

# Mind games

By Pietro Campanile



Chess  
and

Bridge  
share a  
prestigious  
place as the two  
standard-bearers

of that category aptly named "sports of the mind" and lately both the WBF and FIDE (the international bodies overseeing them) have strived to pool together their efforts in order to achieve recognition and representation as "Olympic Sport" by the International Olympics Committee.

But are these two disciplines really so similar?

The answer is no: the hugely important characteristic which sets them apart is the amount of game information available for the player to process. Chess is a game of "complete information": the player can always see the entire board and calculate a wealth of possible moves and subsequent positions. The result of a chess game is usually determined by the range and quality of the calculations, which is what enables computers to perform so spectacularly well. A player's efforts are focused solely at analyzing the position and reconciling it with the vast amount of information stored from experience and previous study (opening theory, end-games and more). Such prior knowledge assumes a relevance which has a much wider impact on the outcome of the

struggle at the chessboard than outsiders can imagine, translating sometimes in "book-wins", games won simply by using home analysis of a pre-memorized series of moves.

A bridge player, instead, has 75% of the information hidden from view during the bidding and 50% during the play (i.e.: the cards held by the other players). In each deal he needs to communicate to his partner the values he holds using a generic and often inadequate code (the bidding system) and to decipher an equally complex set of clues from his partner and the opponents. Moreover, during the auction but especially during the play, the lack of "complete information" about each side's assets means that bridge is a fertile ground for all sorts of quite legitimate deceptive tactics (false carding and more) which make the task of each player all the more daunting. An expert can often take advantage of an incorrect play by an opponent (like the failure to cover or an inferior discard) to create the impression of a completely different layout of the cards and induce fatal mistakes leading to an impossible contract being made. Essentially one could state that in bridge the outcome is usually determined by the ability to correctly guess and make use of each side assets by getting the best possible score on any given hand while conversely stopping the opponents from doing so. In such a foggy battleground, the ability to "read" one's opponents and to fathom what is going on at the table, in short the so-called "table presence", become formidable weapons in the armory of a top class player. The other defining skill which all too often makes the

difference between a world beating pair and a good pair in bridge, is something quite superfluous in chess and it comes only with maturity and experience: the ability to handle a partnership and the inevitable problems that come with it.

Naturally, despite the many differences, there are still important qualities common to people excelling in each of the two games, like superior analytical skills, an above average eidetic memory and a highly competitive character. This common ground explains the process which sees a player successful in one discipline becoming occasionally interested in the other.

"If a chess master is taught to play bridge, and a bridge expert learns chess, which one will do better at the other's game?" This is the intriguing question recently asked by Philip Alder in his regular column in the New York Times.

The experiment will be a difficult one to carry out as the amount of information and coaching needed to excel in both sports is vastly different: a bridge player has a much longer learning curve because of the wider spectrum of skills he needs to master and which go beyond having simply a "natural talent" for the game. As we mentioned earlier the wealth of interpersonal skills needed to manage a successful partnership are not easily attainable by any teenager. That is why it is extremely rare to come across young bridge geniuses who have achieved top world ranking status as some of their chess counterparts have regularly succeeded in doing: Sergey Karjakin earning his GM title at the age of 12 is something that will never be replicated in bridge.

It is interesting to note that the crossover between the two sports has been pretty

much one-way traffic: quite a few grandmasters have dabbled with a varying degree of success in bridge but hardly any top class bridge player has made his mark in chess. For some reason they prefer to get involved in backgammon, like Goren, Jacoby and Woolsey, or poker, like Eisenberg and Abecassis.

A possible explanation for this interesting phenomenon may be found in the different rhythm and stamina required by each game. A top level bridge game is made of short, intense bursts of tough problem solving interspersed among a long series of "routine" decisions, while chess at an equivalent level is like a 15 round boxing match: it may sometimes finish with an early KO but usually it goes the length and at the end both players are mentally exhausted, with the loser finding it very hard to shrug off the defeat. This type of elaborate mental punishment is much more difficult to get used to and constitutes a formidable barrier for those wishing to enter the chess arena at a professional level. So while the chess player may wish to develop an interest in serious bridge as a stimulating intellectual alternative to the slugging on the chess board, the bridge expert is usually unable to successfully transfer his skills across and adapt to the much bloodier head to head aspect of the new game.

That is probably why in the last century there have been many instances of chess grand masters becoming interested in bridge and developing into some useful players and not vice versa. The most widely known case in the last twenty years is that of Irina Levitina, a top ranked woman grandmaster, three times Russian champion who moved to the USA in 1991 and succeeded in making a new name for herself in bridge, rising quickly to the top and already winning a gold medal in the 1996 Bridge Olympiad in Rhodes, representing the USA in the Ladies Teams competition. Other chess champions before her developed an interest in bridge: Karpov, Korchnoi, Larsen and many others, but that was mostly cultivated as a challenging pastime and no more than that. The most talented chess player ever to become seriously interested in bridge was without a doubt Emanuel Lasker, world chess champion from 1894 to 1921 and who embraced so



*The youngest Grandmaster ever:  
12 year old Sergey Karjakin*

passionately the game of bridge in his late years to become foreign correspondent in the early 1930s for the "Bridge World" and feature as a regular presence in the European tournament bridge scene till his move to Moscow in 1934.

Lasker's incredibly long tenure as World Champion spanned across three decades and served as a connection between vastly different worlds: from the mythical giants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like Steinitz, Tarrasch, Tchigorin, and the dawn of the soon all-conquering Soviet School personified by geniuses like Botvinnik, Keres and Smyslow. His resilience and fighting approach to chess enabled him to hang on to his crown for longer than anyone might have expected.

Lasker was a pretty down-to-earth guy with an unassuming character which was worlds apart from the flamboyant antics of modern chess talents like Fischer and Kasparov. An interesting anecdote shows off his jocular character: while returning by ship to Germany after a lengthy stay in New York, Lasker noticed a man seated alone in front of a chess board and could not help himself from stopping to take a look at the position. His momentary pause must have alerted the stranger who asked him if he knew how to play, adding needlessly that even a game with a patzer (=novice) was better than nothing at all. Taking the comment in his stride, Lasker quietly sat down and the stranger continued to make

things worse by grandly stating that "to make the game interesting" he would concede the advantage of a Queen to his "novice" opponent. Lasker bit back his tongue and proceeded to quickly lose his first game. Then, while reassembling the pieces, with a genial smile he turned to his opponent and said: "I can see that playing without a Queen has some advantages. Perhaps because the King has some freedom of movement when the space next to him is not occupied. Let me give YOU the advantage of the Queen and I am sure I will do better in our next game." The other naturally laughed at the silly request but Lasker's stubborn attitude won the day and they played a second game, this time with Lasker playing without the Queen. Despite the huge handicap, he won easily to the astonishment of his opponent. After a third game and another easy victory, Lasker quietly got up, offered his thanks for the games and left his bewildered opponent to wonder what had just befallen him.

Lasker's interest in card games dates from his early years, that and his deep involvement in Mathematics brought him later to make some innovative contributions to the early stages of Game Theory. In 1899 he used his chess notoriety to publish one of the few texts on the subject in German: "Card Strategy" while a few years later he authored "The Encyclopedia of Card Games". His frequent chess commitments when he was world champion absorbed him completely and it was not until the late 20s, with his income from chess waning and his personal fortune ravaged by the dramatic drop in value of the Deutsche Mark, that Lasker turned to bridge as a potential source of income. He established a useful personal relationship with Ely Culbertson and he soon thereafter became a paid up foreign correspondent and regular contributor to Culbertson's authoritative magazine, "The Bridge World". His chess notoriety soon spread over to his new bridge achievements and Lasker even participated to the prestigious London International tournament in 1932 where he distinguished himself thanks to the analytical skills and the fighting spirit which had served him so well at the chessboard.

Here we see him at the helm of an ambitious grand slam during that event:



Emanuel Lasker

According to the records and however hard it is to believe, the bidding went simply:

West	North	East	South
			Lasker
		Pass	1♥
1♠	7♥!!	Pass	Pass
Pass			

It must be remembered that the hand was played in 1932, when Easley Blackwood's wonderful tool was still six years away from being divulged in the "Bridge World". Even so, North's 7♥ bid is quite reckless given the lack of a spade control, luckily for him Lasker had the suit covered and the contract could survive at least the first trick.

West's lead was the ♣Q and Lasker could see that his chances were not brilliant since the spade finesse was definitely not working given the auction. The only possible way to make the hand was a squeeze and the singleton spade in dummy offered declarer the additional threat to set up a spade with a ruff if too many were discarded on the run of the hearts. Keeping that in mind Lasker took the lead in dummy, cashed the six trumps and the ♦A to reach this position:

Dealer East – Both Vulnerable

♠ 2		
♥ AKQJ1098		
♦ 32		
♣ A72		
♠ K87654		♠ J93
♥ 4		♥ -
♦ Q98		♦ J107654
♣ QJ10		♣ 9853
		♠ AQ10
		♥ 76532
		♦ AK
		♣ K64

	♠ 2	
	♥ 8	
	♦ 2	
	♣ 72	
♠ K87		♠ J93
♥ -		♥ -
♦ -		♦ -
♣ J10		♣ 98
		♠ AQ10
		♥ -
		♦ K
		♣ K

Declarer now played the ♦K from hand and West was forced to throw a club since a spade pitch would allow declarer to play ♠A and spade ruff, setting up the ♠Q. East discarded a spade (a club discard would allow declarer to set up the second club in dummy by simply cashing the ♣K). There was only one chance left for Lasker: to hope that East had started with the ♠J and that he was now left with ♠Jx. The wizened champion cashed the ♠A and played the ♠Q, covered with the ♠K by West and ruffed in dummy. When East had to follow perforce with the ♠J, the ♠10 became the thirteenth trick and the contract was home. "Not bad for an old man eh?" One might have heard him say with a wink and a smile.

