

AN HONORS eBook FROM MASTER POINT PRESS

Martin Hoffman &
Marc Smith

Over Hoffman's Shoulder

A Year In the Life
of a Bridge Pro

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INTRODUCTION

In a glittering career spanning more than five decades, fabled card player Martin Hoffman has achieved phenomenal success in tournaments around the world. Time after time he has achieved top-five finishes in major events, partnered only by a client. Regular international partnerships, finishing twenty or thirty places lower, look on in amazement. “How can he do it?” they ask.

In this exciting book, Hoffman teams up with internationally-renowned bridge author and teacher Marc Smith. Together, they examine what went through the maestro’s mind as he tackled some great deals, from the initial bidding, right through to their triumphant conclusion.

Until his death aged 88 in 2018, Martin lived principally in London and spent winters in Florida, whilst traveling extensively to tournaments throughout the U.S.A. and Europe. In this book you will be at his side for a whole year, seeing the world as a bridge professional does.

The authors are indebted to the late Terence Reese, who introduced the 'over the shoulder' format of writing in his timeless classic, *“Play These Hands With Me”*.

This book was originally published in 2001. The hands remain the same, but the text has been expanded and improved in this edition. My thanks go to both Cecilia Billiet and Martin Cantor for their diligent proofreading. Significant improvements in the text are attributable to their hard work.

Two decades on, I hope that a new generation of bridge players will enjoy and appreciate the brilliance of the late Martin Hoffman. One of the greatest card players the game has ever known, it was an honor and a pleasure to have called him a friend.

M.S. 2021

CHAPTER ONE

Resisting Temptation in New York

The first North American Regional event of the year is traditionally held at the Rye Hilton, in Port Chester NY, just a short drive north of the metropolis. I usually try to avoid playing events in the northern half of the country during the winter months, but Abe Cohen, a jeweler who lives in the heart of Manhattan, is a regular client and an old friend.

The field is always strong in New York area events, but Abe has put together a good team and we will be in with a chance of winning. So, despite my aversion to winter weather, I agree to play. Stepping out of LaGuardia Airport beneath leaden, grey skies into a snowy landscape and a bone-chilling wind, I question the sanity of that decision.

The bridge goes well, though, and my earlier misgivings have dissipated by the time we line up for the final match. We are at Table One against the leaders, a very capable team from the Boston area. They are five Victory Points ahead, but a decent victory will win the event for us.

I think we are winning the match when, on the penultimate deal, with both sides vulnerable, I deal and pick up.

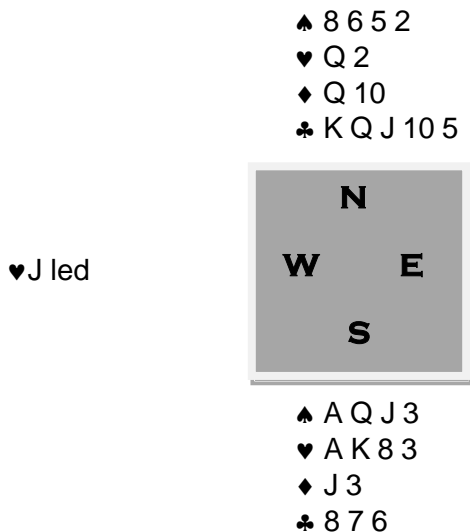
♠ A Q J 3 ♥ A K 8 3 ♦ J 3 ♣ 8 7 6

Opening One Club would leave me with an impossible rebid problem over a One Diamond response. We are playing a 15-17 **One Notrump** and, even with two weak suits, that is still the most descriptive bid on this collection.

Partner responds **Two Clubs**, Stayman. I dutifully bid **Two Hearts** and partner jumps to **Three Notrump**. Since Abe used Stayman, rather than just raising notrump directly, he must hold a four-card major. It's not hearts, so it is safe for me to correct to **Four Spades**, which ends the routine auction.

West	North	East	South
--	--	--	1NT
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♥
Pass	3NT	Pass	4♠
All Pass			

West leads the ♥J and Abe tables a fair dummy:



Despite 25 HCP, the game is not great. On the surface, I need the spade finesse to work and things to break reasonably. The heart lead gives me an extra chance, though: maybe I can cash three top hearts, discarding a diamond from dummy.

It's a tempting option, isn't it? Would that be your choice?

The opening lead is worthy of consideration. West has led into a suit I have bid, so do the odds not favor him holding at least five hearts? If the hearts split 5-2, then trying to cash three hearts will lead to defeat even when the spade finesse is onside. Let's play it through.

Suppose East ruffs the third heart as I pitch a diamond from dummy. The defenders will cash their two minor-suit winners ending in the West hand. A fourth round of hearts will then allow East to score a fourth defensive trick via an overruff.

What is my objective here? I think we are ahead in the match, so we don't need to gain a game swing on this deal. What is vital, though,

is that I do everything I can to ensure that we avoid losing IMPs. Let's start by assuming that our teammates find the best defense. If the spade king is offside, that means cashing their three top minor-suit tricks before declarer has the chance to find a discard. So, if the trump finesse fails, the board may be flat even if I go down. What I cannot afford is to record a minus score when the trump king is onside.

So, I win the opening lead in dummy with the ♥Q and immediately play a spade to the queen, which holds.

Now what?

There is no fast entry to dummy to repeat the finesse. One option is to cash one high heart and ruff the third round.

I don't think I can make ten tricks if trumps are 4-1, but cashing the ♠A now guarantees the contract whenever it can be made (that is, when trumps are 3-2 and East holds at least two hearts).

Both defenders follow low when I cash the ace of trumps, meaning that East still holds the ♠K. Now is the time to cash my hearts winners, throwing a diamond from dummy.

What can East do?

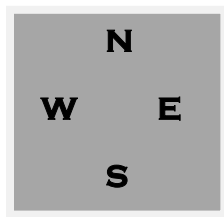
If he ruffs, the defenders can take two minor-suit winners only. If he withholds his king, then I will play on clubs and, again, the defenders can only make a trick in each minor and their trump winner.

This was the full deal:

Game All
Dealer South

♠ 8 6 5 2
♥ Q 2
♦ Q 10
♣ K Q J 10 5

♠ 10 7
♥ J 10 9 7 5
♦ K 5 2
♣ A 9 2



♠ K 9 4
♥ 6 4
♦ A 9 8 7 6 4
♣ 4 3

♠ A Q J 3
♥ A K 8 3
♦ J 3
♣ 8 7 6

Post Mortem

At the other table, our West also led the ♥J against the same contract. Declarer tried to cash three hearts to take a diamond discard and duly went down. We therefore gained 12 IMPs on the deal, but a flat board would have been sufficient for us to win the match 16-4, and thus the event. The swing here gives us a 19-1 victory.

It is always nice to start the year with a win. I am especially delighted for Abe, who played well and with this victory picked up enough Gold Points to make him a Life Master.

CHAPTER TWO

Snow, Sun and Bridge in Switzerland

While I was less than enamored with the idea of a trip to upstate New York in early January, a winter getaway in the Swiss Alps is a completely different kettle of fish. I have played in the annual St. Moritz Festival many times and it is one of my favorites.

I once enjoyed belting down the ski slopes myself, but these days I am more concerned that my bones stay in one piece. I am, therefore, happy to sit inside the lodge with a hot toddy and watch those more energetic than I risking life and limb beneath threatening skies.

The tournament itself attracts many top players from across Europe. I am here just for the Mixed Pairs, invited by Maria Erhart, the most famous of the Austrian lady players. A regular visitor to St. Moritz, Maria often partnered the late Rixi Markus with considerable success in both the Open Pairs and Teams here.

When we arrive at our assigned table, it is already surrounded by kibitzers. I am fairly certain, though, that most of them are here to watch Maria.

Towards the end of the session, I deal and pick up:

♠ K 10 8 7 ♥ A 9 5 4 ♦ A K ♣ Q J 10

We are playing a 15-17 **One Notrump**. With a doubleton ace-king, I have no reason to upgrade this hand.

Partner responds **Two Clubs**, Stayman, and I duly bid **Two Hearts**. Maria's next move is a jump to **Four Clubs**, a cue-bid agreeing hearts. We continue with an exchange of cue bids, **Four Diamonds** from me, **Four Spades** from Maria, and **Five Diamonds** from me. Maria's next move is **Six Diamonds**.

What does partner want?

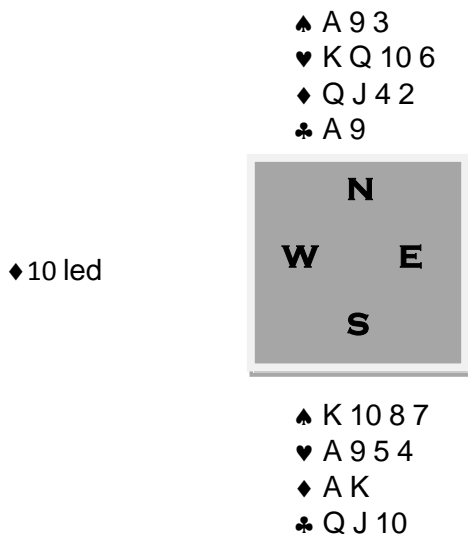
If she was looking for the ace of trumps, she could have bid Five Notrump. With the ♣K, she would have cue-bid Six Clubs. She also knows that I don't have that card as I would then have cue-bid Five

Clubs rather than Five Diamonds. The grand slam is therefore out of the picture, but partner is clearly asking my opinion about a contract other than Six Hearts.

With poor hearts and excellent secondary club values, my hand is as suitable as it can be for the only other alternative, so I close the auction with **Six Notrump**.

West	North	East	South
--	--	--	1NT
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♥
Pass	4♣	Pass	4♦
Pass	4♠	Pass	5♦
Pass	6♦	Pass	6NT
All Pass			

West leads the ♦10 and partner produces just about the hand I was expecting:



It is hard to access the relative merits of the two slams. If the ♣K is onside and the hearts break, pairs in Six Hearts will score thirteen easy tricks whereas I will need a black-suit squeeze to make an overtrick. Still, there's nothing I can do in that case.

TRAVEL THE WORLD OF BRIDGE
WITH MARTIN HOFFMAN

After surviving the Nazi death camps, Martin Hoffman moved to England and discovered a talent for bridge. He went on to achieve great success in tournament play, and at his peak was known as the best pairs player in Europe, if not in the world. He was especially skilled at scoring well despite playing with much weaker partners. His chief weapons were his speed of thought, his imagination, and his brilliant cardplay. In this exciting book, Martin Hoffman joins with bridge writer Marc Smith to tell the reader exactly what his thinking was while he was playing some of his most spectacular deals — from the initial bidding right through to their triumphant conclusion.



Martin Hoffman (1929-2018) was a Czech-born player and writer (this is one of his eight books on the game). His memoir, *Bridging Two Worlds*, was released posthumously in 2019 from Master Point Press.



Marc Smith is a well-known bridge writer who contributes regularly to magazines. His best-known book is *25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know* (with Barbara Seagram).

