

Partnership Training at Top Level Bridge

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Tournament bridge players comprise a myriad spectrum across varying skill levels and length of partnerships. There are widespread materials available on coaching/training/teaching players at lower skill levels, but this paper concerns itself only with the technical elements of coaching and training of elite level players/partnership (World Bridge Federation's Top-100).

Out of Scope: Bridge has lot of non-technical aspects like “experience of playing at the highest level”, “managing emotions at the table”, “handling pressure under stress”, “partnership Inter-personnel issues’. For the purpose of this report, those topics are out of scope.

The Problem Statement

Very little information about top level partnership training is available on the web. The best resource is an article written by Duboin on how he prepared with Zia when they decided to play together. The focus of the article was on building the system notes and how it took almost three months for them to come up with a 100-page long general set of agreements amenable to both players. The link to the article is given below and is highly recommended for anyone who is planning to form a partnership:

<https://neapolitanclub.altervista.org/eng/italian-style-duboins-column-1-100-page-journey-zia.html>

Research Methodology and Approach

In order to establish what training/coaching activities are undertaken by the top partnerships around the world, enquiries across five questions were made. The findings are summarized under each question. Before we look at these, it would be of value to understand the complexities of forming, sustaining and improving a world class bridge partnership.

There are basically 3 types of partnerships:

The long, established partnerships: Two world class experts, who have been playing together for a long period of time (taking 5+ years as benchmark), have produced results at top tier competitions on a consistent basis and are generally part of a professional and/or National teams. They have produced excellent results in WBF and NABC tournaments.

They generally have well documented system notes and the players know each other's style very well. They have lot of experience playing at the top level and consistently bring out their best under pressure.

Examples: Jeff Meckstroth-Eric Rodwell, Helgemo-Helness, Kalita-Nowosadzki, Weinstein-Levin, Greco-Hampson, Brink-Driver (Note: Some of them no longer play together, but have had a long run as successful partnership)

The recent ones: These are two world class players, who are planning to play together or have been playing together a limited time lower than the benchmark of 5 years. Zia-Duboin would belong this category for the time that they played together.

The players individually are highly experienced at playing in top tier competitions. However, as a partnership, they are in the process of formalizing their agreements and understanding each other's style.

The sponsor-pro pair: These are the partnerships where you have a sponsor and a professional playing as a partnership. They may have been playing for long time; however, their requirements are different from the partnerships mentioned above.

The interviews were conducted across all classes of partnerships and the answers below are an amalgamation of the responses.

1. What does your partnership do for training?

The long, established partnerships: Most of them **play a LOT of bridge together throughout the year.** That is their primary source of practice/training. After every tournament, **they analyze their boards** and then go back to refine/improve their system notes, if necessary. Some pairs identify their areas of focus and have a coach who helps them train on those areas. The coach provides them with hands, and they practice.

The recent ones: **Spend a lot of time developing a set of general agreements through discussions.** Then they typically go to Bridge Base Online, bid some hands together and discuss the situations that come up. After each tournament, they will go through the hands, and improve their agreements.

The sponsor-pro pair: This partnership is the most interesting one. Here the development is mostly led by the professional. Most of the focus is to bring the 'sponsor' uptodate on the intricacies of the uncontested auctions and to have the basic contested auction scenarios (and developments) discussed. The expectation from the partnership in the team is "not to drop IMPs".

2. As per your knowledge, what do other top partnerships around the world do?

In majority of the cases, the focus is on having the general agreements sorted out via discussions (often long ones). Seasoned partnerships focus on improving their methods, while the recent partnerships are more focused on having their approach/style and agreement synced up.

A couple of top teams (and few National teams) have coaches who help them prepare. (unable to find too many details of their training programs, but would assume they provide hands for the partnership to practice all types of scenarios)

Partnership uses BBO mostly, set some constraints, and practice
Uses BBO archives (generally with 4 people) and then just "bid and claim" on pre-played hands.

3. Are you aware of any formal/structured training programs in the world?

The Netherlands appears to be the only country that has a structured training program. The players meet once weekly, play preset hands and then discuss as a team. The Netherlands has been having some phenomenal success in international competition in recent times, and a lot of it is attributed to this training program.

There has been some other (prior) training program, but they have mostly been "time bound". The French NBO ran a 4-year program from 2014-2017. Australia had a 1-year program in ~2005. Indonesia had a training program before Asian Games 2018. But none of these programs ran on a sustained basis and none of them exist right now.

Two top professional teams have a full-time coach who help them train on a regular basis. Some partnerships (though very limited), work with some coaches from time to time who provide them with hands on various topics and help them train.

4. Do you think training is necessary at top level?

Absolutely. To perform at the top level, you need to be at the top of your game. The partnerships need to be prepared on handling high level competition, defensive priorities/signaling. They wish to avoid second guessing partner. The only way to do it is by simulation of situations, practice and discussion.

4.1 If yes, what would you like to train for?

Partnership: High level competitive auctions, defense. Some practice on tricky hands where they have to bid thin games/slams (or avoid it).

Individual: Some individuals have specific needs to practice declarer play. That is more of an individual area of improvement rather than partnership development.

5. What are the challenges for training?

Time: Because of other professional commitments, some of the partnerships do not get ample time to practice/play as a pair.

Finding the right resources: Even if they want to, it is difficult to get four people together to have some meaningful practice. Not aware of coaches/trainers who can train top level.

Funding: This is the biggest challenge. To employ a coach for training, requires funding. Unless you are playing in top professional teams or it is funded by the NBO (most of the NBOs direct their limited fund for training juniors), WC players are mostly on their own.

What type of work do I do with the top pairs?

When I started working with top players, I encountered the same problems for training. I (quickly) realized that there cannot be "one size fit all" model to address the problem. In my experience, as a starting point, it is useful to categorize the type of partnership and come up with a bespoke model for the partnership.

When a partnership approaches me, the first thing that I do is have a detailed discussion on which areas they need work. I then create training hands for them on the topic(s). My general approach is that I will seat in the opposite direction (both the seats) and bid/play/defend depending on the topic we are working on. I also have access to how the hand was bid/played/defended in real life, so that I simulate the table condition as close to reality as possible.

Below are some examples on each of the "types" of partnership that I have worked with, and what I did for them.

1. Long-Term partnership

This partnership identified "High Level Competitive auction" as their primary focus area. We did close to 300+ hands on competitive hands over a period of next 4 months. After playing few tournaments, the partnership improved in competitive auction. They now wanted to focus more on defense. We have been working for last couple of months on that.

2. Recent partnership

This partnership wanted to work primarily on their game/slam bidding when there are preemptive interferences.

3. Sponsor-pro partnership

Here the focus was that both can remember their agreements in uncontested & contested auctions (typically, 3rd/4th round of bidding onwards).

Another example is when I worked with a WC player, who needed to practice declarer play. Same approach. I took hands which in real life made at one table, went down at the other.

For teams, I would often setup matches and have preset hands on the same principles. They would play a set of 16 boards, which are a combination of the various partnership topics. That way, they are spending time on quality practice, rather than playing the 3NT+2 or 4M+1 types of contracts.

To summarize, requirements of different partnerships are different. Most of the time, they know what they are looking for. I have a large database of relevant hands. I sit down in the opposite direction, duplicate what happened in the table in real life and the partnership (or individual) gets close to real life practice. Focus of my training is to improve the technical aspects of their game in areas which produce swings in real life.

My views of what else can be done in this area?

Bridge training at top level is completely unstructured at the moment. Designing a training program will have to be a combination of multiple factors as described above.

The "unit" in case of Bridge is a partnership. A team consists for three such units. You must work on each unit independently to achieve your desired outcome. When you are planning to create a team (like a National team), it is often beneficial to work with 4-6 pairs.

Here is my thought process how I would approach it:

- Understand the "type" of partnership you are working with – this is the key
- Have discussions with them.
- Analyze their recent tournaments
- Identify core areas you need to work on (this will be different for each partnership)
- Have focused materials/hands for those topics and have regular, long-term training program
- Have them play enough tournaments at top level (experience is the key)

Optional:

- Play regular team matches only against good opponents (preferably with some preset hands)
- Analysis of "things which went wrong" for every tournament and Improving Agreements

While all the above is not rocket science, the most important aspect is the discipline to do it regularly. That is why, you require a coach/trainer who will work on all these aspects. This model can be extended to any professional or National team. I am confident that this will produce results in medium to long term.

Summary

When I started this exploratory research, I thought there must be a whole lot of things that the top players do to maintain their competitive edge. But the reality is quite different. At best, training is ad-hoc, unstructured and mostly depends on the partnership's availability, willingness, and duration. Even though most of the top players think that training will help them improve, barring few exceptions, training at top level is limited to actual playing. This is an area that needs to be focused on, can be viewed as a drawback or area of opportunity depending on how you look at the problem. One thing for sure, players who focus on regular training, put in the effort do well at the top level.

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