improving as a player. For example, Jason notes the importance of coaching for player development, caveated with acknowledgement that these resources are not always available:

Take more time to analyse your game afterwards, that is so important. After the European Championships, we managed to get Simon Cope up because he'd been doing coaching work for us, to actually review the boards that we played because it's so important. When you're forming your bidding agreements, it's like a big dam, you're just trying to plug holes all the time and eventually if you do enough of it and discuss it enough, there's hardly a hole left that any of the water can get through. So for any pair that is so important to review.

The EBU paid for that. I mean obviously for most people they can't access that. You could find a bridge playing friend and write down what you're discussing, and you'll get him to do that. And then do it for them so there's no issue of payment. (Jason Hackett, England)

In contrast, enjoyment of the game, getting experience and professional guidance are advised by Artur. Whereas Tony suggests that professional coaching can be a means to manage development and expectations, such as balancing winning and losing matches whilst developing as a player:

Start enjoying what you are doing. You need to play a lot of bridge, get somebody with you who wants to play and get somebody better in modern bridge. You need somebody like a bridge professional who can guide you a bit to point out things, but you have to be careful who it is and that depends on how your bridge relationships are. (Artur Malinowski, England)

You are going to have to get someone to help coach you and there's going to be an awful lot of bad results in amongst the good results. (Tony Forrester, England)

Mentoring is a possible route for developing players, although, this is dependent on time available and (the quality of) players in local networks. Access to coaching, and support to develop technical skills are also discussed as important. However, these resources, unless organically sourced by the player (possibly at their own expense) are likely to be reserved for higher level pairs or players playing at international level. Whilst these resources can be sought out by leveraging social connections without incurring costs (as suggested by Jason above), this may not benefit players that are newer to bridge or who lack enough social connections in the bridge world to ask for this type of assistance. As a result, many players may not be able to rely on receiving support from more experienced players or coaches to develop their skills or may not have the funds available to pay for this type of support privately.

Geography, gender, age and social factors

Several limiting factors for player development exist in relation to the geographical location of a player, their club and NBO; the quality of bridge partners available; whether partnerships have similar ambitions to develop their game; opportunities to play on good teams; and other social factors such as age and gender. Players are likely to find enablers and barriers exist within their clubs and more widely within their NBOs (see NBO Training Report). This may be due to limited financial resources or funding, or lack of access to training and mentoring being provided. Some players are likely to have access to more opportunities to develop than others, based on where they live. However, online events and training may mitigate some of these factors if adopted more widely by smaller or underfunded NBOs.

In terms of social issues such as age and gender, some players prefer to play with others of a similar age and/or gender but it is not always possible to find the 'right' partner who is committed to improving at the same pace. Key differences are also noted in terms of how men and women experience the 'professional' aspects of bridge and to what extent this drives or motivates them. Tony suggests that there are not as many professional players that are women and that this may affect the competitiveness of the women's category:

The thing is the professional argument doesn't quite work the same in the women's game as it does in the men's game. In the men's game, the professional aspect is hugely important but in the women's game, there are not that many professional women players in the UK, very few in fact. So you're not going to be competing against professionals in that sense of the word, not in the women's game. (Tony Forrester, England)

Advice Conclusion

In conclusion, this report has presented and summarised three key types of 'advice' offered to developing players. Top players generally consider that studying the game on a technical level, reading books, getting 'hours at the table' playing, as well as observing and learning from others are practical, self-motivated tasks that can be practiced by any bridge player. These aspects of advice require personal motivation on the part of the individual players and partnerships. Many of the resources suggested (i.e. reading material and observation of top players at events) can be accessed without significant financial costs being incurred by the players or NBOs. As such, these represent a good starting point for players looking to step up their game or stretch their skills. Self-motivated efforts of players to improve can be supported clubs and NBOs providing regular access to (in-person and online) events, recommended reading materials and general advice to support player development.

Many of the participants suggest that partnerships can be a challenge to negotiate for players. Finding the right partner, accessing coaching and playing with better players are more dependent on opportunities mediated by access to high level (good quality) bridge networks. Limitations are additionally identified regarding 'stepping up' to higher level tournaments dependent on geographical location, the gender divides present in relation to navigating mixed teams, and open and women's tournaments. These factors may require further exploration, in terms of the extent to which these issues can be addressed on a club by club basis. Alternatively a more joined up approach might be necessary to distribute training, coaching, mentoring and 'professional' playing opportunities more evenly, particularly across the open, women's and mixed categories as significantly fewer women are noted as playing professionally (see [Russell et al., 2022](#)).

Player Regrets

This section summarises the interview findings which address the regrets of players, particularly in relation to the enablers and barriers to becoming 'better' bridge players. The three key themes identified are player personal regrets/decisions that impacted career development; team-based regrets and work ethic (see Table 4).

Table 4: Key themes and sub-themes

Key themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Player personal regrets/decisions that impact career development	Bridge-Life balance; Started playing too late
Theme 2: Team based regrets	Not being a better partner/team member
Theme 3: Work ethic	Not studying enough; Working harder

Personal Regrets/Decisions that Impact Career Development

The first theme identifies player accounts of personal regrets and decisions they have made, that may have impacted career and player development.

Bridge-life balance

For older male and female bridge players an issue is identified in relation to regrets associated with balancing the pressures of bridge with general family and life stressors or the 'bridge-life balance'. For example, Alan describes struggling to balance furthering his bridge career with family commitments (in relation to playing professional bridge):

If I became a full-time bridge professional, I would just be away from my home for weeks at a time and you've got to be playing in the evenings. Whereas of course your partner unless they're a bridge player is working during the day and is available in the evenings. I gave it a kind of a few passing thoughts and thought, nah, this doesn't work. (Alan Mould, England)

Simon alludes to the family pressures of being away from home regularly for bridge events and the guilt he feels over this. Similarly, Liz has made sacrifices to balance bridge with other commitments, and several players also mention regrets over matches or tournaments they might have won:

My youngest son regularly says "I see you're off playing bridge again abandoning the family!" So it's like, he knows how to wind me up!

Does it make you feel a bit guilty?

Yeah! There's nothing worse than being in a hotel room waking up in the morning, not doing well in the event in a foreign country, knowing that you're not playing well. The team is not playing well and you miss your family, so that's not so good. (Simon Gillis, England)

I don't think I have any major regrets. Sacrifices, I mean obviously there are lots of events where you could have done better. Venice is the one where we lost the final by something or other.

Could have won it and that was very upsetting at the time, but you learn to live with that sort of thing. (Liz McGowan, Scotland)

Additionally, balancing the pressures of playing bridge with work may result in feelings of burnout for some, which could impact player performance or be unsustainable for players in the longer term, for example:

I think sometimes, particularly because of work, I've often gone to events not being as stocked up on sleep as I could be. So I'm starting the event not fully with the batteries charged and then you're playing the event and I've relied a lot on adrenaline. I've actually encouraged the adrenaline, drunk lots of coffee to get the adrenaline going to make sure that I'm concentrating and lucid. And I think I've overdone that and my body has become so used to that, that it's lost the ability to relax. I just feel that I'm often just so keyed up and the brain doesn't switch off and it's really hard to just completely relax. I find as I'm now getting older that's starting to take its toll. I've got to get a better balance between the two things and I've got to get more of just no bridge, no work time. I can't sustain it, so I think I've got to look at bridge and maybe just stop playing the lesser events and just be a bit more selective about what I play. So that when I play, I can concentrate on playing my best and trying to win rather than going along thinking, oh god I'm quite knackered and I've got to get through this. (Samantha Punch, Scotland)

Furthermore, some players express a sense of 'missed opportunities' from taking time out, or not fully committing at points in their life to developing as a bridge player. There is also a sense of loss that to some extent the game has changed and their ability to 'play like they used to' has lessened with time and age.

I stopped going to tournaments for about ten years. I've started going again now. There's a lot of my social life there so I started going back to that. But the game is now different for me, it will never be the same again. I will never be the player I once was. That's a source of sadness to me and it's a source of irritation that I can't play as well as I used to, and I make far more mistakes. But you just have to accept that that's the way it is or you've got to play a load more and I haven't got the time, my life doesn't allow that anymore. (Alan Mould, England)

Started playing too late

Whilst some players express concern in relation to balancing bridge with life pressures, there are also accounts of regrets of 'starting too late' and missing out on vital player development in their earlier years, in addition to having to balance work-life pressures, for example:

I would have liked to have started earlier. If I'd started at 16 or something where I could have got in a lot more hours playing to get my card play up to the level I'd like it to have been at. And that is hours and hours of playing whereas if you learn when you're already in a full-time job, it's limited as to how many hours you can dedicate to playing. If I learnt when I was at university, I mean I spent hours and hours at university playing pool so instead of playing pool I could have been playing bridge. My game would be better now as a result of it. (Samantha Punch, Scotland)

Players can find it challenging to balance the demands of bridge (time commitment and the pressures of playing to a high level) with their non-bridge life (family commitments and work). For many players this results in feeling regretful that they could have done more to develop as players. Many players also suggest their playing careers could have been more successful had they struck a better balance with these factors. There are generally more limited opportunities for older bridge players to engage

with formal training and development programmes, as many of these initiatives are reserved for junior players. Providing more comprehensive training opportunities to non-juniors may enable players to feel more fulfilled, motivated and give them a more competitive edge.

Team-based Regrets

Not being a better partner/team member

For both younger and older male bridge players, not being 'a better partner' appears to be a prominent regret featured. For example, Mike notes that when he was younger his temper impacted his relationship with his bridge partner (and wife): "I regret not being a better partner at times, especially in my younger days, when I had a pretty bad temper at times" (Mike Passell, USA). He also expresses regrets over not being nicer to his partner: "I wish I had been, especially sometimes playing with my wife I wasn't very nice to her." Similarly, Justin, had regrets over losing important partnerships: "I would say I didn't play well enough in the final of the Bermuda bowl. I don't know. I regret losing my partnership" (Justin Lall, USA). Michael expresses that his performance in certain team environments has led to regrets:

Unfortunately, when I played we got a chance to play in the Nationals one year and I played poorly with her that year, and our whole team didn't play as well as we should. We played with Sabine and Daniella, that was our team, but our team did not play as well. We came third in the Reisinger but on the whole we did badly. So that's a pretty major regret for me that I didn't play better in that team. (Michael Rosenberg, USA)

Bridge is a very social mindsport and relies heavily on the interpersonal relationships that exist between pairs and the wider team. Despite this, having amicable relationships and good communication between pairs and the wider team is not guaranteed. With hindsight many of the players reflect upon how they could have improved their behaviour within partnerships. However, proactive action by coaches, captains and a joined up approach at a wider club or NBO level could assist with matching players with compatible partners more effectively. Additionally, putting formal procedures in place to deal with conflict between pairs and team members could help to mitigate relationship problems before they impact the performance of the team and lead to regrets for players.

Work Ethic

The third theme relates to 'regrets' expressed regarding poor 'work ethic' impacting their player development.

Not studying enough

For some players 'work ethic' and specifically 'not studying enough' represents a regret in terms of their player development, for example:

If I had my time all over again, I would have studied much more rather than played all the time. I would have really gone to town and spent time like the professionals do -going through everything in their mind and discussing it. (Bernard Teltscher, England)

Working harder

For younger female bridge players, issues around not 'working hard enough' appear to be a salient regret in terms of their player development. For example, one younger female player expresses frustration with not 'putting the effort in' at a younger age and felt that it may have impacted how their current partnership is viewed by the wider team. These sentiments are shown in the following examples from Yvonne and Sinead:

I wish I'd made more of an effort in Juniors and actually tried to get more help at an earlier age and get better. I think things would have been different now. If we had played a bit more bridge and been to more competitions and tried to get coaching from an early age it would have made people view Ralph's and my partnership differently for the Junior squad. (Yvonne Wiseman, Scotland)

I should be a better bridge player. I should have definitely worked harder this year in the lead up to playing in Germany. I regret not doing that 'cause obviously this is my last chance as a junior as well. I should have played more bridge. (Sinead Bird, England)

Having a good work ethic can enable players to continue to develop and to study and learn from mistakes. However, for players many regrets exist around not working harder to support their development as players. A lack of studying and not making the most of the training and development opportunities that come with being a junior (training, support etc.) are the most prominently featured concerns raised by players in relation to these issues.

Regrets Conclusion

This section has had a particular focus on uncovering how players' regrets have impacted their bridge careers and development as players. It is evident that players often struggle with regrets around work-life and 'bridge-life' balance. Non-professional international players find it difficult to balance their ambition to be 'top players' with work and family life, and can sometimes feel a sense of loss, 'missed opportunities' or in some instances 'burn out' by trying to do too much. Such challenges can be less of an issue for professional players where bridge is their main employment. Interestingly, for younger female players 'regrets' are expressed around 'work ethic' with both accounts describing a desire to have 'worked harder' to gain greater recognition within their current teams. Players also express regrets around not performing at their best in partnerships or as part of the team.

Increased discussion around player 'regrets' or difficulties experienced by players across their playing career may be useful in terms of opening a dialogue or signposting people to any support available for players who might be feeling overwhelmed, or perhaps to uncover players in need of support or motivation. This may be particularly relevant at the junior level where players refer to a desire to 'work harder' and gain greater respect from their team-mates, and with older player who express the greatest level of distress with navigating the difficult work-life and bridge-life balance and who are less likely to gain access to tailored training programmes (reserved for juniors).

Implications for Practice

This report has shown that tailored support could be offered to older and younger players to help to support their development based on their different needs. A one size fits all approach to training and development may allow players with potential to fall through the cracks. Furthermore, these interview findings indicate that training regarding the roles of NPC and coach for elite bridge teams could be beneficial as it is in other sporting arenas. Aspiring players are also likely to benefit from greater

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 the bridge community, not much attention has been given to the potential benefits of a 'good' NPC and coach. For some NBOs, the selection of the NPC may be relatively ad hoc depending on who is available and who the team are happy to nominate. This may mean that NPCs change from event to event rather than an NPC having an on-going relationship with a team. For other NBOs, there is a more formal, structured approach to NPC selection. Many national bridge organisations do not have the resources to fund team coaches as well as NPCs (see NBO Training Report).

Regardless of the approach, there is very little documentation regarding the nature of the roles or information to help new NPCs or coaches prepare. According to the findings in this report, there is much value to be gained through the involvement of good NPCs and coaches. Players new to these positions could benefit from training and raised awareness of the potential team impacts of their roles. Both roles, but particularly the coaching relationship, can benefit from being long term, rather than for a one-off event.

This report contributes to developing an understanding of what players and organisations are looking for when appointing an NPC or a coach. It could be used as part of training to prepare new NPCs and coaches for those roles. When successful, a good NPC and coach can help to maximise the performance of bridge teams by getting the most out of individual players and partnerships in high-pressured team contexts.

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