

***SIMPLY
THE BEST***

20 OF THE GREATEST
BRIDGE PLAYERS
OF ALL TIME

BY BRIAN SENIOR

Contents

H. S. Vanderbilt	3
Ely Culbertson	6
P. Hal Sims	11
Howard Schenken	15
B. Jay Becker	19
Charles Goren	22
Helen Sobel	25
Terence Reese	28
Rixi Markus	32
Giorgio Belladonna	35
Pietro Forquet	39
Benito Garozzo	42
Omar Sharif	46
Edgar Kaplan	50
Bob Hamman	53
Mike Lawrence	57
George Rosenkranz	59
Zia Mahmood	61
Jeff Meckstroth	64
Geir Helgemo	67
Conclusion	70

Harold S. Vanderbilt

The ancestry of the game of bridge can be traced at least as far back as early sixteenth century England when prototypes of Whist were being played. By the middle of the seventeenth century Whist was being played under its modern name.

The next major step towards bridge as we know it came in the eighteenth century with Bridge Whist, the main innovations being that the dealer or his partner could select the trump suit plus the exposure of the dummy hand. Also, reflecting the fact that Bridge Whist was essentially a gambling game, were the new calls of double and redouble, which could go on indefinitely. Already, many of the features of scoring with which we are familiar today, such as games, rubbers and slam bonuses, were in place.

Step three came early in the 1900s with the introduction of Auction Bridge. The major innovation was the introduction of competitive bidding. The aim was always to keep the bidding low because declarer gained full credit, including slam bonuses, for the tricks made whether contracted for or not. Scoring was quite different from that of Contract Bridge and honors, which play a minor part in rubber bridge scoring today and none at all in duplicate, had a disproportionate importance which could seriously distort the bidding.

And then, late in 1925, came the final step to Contract Bridge, the game we play today. The man credited with the invention of the new form of the game was Harold Stirling Vanderbilt.

Vanderbilt had been born into the then richest family in America and on his father's death in 1920 he inherited an estate worth well over \$50 million. He had taken up bridge seriously in 1906 and his partnership with Joseph Bowne Elwell was considered to be the strongest in the country at Auction Bridge for many years.

The story goes that Vanderbilt was taking a cruise from California to Havana, Cuba in the Fall of 1925. While on the cruise he formulated

the rules and scoring table for the new game of Contract. Vanderbilt actually came up with little new but rather gathered together what he considered to be the best features of a number of games already in existence. Putting a premium on accurate bidding, the idea that only tricks both made AND contracted for should count towards game was already a feature of Plafond, a game particularly popular in France and with which Vanderbilt would certainly have been familiar.

The story also tells that many suggestions were made by a young lady fellow passenger, including the innovation of vulnerability, which added considerably to the variety of the game. The young lady's identity has never been established and whether she ever actually existed is a matter for conjecture.

Vanderbilt inflated the scores for tricks and undertricks, for slams and for winning the rubber. Basically, by adding noughts on to the old scoring tables, he made the numbers more exciting, but Vanderbilt also altered the scores for making and defeating contracts to get the right balance to encourage the competitive aspect of the bidding.

Over the next few years, Contract swept all before it and was soon the dominant form of the game. Vanderbilt's social standing was the key to the game's rapid acceptance, making it instantly fashionable.

But it was not only as inventor and populariser that Vanderbilt was a major figure in the game. He also made a massive contribution to theory, devising the first unified system of bidding, inventing the concept of the strong $1\clubsuit$ opening and $1\diamond$ negative response, the strong no trump and weak two bids.

Vanderbilt was also active in bridge administration and a fine player. He awarded the Vanderbilt Cup for what is still the most prestigious teams competition in American bridge and won his own trophy twice, in 1932 and 1940.

So Harold S. Vanderbilt's place in the history of bridge was a crucial one. In succeeding chapters we will look at some of the other great

names who, through their great skill or colorful personalities, have also laid claim to a place near the top of the bridge pantheon.

Harold S. Vanderbilt may have invented the game of Contract Bridge, but the biggest single name in the history of the game is not that of Vanderbilt but, without doubt, that of Ely Culbertson.

Ely Culbertson

Culbertson (1891-1955) was born in Romania, the son of an American father, a mining engineer, and a Russian mother, the daughter of a Cossack chieftain. An American citizen from birth, he spent much of his youth pursuing revolutionary ideas in labor disputes in the American North-West, Mexico and Spain, and being involved in one of the minor Russian revolutions.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 wiped out his family's substantial assets there and for the next few years he made a living in various European cities, notably Paris, by utilising his skill at cards. In 1921 he returned to the USA, continuing to make his living from cards. Two years later he married his first wife, Josephine, a highly regarded bridge teacher in New York. Together they became a successful tournament pair.

Then came Contract. Culbertson saw that the new game gave him an opportunity to displace the entrenched authorities on Auction Bridge and began a long-term plan with the aim of making himself the king of bridge. Culbertson was a fine bridge player, let there be no doubt of that, but his true genius was in marketing, and as a self-publicist it is hard to find his equal in any walk of life.

By the mid-1930s the name Culbertson was almost synonymous with Contract to the ordinary player. 1929 saw the publication of *The Blue Book*, which he marketed as the first systematic presentation of the principles of winning at Contract. The same year Culbertson founded his magazine, *The Bridge World*, which is still going strong today. He ran an organisation of bridge teachers who all taught the Culbertson system, sold bridge stationery and other supplies including the new Kem playing cards, and conducted bridge competitions, both at home and abroad.

His success can be illustrated by the fact that in 1937, its best year, *The Bridge World* grossed over \$1,000,000, of which some \$220,000 were

royalties which went to Culbertson before profits were calculated. Translate those figures into today's money and we can see that Ely Culbertson was doing very well for himself.

But to reach this pre-eminent position Culbertson needed not only ability and a willingness to work hard, he needed the life blood of publicity and to eliminate the opposition. No opportunity to get publicity was overlooked. He once claimed that, though he had never played golf, he would break 90 at his first attempt. Of course he failed, but it still got him more news coverage.

But the biggest and best publicity of all came at the end of 1931. Alarmed at Culbertson's success, a group of the old established authorities of Auction Bridge, who did not wish to lose their position to this young upstart, had got together and produced 'The Official System'. Culbertson badgered and provoked Sidney Lenz, leader of this group, until he finally agreed to play a challenge match of 150 rubbers. Culbertson had offered to bet \$5,000 to Lenz's \$1,000 on the outcome with the winnings to go to charity.

The match began at the Hotel Chatham but was later moved to the Waldorf Astoria to accommodate the growing crowd of onlookers. Lenz partnered Oswald Jacoby, already a fine player at the age of 29 and destined to be in the top echelon of players for half a century to come. Culbertson partnered his wife, Jo.

During the match, Lenz fell out with Jacoby and the latter was replaced by Commander Wingfield Liggett Jr. Several players stood in at various times for Jo, whose stamina was not quite up to that of Ely. The result of the contest was a win for Culbertson by almost 9,000 total points, confirming him as number one.

Not only did the match confirm Culbertson's position at the top of the bridge world, but it also made him rich in a more direct fashion. During the month-long 'Battle of the Century', he was earning \$10,000 a week for network radio broadcasts, he and Jo both acquired contracts

for widely syndicated newspaper columns, and he made a series of movie shorts for \$360,000.

Culbertson's success was now assured and he continued to milk his position for all it was worth, producing new books, giving radio lessons and lectures, endorsing products and opening his own bridge club, Crockford's. All the time, he was alive to the importance of publicity. He was frank about his approach. He once said in a speech:

I have formed the greatest advertising and publicity organisation in the world. I have sold bridge by appealing to the instincts of sex and fear and by false representation of my own character and that of my wife. I am not the cocky smart-alec, conceited and ready to fight person I have tried to make the world believe. My wife is not the shy, diffident, cool, calculating woman I have tried to make the public believe. It is all a stunt calculated to make the name Culbertson synonymous with Contract Bridge.

First we had to build a system. That took six years. Then we had to sell the system. We appealed to women, to their natural inferiority complex. Bridge was an opportunity for them to gain intellectual parity with their husbands. We worked on their fear instincts. We made it almost tantamount to shame not to play Contract.

I have sold bridge through sex – the game brought men and women together. I used the words 'forcing bid' and 'approach forcing' because there is a connotation of sex in them.

In 1935, Culbertson played and won the last of his great challenge matches, against P. Hal Sims. Shortly afterwards he retired from competitive bridge. The competition was getting tougher and to continue to play but without success would risk eroding his dominant position in the minds of onlookers. He continued, however, to play high-stake rubber bridge for most of his life.

Ely and Jo were divorced in 1938. He was remarried in 1947, to

Dorothy, a non-player, 35 years his junior. He had two children from each marriage.

In his later years, his principal interest turned to the quest for world peace. As early as 1938, with war looming in Europe, he proposed arms limitation and international control of decisive weapons of war. After World War Two, some of Culbertson's ideas made a discernible mark when the United Nations was established.

But, whatever his interest in politics as a young man and in later years, it is as a bridge player and publicist that Culbertson really made his mark. As a player, he claimed to play his opponents rather than the cards, but it cannot be disputed that he was a fine technician and was responsible for many valuable contributions to bidding theory. Some of his 'playing the man' was, at best, gamesmanship. As appropriate for a particular opponent, he would play quickly or with exaggerated slowness, goad and taunt his opponents, etc. For the match against Lenz he would regularly turn up late, then eat at the table, claiming that 'his public gave him no time to do otherwise'.

But 'playing the man' also meant bringing an awareness to the table. Take this example from the Lenz match:

Love All. Dealer West.

	♠ 9 3 2 ♥ 9 8 5 3 ♦ K 10 8 6 ♣ 7 5										
♠ A 8 7 ♥ A 7 6 ♦ A 9 7 ♣ J 10 8 4	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center; width: 60px; height: 60px;"> <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		♠ K J 5 ♥ 10 4 ♦ Q J 5 3 2 ♣ A Q 6
	N										
W		E									
	S										
	♠ Q 10 6 4 ♥ K Q J 2 ♦ 4 ♣ K 9 3 2										

Culbertson (West) opened a weak no trump and Jo raised to 3NT. After this unrevealing auction, Lenz led a diamond. Culbertson won the nine and played two more rounds, Jacoby (South) discarding ♣2 and ♠4. Lenz won ♦K and switched to a heart, Culbertson holding up to the third round.

There were eight tricks, should he finesse in clubs or spades for the ninth?

Culbertson began by cashing the ♣A, a Vienna Coup, then came the diamonds. Coming down to four cards, Jacoby was squeezed, unable to keep everything he needed. If he discarded his last heart he would be thrown in with the ♣K and forced to lead up to the spades. So Jacoby threw a spade. Culbertson played spades from the top, dropping the queen and claiming his ninth trick with the ♠J.

Why play in this unlikely way rather than take a simple finesse? Culbertson's explanation was illuminating. Having won two heart tricks, Culbertson claimed that Jacoby sat back, with the air of a job well done. Clearly he thought he had the contract beaten, and equally clearly that meant that he had to hold both the missing honors in the black suits. Hence, the squeeze was the only chance.

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