



# Keeping Bridge Alive

## A Kib interview with Samantha Punch

I first met Samantha Punch at the 2011 Toronto NABCs. She and her team from Scotland had flown across the pond to test their abilities versus us North Americans. My team drew theirs in the first match of a 2-day KO event. It was a close match, but Sam and the Scots came out on top. Yes, it was a knockout *punch*, so to speak, pardon the pun. All I remember from that match is how fiercely she competed, of her concentrating on every bid and trick.

Flash forward to this past spring in Salsomaggiore, Italy, when I saw that Sam was competing in the world championships on the Scottish women's team. I thought, what a great person for a Kibitzer interview, (as you shall soon see). Sam has been doing all kinds of research in the past few years and announcing some of her findings on [www.bridgewinners.com](http://www.bridgewinners.com). Much of this interview took place last spring, and we followed that up with a Zoom session this past fall.

Sam is a professor in the Social Sciences department at the University of Stirling in Scotland. She was instrumental in starting up BAMSAs which stands for Bridge: A MindSport for All. What is a *mindsport* you ask. Well, you can probably figure it out. Figuring it out is a mindsport in and of itself! The BAMSAs website <https://bridgemindsport.org/> defines *mindsport* as, "a game of skill that requires mental agility rather than physical ability. Bridge, chess, draughts (checkers), go, xianqi (Chinese chess), and mahjong are all mindsports."

As their site further explains, bridge is unique amongst the mindsports in that it involves partnerships. Also, bridge is the last holdout of games in which no computer has ever beaten a human being. Chess, for example, lost this claim years ago when Deep Blue soundly defeated the world's number one chess player, (at the time) Garry Kasparov.

What's refreshing about Samantha's work is that it is for the good of our game. BAMSAs was originally titled, Keep Bridge Alive because there was evidence that our game was ... how shall I put it...dwindling out. And then along came Covid to make matters worse. Furthermore, if you recall, our Region 1 Director, Jonathan Steinberg, wrote a piece called "Saving Face-to-Face Bridge" in these pages (Summer Kibitzer, 2022). It was all about what we need to do to keep our game flourishing. It's a worldwide happenstance. Although bridge is not on life support, per se, its popularity is on a downswing.

Time to hear from Samantha Punch, who brings the same intensity and focus she displays when playing a hand of bridge to the important work of 'saving' bridge.

**Kib:** *From your Bridgewinners bio, you are "Working to establish the 'Sociology of Mind-Sport' as a new academic field with a focus on the sociology of bridge. This sounds fascinating, Sam. Can you elaborate on what you are doing as part of your research?"*

**Samantha:** BAMSA has three key goals:

- to transform the image of bridge
- to encourage more people of all ages to play
- to ensure the card game continues to thrive

In order to achieve these goals, BAMSA's starting point is to develop academic evidence on the dynamics and benefits of bridge as a mindsport. We are establishing a new academic discipline, the sociology of mindsport, using bridge as the key case study. For example, I am currently delivering a new academic module on the sociology of sport, mindport and leisure to undergraduates at the University of Stirling. As far as I know, it is the first university module (anywhere?) which includes the sociological study of mindsport.

We have five bridge research projects on the go at the moment (some finishing, others starting). Each one is publishing academic peer-reviewed papers to build

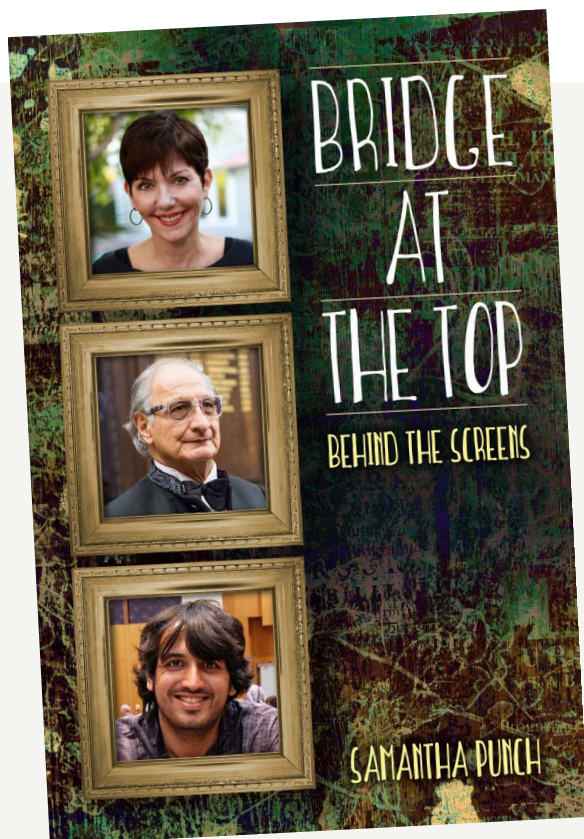
up an evidence base for bridge in the same way that chess has done for years.

However, whilst our first phase is to develop the academic evidence, the second phase is to work collaboratively with bridge organisations and practitioners (teachers, players, organisers) to ensure that the findings have a practical use for the bridge community. For example, the findings can be used to lobby policymakers to introduce bridge into the curriculum for schools.

BAMSA's remit extends beyond the world of academia and a key goal is to raise awareness about the different facets of bridge as a mindsport. Ultimately BAMSA is working towards the recognition and development of mindsport education in schools. This will offer children opportunities to develop their brain fitness and friendships through mindsports, as well as through physical sports.



Samantha presenting the bridge, gender and sexism research to the European Bridge League



This book is dedicated to Justin Lall, my first interviewee, who exemplified many of the key qualities of a top player discussed in this book. He sadly passed away at just thirty-three years old in August 2020 as the manuscript was being finalized. This quote from Justin's interview captures the essence of Bridge at the Top and reflects why many loved playing with him:

*Being a good partner, getting the best out of your partner, is just very important, and having your partner know that you are not going to yell means they will not be overly cautious — they'll just play the game. If people are comfortable playing the game, then they will play well. Whatever level someone is at, you want them to play the best that they can.*

Samantha's book *Bridge at the Top* is published by MasterPoint Press and is available as an ebook from <https://ebooksbridge.com>

**Kib:** *How is it all going so far?*

**Samantha:** So far, we have seven published academic papers, each with an accessible two-page summary on our website (<https://bridgemindsport.org/home/research/>). I've published a book – *Bridge at the Top: Behind the Screens* based on the interviews with top players. Most people outside the bridge world do not realize that bridge can be played at elite level with world championships and professional players. So, this work contributes to shifting the stereotypical images of bridge in wider society.

We also held a four-day online conference in June 2021 with 8 two-hour sessions covering a range of bridge topics (including wellbeing, digital bridge and the pandemic, cheating, gender, ageing, education and youth bridge, marketing). All the presentations and recordings of the discussions are freely available on the BAMSA website (via the events section). We had over 500 participants attending from 62 countries.

Our newest project is *Bridging Schools*, where we will be interviewing pupils, teachers, and parents about the experience of learning bridge at school. Another mission, based on BAMSA's research findings on gender and bridge, is to encourage the World Bridge Federation and European Bridge League to develop an Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) policy. We must stamp out everyday sexism and other *isms* if we are to be more welcoming to players from all social groups. Addressing gender inequalities within the game will also help to decrease the high drop-out rate of young women players.

**Kib:** *Do you get funding for these types of projects from the government and/or the private sector?*

**Samantha:** I spent two years crowdfunding to raise money to pay part-time researchers to work with me (donations still very much appreciated- <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/u5c0e5e7810869>). My salary is covered by the University of Stirling, and in order

to get the work started the University subsidised the research heavily by not charging for overheads, administration, nor for my time. Hence BAMSA has been able to achieve a lot with not such a large budget. We are a small team of part-time researchers, with some additional costs for the BAMSA website and developing the resources/outputs.

Once we have established a track-record in this new field of the sociology of mindsport, BAMSA aims to seek a large research grant for an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural project with practical outcomes. For example, this would be for a project on healthy ageing and tackling social isolation or on digital learning and building intergenerational relations. An ideal would be if someone like Bill Gates or other bridge sponsors would support such a project.

**Kib:** *If the WBF gave you 5-7 minutes on the microphone and you could address everyone involved here at the world championships (players, captains, coaches, staff, committee members, everyone), what would be your message? What can we do to help keep bridge alive?*

**Samantha:** We can all help to spread the bridge bug. I remembered about my desire to learn bridge, after one guy at work on a Monday morning spoke so passionately about winning a bridge congress that weekend. His eyes lit up and I wanted to know more about what made them sparkle so much.

I often try to tell people what a great game it is and that it is never too soon nor too late to learn. Once in the gym I was on a cycling machine next to someone and suggested he give it a go. Three years later he bumped into me, thanking me for sowing the seed. We also shouldn't worry about teaching children in school and it being hard to retain them. The seed is sown – even if they return to the game in twenty years, you have helped that to happen.

I would also talk about some of the points above relating to the need to develop mindsport education, so we are not just relying on individual charismatic

teachers to start a school bridge club. Collectively we need to work together to get mindsports integrated into teacher training colleges in the same way that physical education is. The other thing that would be helpful is to dialogue with policymakers outside the bridge world to integrate bridge as a solution for tackling rising global rates of loneliness and mental health issues.

**Kib:** *Is Scotland like the rest of the world where bridge is on the decline? I feel like bridge peaked in North America around the late 60s to mid 70s. Since the mid 40s it seemed every couple played, perhaps not well, but they played. Nowadays, folks are not picking it up until their late 50s, if they pick it up at all. How dire is it?*

**Samantha:** The growth of bridge was between 1930s—'50s as it was a cheap and fun leisure activity when people relied on entertainment within the home. Cards was a popular pastime and people learnt from family and friends in the local neighbourhood. There was a lack of competing interests and bridge was fashionable with lots of publicity in newspapers. Back then top players were like minor celebrities who were both role models and promoters of the game.

Gradual decline began from the 1960s as some of these things started to change. Nowadays more leisure choices are available, and many are quicker to learn than bridge. We are more used to instant gratification and some hobbies have become more physical to compensate for lack of activity at work (with many jobs involving less manual labour). More women now work outside the home, so they have less time to play, especially during the day. So, it has become perceived as more of a past-time for older people in retirement.

Hence a key thing we need to do is to publicize bridge as a mindsport for all ages, showing the benefits for children, for community building and for intergenerational bonding. Another thing is not necessarily to resist too much that it is a game for

those with more time on their hands – i.e. the pre-retirees looking for a less physically demanding leisure activity, or the empty-nesters who are searching for a new challenge. Depending on the context, sometimes it might make more sense to channel energy, time, and investment to the older age groups if that is where successful uptake is more likely. We should celebrate and promote that bridge is a great game for older people rather than just lament that there are not enough younger players.

However, it is also about creating more varied and new opportunities for teaching bridge to younger people too. BAMSAs believes one way of doing that, is to develop the notion of mindsport education for schools – encouraging mind fitness alongside physical fitness. Bridge offers the non-sporty children or children with Asperger’s or physical disabilities to engage in an activity that may appeal to them and allows them to make friendships and challenge themselves through playing cards.

So yes, bridge has lost some of its traditional popularity, but there are avenues to expand its popularity within different parts of society. We need to accept that when teaching bridge, several approaches might be needed for beginners: for those with no knowledge of card games, for those who know about suits and tricks, for those who prefer digital learning and for those who prefer to learn in face-to-face environments. Lifelong learning should be fun so it is helpful if the teaching methods and style can reflect that.

**Kib:** *What are all the aspects of bridge that bring you joy?*

**Samantha:** The thrill of problem-solving every 7-8 minutes, the thrill of winning (always made sweeter because of the pain of losing) and the thrill of escaping to the bridge bubble for several days/weeks and losing track of everything else.



Samantha framed!

## Managing emotions

Here's an extract from Samantha's paper titled [Playing with Emotions: Emotional Complexity in the Social World of Elite Tournament Bridge](#), *Emotions and Society*

“Players of competitive sports are required to maintain composure in a controlled way ([Peterson, 2015](#)). However, bridge is similar to chess, where, unlike physical sports, there are fewer opportunities for ‘acting out’ ([Fine, 2015](#)). Our findings show all players engaging in emotion management, rooted in a common perception that emotions are detrimental at the bridge table and should be strategically managed to improve outcomes. Players explain that being emotional detracts from concentrating on the bridge hand, and momentary lack of focus may lead to avoidable mistakes:

‘Emotions at the bridge table are bad, period – especially negative ones. Negative emotions are real killers.’ (Jeff Meckstroth, 64, USA)

‘Concentration is more difficult if you allow yourself to get emotional. So, if you're cross with partner, it may be you who makes the next mistake.’ (Brian Senior, 67, England)

As Susanna Gross (51, England) puts it, to be emotional “is clearly detrimental,” because “it's just diverting your energy from the task at hand.”

Hence, players self-consciously try to instrumentalize their emotions, to achieve better outcomes. This is key to partnership dynamics and players' ideas about what makes a good bridge partner:

‘A good temperament is someone who is a good

partner – so they are pleasant, they don't pull faces, they are easy to play with, sympathetic.’ (David Gold, 41, England)

‘Temperament is everything. You really just have to be encouraging and keep a positive attitude. You can't get too emotional. You've got to be supportive of your partner.’ (Jeff Meckstroth, 64, USA)

A central part of emotion management in bridge is managing emotion in partnership. This means being attuned to the emotions one is giving off at the table, including via facial expressions and body language, as well as more active efforts to avoid emotional outbursts:

‘♠My partner♥ doesn't care if I look grumpy, but if you're playing with weaker players and you're sitting ... sometimes when you focus it looks like you're upset, but I focus really hard on not trying to look unhappy when I play.’ (Jenny Wolpert, 34, USA)

This indicates how players manage their own emotions to benefit their partner, which is common in team sports where prosocial actions require ‘taking into consideration the needs of others and accommodating others' needs by adjusting or altering one's own behaviours’ ([Tamminen and Crocker, 2013](#): 743).

However, ‘the complexity of interpersonal regulation’ means that players may be trying to ‘regulate their own and others' emotions without fully appreciating the emotional state of their teammate’ ([Campo et al., 2017](#): 387). Over time, players learn how their own and their partners' emotions are tied to specific actions and try to minimise situations of conflict.”

~Samantha Punch



**Kib:** *Let's go back to the beginning a bit. Where did you grow up; how did you get introduced to bridge? And when did you know you were "hooked"?*

**Samantha:** I grew up in Tonbridge, Kent in England. I studied in Leeds and then my first academic job was as a researcher in Stirling, Scotland and I've lived there ever since. For the first year of my job, I was finishing off my PhD (on the sociology of childhoods in rural Bolivia), so when the PhD was finally completed, I decided to take up a new hobby as I had evenings and weekends back. I phoned up Stirling Bridge Club, joined the lessons half-way through (which meant starting with bidding at the two level – my excuse for being an overbidder) and caught up the rest via the teacher's notes and books.

I had first encountered a simplified form of bridge whilst travelling in Brazil for a month at 21 years old. I made a mental note to learn the real bridge someday, and finally got round to it at 29 years after finishing

my PhD. I knew straightaway on reading the first ten lessons I had missed, that it was a card game that I was going to enjoy.

I really became 'hooked' when a local bridge club member suggested I went to a weekend congress with them to play bridge from Friday through to Sunday evening. 'Why would I want to do that?' I asked, content with playing once a week on beginner's night at the club. 'Ah, I get it' was my response after realizing another bridge world beyond the club existed and offered another layer of challenge and excitement.

And that's something to remember – many newer or young players don't know about the possibility of bridge tournaments beyond the school/club or the opportunity to represent your country (or region). It is up to us to create opportunities to help the new players to get hooked.

**Kib:** *Are there others at your institution whom you've turned on to bridge? Do you get support from your colleagues regarding your bridge projects? (Curious to know if some of the academics scoff at the thought of playing bridge.)*

**Samantha:** Yes, I've inflicted bridge onto quite a few of my colleagues! I've brought in researchers to help with particular aspects of the research – such as an academic whose area of expertise is the sociology of work. He has helped with theorizing the findings around the professionalization of bridge and the notion of 'devotee work' (ie. when your hobby becomes your job).

We also set up a University Bridge Club and invited members of the local community to join in so we had a mix of students, staff and wider community. At first there was some amusement regarding the bridge research – see <https://archive.discoverysociety.org/2019/12/04/taking-bridge-seriously/?msclid=7796d740b6b711eca4ed563ab62c4f9f>

Dr Miriam Snellgrove worked three days a week across several bridge studies, and she found that her colleagues could not take it seriously as an area for research. I think there are several reasons for that – people see it as a game, not as serious leisure which contributes to wellbeing and improved mental health, as well as helping to develop transferable life skills such as empathy, cooperation and problem-solving in the context of incomplete information. There is also a perception of it being a dull game for little old ladies rather than a cut-throat competitive arena where players of all ages can battle their wits.

Some think that research should be about improving society – addressing poverty for example and how could a game like bridge be worthy of research funding? The answer is because it can address big societal problems like social isolation and loneliness for example. Community cohesion and the building of intergenerational relations are aspects of society that are becoming lost – bridge offers community and intergenerational bonding. It is certainly an innovative area for research which can help to tackle societal challenges like healthy ageing which should start in childhood, not in older age.

## Links to Samantha's articles and research

Our 8 research projects are on the Research area of our website:

<https://bridgemindsport.org/home/research/>

There is also a list to our current publications in the attached and each has a two-page summary on the website (in each project via the link above)

The main two projects that might interest players are:

Bridging Minds:

<https://bridgemindsport.org/home/research/bridging-minds/>

Bridging Gender:

<https://bridgemindsport.org/home/research/bridging-gender/>

And there's also Bridging Covid but we've not got much out on that yet, though there's this policy piece:

Snellgrove, M., Punch, S and Rees, T. (2021) Using Digital Leisure to Tackle Social Isolation, [Policy Briefing for the Scottish Government](#).

Blog on Taking Bridge Seriously

<https://archive.discover society.org/2019/12/04/taking-bridge-seriously/>

~Samantha Punch



**Kib:** *Do you have a favourite bridge memory that you can share (perhaps one you have not shared before) that encapsulates why you love the game?*

**Samantha:** One good memory was playing against the Nickell team in the first round of the Spingold (a 64-board match). It was Zia and Bob's first outing, and it was exciting to be playing them, surrounded by their kibitzers. At one point Zia asked us to stop pre-empting so much (we figured that aggressive bidding was a sensible tactic against such a team). With 8 boards to go we were winning, and Zia was on lead to a slam with two aces – he led the wrong one. Coach Kokish whispered to him that they may have just lost the match. Alas our teammate with Zia's cards couldn't decide which ace to lead, so led neither... They piled on a few imps, we lost, the upset never happened...

A few years later though we did beat a couple of great teams to get to the round of 16 in the Spingold and for four-handed amateurs that was fun...

**Kib:** *One of the themes I'm trying to explore with different articles in The Kibitzer is answering the question, "Why do we play bridge?" I'll start with a couple rapid fire reasons, and then I invite you to fill in as many as you can think of....*

- Love for the competitive arena and the knees need replacing
- To meet other like-minded people
- To meet people

**Samantha:**

- For escapism and to experience 'flow'
- For the thrill of winning and to try to avoid the pain of losing
- For the drunken post-mortems until 4 in the morning...
- For the varied challenges of every new hand

**Kib:** *Speaking of a new hand...time for a hand! Can you share with us one of your triumphs in Salsomaggiore?*

**Samantha:** There was a hand in the match versus Brazil where my partner Anne Symons and I bid to a nice slam in spades, and we picked up 11 imps when our counterparts stopped in game. I was North and opened 1♠ in third seat:

	♠ K Q 5 3 2	
	♥ A Q 8 5	
	♦ A 6	
	♣ A J	
♠ 6		♠ A 9 4
♥ J 9 6 3 2		♥ 4
♦ Q 10 9 4		♦ K 7 5 3 2
♣ 4 3 2		♣ Q 8 6 5
	♠ J 10 8 7	
	♥ K 10 7	
	♦ J 8	
	♣ K 10 9 7	

Anne, South bid 2♣ Drury. I bid 2♥ which is natural and forward going. My partner now re-evaluated her ♥K (as it fit my side heart suit) and jumped to 3♠. This was all the encouragement I needed so I bid 3NT which is a serious slam try in our methods. She made a control bid in clubs and soon we were in 6♠.

Although a diamond lead would have been more challenging, the opening lead of a club made the hand play quickly. I could pitch my losing diamond on the club king in dummy.

**Kib:** *Great auction and well-deserved result! I'd like to close with one last question about how we can go about saving bridge...I wonder if there's a precedent out there of some other pastime that was on the brink of 'disappearing' and somehow brought back and regained some of its popularity.*

**Samantha:** It's a good question, I can't say I've thought about trying to find an equivalent case study and looked at what they did. There are some people who say, "Oh things come and go, and we should not be worried; if it's time to die, it's time to die." But I



don't really believe that. I really do believe that there's so much that bridge offers. If we can get it thought of more, and marketed more as a mindsport, and if folks can become aware of all the benefits of a mindsport such as mental well-being and forming community, the community cohesion aspect...there's just so many aspects to it. We're sold on bridge but we're just talking to ourselves about it. What we do need to do about it is get it into government agendas. We need to get it into education curriculum and to teacher training colleges. I mean, something big has to change.

We also need to look closer at our methods. We are not successful at teaching young people. One, we've tried to replicate our face-to-face situation onto the online environment. We need to completely rethink

how we teach bridge in an online environment in an interactive way. And have better tools to do that. And two, we've tried to teach young people the same way we teach older people, so we need different methods there. We read from books. But kids don't read books—they learn from watching online. They watch 5-minute videos so how can we produce learning bridge in fun, short, snippet ways? They learn rather complicated video games so how can we replicate that? It's got to be energetic and exciting, and it's got to have levels, and something entices them to go to the next level...so we need a gamer to design something. But this costs big money. So, we need collaboration, backed by big NBOs and the WBF.

**Kib:** *Thank you, Sam.*