

BRIDGE ON A *Shoestring*



Michael Schoenborn

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Publisher's Foreword

Back in the 90s, Mike Schoenborn contributed occasional articles to our magazine, *Canadian Master Point*, each one a gem. Usually, they would recount, more or less truthfully, some insane-sounding but fascinating bridge escapade that had happened about twenty years before. The Shoe would always apologize for his faulty memory of the actual deals: 'The spots are mostly right,' he would say, 'but I'm not totally certain who had the ♦4 on the third hand.'

I've been trying to get the Shoe to collect more of his ramblings into a book for many years. About ten years ago, he actually sent me one chapter, but after that nothing happened for several weeks. Then I got an email: 'Boy, this is a lot of work!' (That's the expurgated version.) Eventually, he summoned up the resolve to get going again, and you are holding the result in your hands. Inside its pages, you will meet a cast of characters worthy of Damon Runyon or even Victor Mollo. And the usual publisher's disclaimer, 'Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental', is not operative here. Everyone in this book is very real; they include the best man and maid of honor at my wedding, several of the guests, and many of Linda's and my bridge partners, some more serious than others. It was the Shoe himself, in a Regional open pairs in Detroit, who helped me earn the last few points I needed to become a Life Master all those years ago.

Hart House still exists, as does its bridge club, and for all I know the downtown YMCA still runs a duplicate game too. Alas, Kate's and the Metro Club are no more, but they too were as real as the players in these stories. Fran's is still around too, although the Yonge-Eglinton location around the corner from Kate's has been closed. So you can look at this book one of two ways: as a fascinating look back at the bridge scene in Toronto in the 60s and 70s, or as a bridge 'coming-of-age' story that takes its hero from fooling around at the afternoon duplicates to playing for Canada in a world championship. Either way, you have a treat in store. And you may never bid or play quite the same way again.

You have been warned.

Ray Lee
June 2014

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Introduction

This book was originally intended to cover fifty years of fun and seriousness at the bridge table in the Toronto, Canada area, from 1962 to 2012. However, there was so much material that I had to stop half way. The locations are real, described as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Pretty much all the hands and auctions are real although some players have been changed to fit the story. The characters are based on real people. Well-known players get their real names.

I regret that I could not convert all the people who put up with me as a partner/critic into characters in this book. I am particularly sad to have no stories about John Gowdy: I just didn't write them down. Also, I shamelessly sourced hands from old issues of *What's Trump*, a short-lived magazine that was the brainchild of Bob Haines, of Metro Bridge Club fame. Among his contributors, I relied heavily on Andy Altay's writeups of Canadian Intercollegiate bridge and on John Sabino's priceless stories.

These are the real people behind some of the major characters:

Eric the Half Bee: in real life, an engineer, Eric Rankine. Full of goodwill and enthusiasm, his intelligence was not always transferable to bridge. He was the source of many excellent dinners during my starving student days.

Colonel Bulldozer: is based on Fred Lerner, the only partner from those early days who still plays with me. A great player who is routinely underrated, maybe because of his unfailingly sunny disposition. His loud, happy laughter can regularly be heard across the room, whether he is winning or not. Fred acquired his name playing regularly with his equally good-natured wife, Margaret (Mrs. Four Notrump), who more or less schooled Fred in auctions that use Blackwood in the early rounds of the bidding.

The Albatross: Although it certainly fit, this was never actually used as a nickname for David Bryce, a lawyer and my first serious partner. He was an excellent player and director, whom I ribbed mercilessly about butchering hands on which he went into prolonged trances. His other famous blunders included twelve exposed cards on a single hand in the Spingold. The real Albatross was Eric Landau.

The Bambino: John Sabino, a great talent and in his younger days, a devastatingly creative mind at the bridge table. I played a game of duplicate with him the first day he played, and he was pretty much perfect. Once, we won a duplicate game by bidding three notrump on every hand.

The Hummingbird: John Cunningham, regional genius at the invention of bizarre, useful bidding treatments. On a good day, one of the best players I ever saw in action.

The Victim: Doug Dearborn, my partner for three months, during which time I went from 100 masterpoints to Life Master. An exceptional card player, with an uncanny sense for what was happening at the table, Doug specialized in impossible plays, such as inducing a shift holding three small opposite three small when the ace or king was led, by calling for the highest card from dummy. The opponents never could figure out what he was up to, but they knew it had to be something and they weren't going to fall for it.

The Tree: Katie Thorpe, at the time that the book takes place, a law student learning how (not?) to play bridge. Subsequently, a successful internationalist for Canada. Katie always seemed to have something to spare in the bidding, and was famous for tabling 'Thorpe dummies'.

The Old Guy: Harry Rombach, whom I met when he was in his mid-eighties. A survivor of the Ukrainian pogroms, he laughed at the Canadian government for giving him so much money that he could live well and still go to the racetrack three times a week. Harry's sight was failing, so he occasionally called for the three of clubs from dummy when it was the three of spades. A bad player who never seemed to get a bad result.

The Owl: Harry Abel, a rotund bespectacled student of the game who never rose further than being the terror of little old ladies in club games. Harry, unlike many of us, was prepared to work for a living, and occupied himself variously as a cab driver and a process server. He was also an assistant to Don ‘Moo’ Cowan in his entertainment agency, where among other duties he got to drive the occasional stripper to her performance at some private function.

Bozo: Dominic di Felice, who originally brought me the forcing club canapé system and took us to within a whisker of qualifying to represent Canada when we lost a heartbreaking 1975 Canadian Team Championship in the finals.

Big Bird: Harmon Edgar, who has been called the World’s Largest Rookie, in bridge and in life, but aren’t we all? Helped to continue to develop the forcing club canapé system. Missed a few easy plays, but made more impossible good plays than anyone else I’ve met.

The Snowman: based on Bruce Raichman, who had the delightful quality of dressing and talking like a serious human being while implementing a few ideas at least as warped as my own.

Flashy: Roy Coleman, who sailed with my brother and me. He really did play only six hands of bridge in his lifetime and the chapter about bridge on Toronto Island chronicles the results.

The Shoe: Loosely based on me, as if those who know me were ever fooled. In 1987, I reached the Bermuda Bowl as promised (and finished sixth).

My original title for this book was *The Wrong Play at the Right Time*. Then, of course, my ideas were merely considered some kind of idiotic diversion. Now, I see leading players quite often making these “wrong” plays, with excellent success. It’s still not a bad title, even now when I, like everyone else, have become slavishly devoted to making the right play.

It is 1987, and the scene is set in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. Eight teams are in contention for the Bermuda Bowl, emblematic of the world championship of bridge. One of them is Canadian. Our imaginary

camera zooms in on the North-South pair, surely the legendary Murray and Kehela... but no. Instead of a suave, gentlemanly, cigar-smoking duo, we see two tall, thin, badly-dressed individuals. They rejoice in the Runyonesque sobriquets of Big Bird and The Shoe. One of them still looks much like the student he was twenty years ago when his bridge odyssey began, when as a rookie who spent every waking moment playing and thinking about bridge, he vowed that one day, he would play for Canada in this great event. As Jerry Garcia might have mused, it has been a long, strange trip...

The Hart House Bridge Club

In the 1960s, as now, the Hart House Bridge Club was located at the downtown campus of the University of Toronto, where it had operated since the Great Depression. It had originally been run by the legendary Percy ‘Shorty’ Sheardown, one of the greatest bridge players who ever lived. Shorty by that time had moved on to manage Toronto’s rubber bridge club, the St. Clair, one of the few places in the city where one could play the game for money.

Hart House was a dark, castle-like structure built by the Masseys (of Massey-Ferguson fame) after World War I, and roughly modelled on the Oxford and Cambridge Unions in England. It had an art gallery, a music room, a debates room, a library, a chapel, common rooms and extensive athletic facilities. You could eat at Hart House: there was a cafeteria for coffee, snacks and bridge games, and the Great Hall for actual dinners. The kitchen was universally known, prompting some wag to inscribe in the bathroom cubicle of the campus library the advice: “Please flush twice, it’s a long way to the Hart House kitchens.” Hart House also housed the campus clubs for innumerable activities, including bridge.

Perhaps I should introduce myself here. My name is Bill Miller and I am an older, solitary guy, with my children all grown up. I am fascinated by bridge and by human nature, and kibitzing allows me to indulge my two vices simultaneously. My contribution to the game is the Winning Butterfly, which accompanies me and lights on the shoulder of those I kibitz if they behave well. There was no better place for me than Hart House. The Hart House Bridge Club featured inexperienced bridge players with overactive imaginations, often vindicated by an excess of intelligence. Alcohol, as they would say today, “was involved”. There were few real experts, except of course in their own minds.

The bridge club conducted regular Tuesday night duplicates, appropriately held in the debates room, with the added attraction that games were totally free. The director had hair that was both too long and badly cut, as well as a name nobody could spell, and a tendency to boastfulness and sarcasm. He was universally known as “the Shoe”.

I had heard a few stories about the Shoe’s eccentric theories and behavior, so it was with some trepidation I first wandered over to Hart House, introduced myself and asked if I might be permitted to kibitz. He skipped the part about being glad to meet me and said, “We’ll call you ‘Bungalow Bill’. That way you won’t be confused with *The Kibitzer*, the Ontario Unit bridge magazine.” I took that as a “yes” as far as the kibitzing was concerned, and so began the first day of many years of priceless entertainment.

The Shoe was a superb natural card player, and like many in his circle, he had little use for textbook bids and plays. The objective was to win, and have fun doing it, rather than to slavishly follow well-trodden paths. Shoe’s inclinations prompted him to reinvent the game, rather than seeking assistance from experts. He particularly disdained the percentage play, reasoning that 52% for the drop against 50% for the finesse paid off one time in fifty, whereas any really good player, himself automatically included, could induce the opponents to make a mistake at least half the time. His goal was fittingly immodest: one day he would play in the Bermuda Bowl. What better place to begin such a journey than at the Hart House Bridge Club?

The first bridge hand that the Shoe ever submitted to *The Kibitzer* was rejected by its then editor, Sami Kehela, one of the few players

who could legitimately lay claim to being possibly even better than Shorty. We have to presume that he considered the story too improbable to publish, or perhaps just not instructive. I can vouch for the hand because I watched it. Justice did not necessarily triumph.

Shoe was directing the Hart House game sitting at his usual spot, South at Table 1. He claimed that he had learned from the newspaper bridge columns that South always got the good hands. He picked up, at favorable colors:

♠ 8 6 ♥ — ♦ 4 ♣ J 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

The Shoe's RHO opened four spades, and Shoe so desperately wanted to bid five clubs that he actually hesitated more than the required ten seconds before passing. His partner on this occasion had been introduced to me as Eric the Half Bee, and I had to wonder how he had ever met up with the Shoe. The Half Bee was an older, silver haired gentleman in a blue suit. Later, it transpired he was a successful engineer whose only shortcoming was a fanatic love of bridge. His success in life and intelligence had not, so far, been transferable to duplicate bridge.

The Half Bee would be bound to assume that a five club bid showed more than a jack. Worse than that from the Shoe's point of view, if a five club bid proved unsuccessful, the Half Bee would be sure to win the post-mortem discussion. He'd have enough opportunity to do that when he treated the Shoe to another dinner.

Reluctantly, the Shoe passed, as did LHO. The Half Bee doubled, RHO passed, and Shoe contributed a modest five clubs, confident that any blame had now safely been transferred to the Half Bee.

The five club bid seemed to bring the table to life: LHO bid five diamonds, the Half Bee five hearts, RHO five spades. This was surely what bidding up the line was all about! Once again, the Shoe wanted to bid on, but even he could see no way to justify it. After a pass by LHO, the Half Bee came to the rescue with a bid of five notrump. This was all the excuse Shoe needed: he could win any argument that might possibly ensue. If the heart bid had not promised club tolerance, surely the five notrump bid did? Anyway, holding all the low clubs, where was his hand entry? Accordingly, six clubs by the Shoe, double by LHO, all pass.

This was the entire deal:

Half Bee					
	♠ K J				
	♥ K Q J 10 9 4 2				
	♦ A K				
	♣ K Q				
♠ — ♥ 8 7 5 3 ♦ Q J 10 9 8 6 5 2 ♣ A	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">N</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">S</td> </tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ A Q 10 9 7 5 4 3 2 ♥ A 6 ♦ 7 3 ♣ —
N					
W E					
S					
Shoe					
	♠ 8 6				
	♥ —				
	♦ 4				
	♣ J 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2				

After the opening lead of the ♦Q, Shoe was in a position to make the hand regardless of the location of the ♥A: two rounds of diamonds pitching a spade, followed by a club lead, putting West in a position of yielding a heart trick or a ruff and discard at Trick 4!

In case anyone had overlooked the beauty of this hand, the Shoe expressed disappointment with the other two +1090 scores, which probably only occurred because he had the misfortune to find the ♥A with RHO. Shoe persisted with further analysis: even on a diamond lead, declarer in 6♠ would lose only four tricks for minus 800. Furthermore, 6♣ would not make from the Half Bee's hand, as the ♠A could be cashed. As far as I know, this was the first occasion when the Shoe noted that the hand would play at least a trick better from his side, an observation codified in Shoe's Second Rule of Bridge. If the ten-club hand was the original example, the following was proof positive:

♠ 5 ♥ 10 2 ♦ A 3 2 ♣ A K J 8 6 5 2

Rejecting a vulnerable gambling three notrump rebid, Shoe opened one spade. After a pass, the Half Bee raised to two spades, RHO doubled and Shoe bid three notrump. LHO passed, and the Half Bee was face-to-face with Shoe's First Rule of Bridge: *never pull three notrump*.

However, the Half Bee was wavering because he had stretched a bit for the 2♠ raise:

♠ 10 9 7 4 ♥ Q 7 6 5 ♦ Q 5 4 ♣ 10 7

After all, Shoe would still be declarer at spades, so Half Bee would be complying with the Second Rule if he bid four spades. Reluctantly, he decided that the First Rule must come first for a reason, so he passed. RHO exercised his table presence with another double, and when this came back to the Half Bee, he could restrain himself no longer and removed to four spades. RHO had a thing going now and doubled again. The Shoe removed to four notrump.

Even the Half Bee knew this was not Blackwood, and quailed inwardly at the discussion that would ensue if four notrump went one down. RHO doubled again, the Shoe redoubled and the Half Bee watched the events that ensued, not as a full-sized Half Bee, but more like a mosquito watching itself fly into a campfire. He wished he could be an even smaller insect, actually.

This was the whole deal:

Half Bee											
♠ 10 9 7 4											
♥ Q 7 6 5											
♦ Q 5 4											
♣ 10 7											
♠ K Q J	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <table style="width: 100%; text-align: center; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table> </div>		N		W		E		S		♠ A 8 6 3 2
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ J 9 3		♥ A K 8 4									
♦ K 9 8 6		♦ J 10 7									
♣ Q 9 3		♣ 4									
Shoe											
♠ 5											
♥ 10 2											
♦ A 3 2											
♣ A K J 8 6 5 2											

The Half Bee was squirming needlessly about one down, as he might have inferred when the ♥3 was led and the Shoe thanked him politely for the dummy. The play was swift: small from dummy, ♥K from RHO, small from Shoe. The ♠3 was returned, won by LHO with the ♠J. Many

routes now lead to six down, minus 3400, if the batteries in my calculator are still working (for example, cash two more spades and then lead the ♥J to squash the ten).

The opponents had other ideas, however. LHO returned the ♥9, which was ducked round to the Shoe's ten. Shoe now led the deceptive ♦3 toward dummy: small by LHO, ♦Q, small by RHO(!). LHO had now shown up with the ♦K, ♥J and spades headed by honor-jack. Surely RHO had *something* for the four doubles? Accordingly, ♣10 from dummy, small, small, queen! West was as confused as everyone else and, suspecting the Shoe of subterfuge, returned a diamond.

Shoe won, and began the avalanche of clubs, finally coming down to the good ♣2 and the not-so-good ♦2. In the two-card ending, LHO 'had to' hold the ♠KQ (the Shoe had bid spades, after all) and RHO 'had to' hold the major-suit aces. The Shoe was able to claim with the two minor-suit deuces. This is probably the occasion where the Shoe first developed a penchant for picturesque endings.

Nowadays, he would have logged up an immodest +1120, but in those days, the insult was only worth fifty, so the total was only +1070. The opponents moved on to the next table, so they missed Shoe's comment that the swing compared to down six had been nearly 4500 points. "Of course," he added to no one in particular, "had West led the nine of hearts, an obvious unblocking play, it could have been down seven, for minus 4000."

Of course, the Shoe got away with a lot of atrocious bidding because he discovered early that running his long suit produced unexpectedly good results. He was about to learn the word 'pseudo-squeeze'.

Half Bee

♠ 6
♥ A K Q J 9 5
♦ K J
♣ Q 6 3 2

♠ K 10 8 7 2
♥ 10 7
♦ 10 7 6
♣ A J 9



♠ Q J 4 3
♥ 6 4 3
♦ 9 8 5 4
♣ 5 4

Shoe

♠ A 9 5
♥ 8 2
♦ A Q 3 2
♣ K 10 8 7

On this deal, after some auction like one heart – two clubs – three hearts with the opponents silent, the Shoe shamelessly hogged the hand from the Half Bee by bidding three notrump, which was emphatically for play, though far from the par spot. The Half Bee did not even consider removing three notrump.

Justice demanded that there be a spade lead. The Shoe made a *pro forma* duck, hoping for some miracle shift. Spades were continued and he couldn't cash his eleven winners due to the blockage in diamonds. He nonchalantly ran the hearts. East was persuaded that his little diamonds were worthless and pitched one. That was back to eleven tricks, a top board instead of a bottom, as all the normal people reached 4♥ making five.

Somewhere along the way, the Shoe began to experiment with preempting short suits. It began simply enough, on a deal where the opponents were two of those players who inveterately listened to auctions and, what was worse, believed them. Almost without thinking, the Shoe determined to send out false information. In the old days, Shoe was not all that subtle. Come to think of it, he's not all that subtle now. He held as dealer, at favorable vulnerability:

♠ 6 5 4 3 ♥ A 10 8 7 4 ♦ A 10 9 5 ♣ —

With a Listener on his left and the vulnerability right, the Shoe began the proceedings with an opening bid of three clubs. Presumably,

the Half Bee had already learned about the dangers of raising non-vulnerable preempts, and also knew about Shoe's Third Rule: "Do not take a save unless you think you might make it."

LHO, the first Listener, bid a smooth three spades and the Half Bee contributed four hearts (!), which went pass, pass back to LHO. He tried four spades. An astonishing five hearts from the Half Bee, five spades by East. Shoe had two aces and five more hearts than promised, plus the surprise club control. He risked six hearts, doubled by LHO, redoubled by Shoe. The play was uninteresting, as the Half Bee held:

♠ — ♥ K Q J 9 6 5 3 ♦ J 4 2 ♣ 10 8 7

On the spade lead, the Half Bee ruffed, drew one round of trumps, ruffed black cards back and forth ending in his hand, and finally advanced a diamond to the ten, not caring where the honors were located. He explained that he was counting on his club fit when he bid to the five-level, and Shoe congratulated him on his play, suggesting he might soon qualify as a full bee. The Shoe managed also to point out, before the opponents fled the table, that the club preempt was essential to get the Half Bee off to a club lead, the only lead to beat 6♠.

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FROM HART HOUSE TO THE BERMUDA BOWL

Most young bridge players spend their formative years experimenting with wild ideas, inventing new conventions and systems, playing in crazy contracts, and discovering the magic of card play. Michael Schoenborn was no exception. This book is an entertaining account of his formative years in the bridge clubs of Toronto, and how he finally fulfilled his dream of playing in the Bermuda Bowl.

Along his journey from the university bridge club to the world championships, he meets a cast of characters worthy of Victor Mollo: the Owl, Big Bird, Eric the Half Bee, Colonel Bulldozer, Mrs. Four-Notrump, the Bambino, the Albatross, the Hummingbird, and many more. One thing separates them from Mollo's stories, however: these people were (and are) real, and their hilarious misadventures at the bridge table and away from it were real too.

Great characters, great stories, great bridge hands — what more could you want?



MICHAEL SCHOENBORN (TORONTO)

has represented Canada several times in world championships, having won both the Canadian Team Championship and the Canadian Senior Team Championship. While he has been a prolific contributor to bridge magazines in Canada over the years, this is his first book.

