

Touching wood? Bridge and superstition

By Pietro Campanile

Superstition and cards have been happy bed-fellows ever since they were introduced in Europe in the second half of the 14th century and bridge has certainly contributed to carry on the long and varied tale of man's eccentricities.

Its very cardinal rule of distributing 13 cards to each player could not have assuaged the fears of those many who believe in being the object of the most dreadful run of bad luck.

Luck and bad luck can, of course, be attributed to items, persons, events, numbers...the list can be endless and such is also the ingenuity of people who aim to identify the antidotes to the dreaded "malocchio" (the bad eye, in Italian vernacular).

In the 2001 European Championship in Tenerife, the Dutch Chief Tournament Director Tom Kojiman was running through a last minute check of the playing tables when he noticed a curious sign marking the one where Italy was due to play Turkey: someone had affixed a table notice reading "16+" to what was meant to be table 17.

A brief investigation uncovered the unlikely culprit: the Italian captain, Carlo Mosca, clearly uneasy about his team playing at table 17 (an unlucky number for Italians), had decided to adopt the clever ruse to bypass its nefarious influences.

In case you wonder, Italy beat Turkey 16-14. Coincidence? You tell me!

From Italy to... Italy: Eugenio Chiaradia, a Neapolitan champion who won many titles with the legendary Italian Blue Team, was a very nervous character by nature and was known in his early years to routinely scan the players in the field to locate the bad luck bringers in order to arraign his own special amulets on the table in such a way as to shield him from their malicious effluxes.

Another widely spread belief is to assume that certain items of clothing may affect

one's performance or one's luck and changing them after a successful session is quite out of the question.



The English Nicola Smith, many times European and World Champion, used to make a point of never changing clothes after a successful first match. Many more follow her lead to the extent that the latest rounds of an international championship can sometimes become rather unpleasant for the unwary kibitzer!



Nicola shows off her "lucky underwear"

But superstition can also be seen closer to home: a well known Israeli expert in the middle of what he perceived was a very unlucky session took the extraordinary step of getting up and leaving the playing area. He returned after a while sporting an ill matched pair of socks that he was not wearing earlier and explained to the astonished bystanders that he just had to go and put them on because he felt that his luck was flowing away from him through his toes!

Another extraordinary character, the late Mauri Stampf, who represented Israel at several international events in the eighties, would routinely make a hole in any new item of clothing he purchased to create a way for the bad luck to go out during the game.

Let us cross the oceans now and take a look at some of our American friends..

In a famous interview with the "San Francisco Chronicle", Grant Baze, one of the most celebrated American experts, candidly admits that he wasn't superstitious

until he got involved in serious bridge. First, it was a special rock that he kept in his pocket. Then, in the mid-1960s, he decided that a particular song - The Mamas and The Papas' "California Dreamin'" - was lucky, and he would sing it to himself as he walked to a bridge club or tournament. One time, he had his hand on the club's doorknob when he realized he had forgotten to sing it. He backtracked and began his approach over again.

These days, on the eve of a tournament, he'll repeat the words "win tomorrow, win tomorrow" before going to sleep. And for the past 15 years he's used the same red Parker pen, a gift from a friend, to keep score. "I used that pen on the first day of a tournament and won," Baze says. "So now, if I forget to bring it, I'll leave the bridge table and get it."

Lucky you that it is a refillable one, Grant!

However one cannot blame Baze too much, after all some of the partners he played with were way more superstitious than he was to the point of developing their own bridge axioms.

In the same article Baze shared a very funny anecdote involving Barry Crane: one of the greatest matchpoint players of all time if not the foremost, the player to whose name the ACBL dedicated post-humously their yearly Master Point leader award. Barry had several superstitious rules to which his partners were deemed to abide or else. One of these was that if you had a two way guess for a queen, you did not have to think about it - the queen was over the jack in the minors, and under the jack in the majors. So if you held Axxx and dummy had the KJ109, you would lay down the ace and lead to the J if the suit was a major, and lead to the King and finesse coming back if the suit was a minor. Easy isn't it?

Horse shoe



Amulet



Grant Baze happened to be playing with Barry Crane in a national tournament in

1983 and they happened to bid to 7NT where their combined club holding was exactly that : Axxx facing KJ109 with only 12 top tricks.

♠ AQ7	N W E S	♠ KJ86
♥ K93		♥ AQ8
♦ AQ2		♦ K4
♣ KJ109		♣ A874

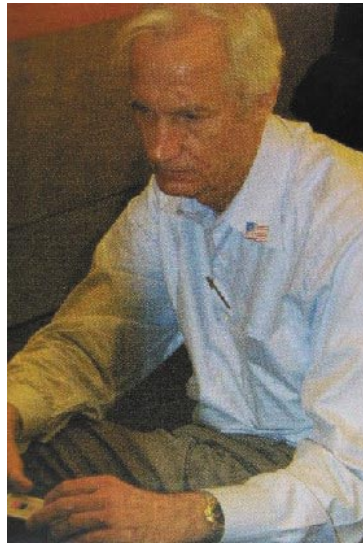
Having both balanced hands Baze did not expect to get a count on the hand to help him guess the location of the missing ♣Q.



Barry Crane

"No problem" he thought to himself "I will just follow Barry's rule; if it does not work at least he will keep his mouth shut." He pro-

ceeded to cash a few side suit winners but to his annoyance the suits split crazy and he did get an exact count on the hand.



Grant Baze and his lucky pen

LHO had three clubs and RHO two clubs, which made it a 50% better play to ignore Barry's rule and to play ♣K and finesse the ♣Q over the ♣J instead of under as Barry's rule dictated.

Meanwhile, at the same time, downstairs in another section, Mike Smolen (another great expert and many times Barry's partner in the past) was playing the same hand, well aware that he and Baze were

due to tackle the same problem. Mike also got a count on the hand, but decided to follow Barry's rule. Sure enough, the Queen was doubleton offside and Mike made the hand. Seeing the layout, Mike knew that Baze, a superb technical player, could not help himself from trying to make the hand the technically correct way, regardless of Barry's superstitions.

So he told his partner "Listen closely, you are about to hear an explosion from upstairs." How right he was. Baze misguessed the Queen and Crane went ballistic, screaming like a lunatic and then running out of the room.

When he came back he deliberately threw the next six boards in a row. They lost the event by 0.2% and naturally he blamed Baze for it!

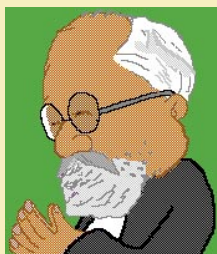
Out of curiosity Baze tried, in the following tournaments, to keep tabs on how many times Barry's rule succeeded in that specific layout. To his great surprise Barry's rule worked twice as many times as the percentages would give it credit for.

I know..I know..the statisticians will tell me that it was an insufficiently large sample to be able to extrapolate any firm conclusion but it makes you think, doesn't it?

Bridge incurred a tremendous explosion of popularity in the early 1930s, so much that even "mainstream" media started to look at this new phenomenon in their own often peculiar way. Here is an extract of an article published in 1936, in the "San Francisco News Yearly Review"

THE BRIDGE ADDICT

By Harold T. Pendergast



Let nobody think that science has been baffled by contract bridge. The other day, a well-known psychiatrist declared that it was inaccurate to call bridge players crazy. "Insanity is relative," he stated, "and there are hundreds of people who are more insane than bridge players. Well, anyhow, at least twenty."

The victim of contract bridge, he continued, is easily identified by these clear symptoms:

1. Almost immediately after lunch the patient loses interest in his surroundings and becomes incapable of performing the simplest routine task. If detained at this stage, he sinks into a stupor from which he can be aroused by the noise of cards sharply riffled.
2. If not detained, the patient rushes off at once to a sort of pest-house, sometimes called a "club," which serves as a quarantine center (somewhat like a leper colony). Most patients show great animation at this stage and appear to be in full possession of their faculties.
3. At the pest-house, the addicts group themselves at small tables and scream hysterically every five or ten minutes. This is less dangerous than it seems.
4. On leaving the pest-house, two hours late for dinner, the patient begins a monologue in a language which closely resembles English. In advanced cases, this persists through the early hours of the patient's sleep.
5. During most of his sleep, the patient seems quite normal - except for an intermittent twitch.