

*...From the Diary of a Bridge Savant...*

I have just returned from a NABC, where I participated in the Unlimited Blue-Ribbon Pairs. In this event, I played against many very good players. These individuals, and by extension--these pairs, amazed me with their skill and precision. Later, after the event, I tried to figure out what made us so damn good. I came up with seven traits of the expert.

We are able to concentrate. This is not as daunting as it seems. There is this persistent illusion that I have to concentrate for 182 minutes straight. This is not true, I only have to concentrate for 7 minutes 26 times. I also acknowledge that my concentration is largely dependent on my mood. When I feel good about myself, my concentration improves--and by extension--when my partner feels good about themselves, he is able to concentrate better.

We are able to balance our emotions. Kipling says it well when he says, "...to meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same.". I strive to remain balanced when things go well. If I fail, I will become over-confident and take actions based on delusion rather than reality. I strive to remain balanced when things are going poorly. In sports, bridge, and life--when things are going poorly--I tend to become mired in quicksand. The more I struggle--the more I try to do the right thing or make up for my mistakes--the more I invite my own destruction. When I blow a hand--I take solace in the caring understanding of my partner, I take solace in our partnership agreements, I take solace in moving forward and playing the next hand--and most of all, I strive to remain balanced.

We are able to be disciplined. I do the same thing the same way every time. My partner can trust that I have what I say I have--both in the bidding and on defense. I take care not to make unilateral decisions while, at the same time, inviting my partner to contribute to the conversation. I make the difficult plays--not because they are easy, but because they are the right thing to do.

We consistently play against good players. There is a movement in our club to stay in the limited games for as long as possible. It is my experience that the player who does this never truly matures into their true potential. In my case, I have always wanted to be the best that I could be. I was taught long, long ago: my maturation could not be incited--and could only be undermined--by having success against inexperienced competition. The corollary to this is that I have to play against those better than me to get better. It seems to me that when I play against players better than me, those players lift me from the ability and skills I have today to something greater tomorrow. In all honesty, my sole desire at the club-level is to fail over and over again. Why is this? It is because bridge is one of the few things in life that requires--in perpetuity--the repetition of failing over and over again to become better.

We are able to develop a table-feel, and then use this table-feel to our advantage. Duplicate Bridge has many traps. One of these traps is that we assume things happen in a vacuum. This play is made solely for the reason of that play. In the time it took me to mature into an expert, I had to learn to look beyond what is occurring on any individual play. I had to ask myself a series of questions. Why did the opponent do what the opponent did? Why didn't the opponent do something else? How experienced is my opponent? Does what they are doing have a logic? Does the way they are declaring or defending a hand give me insight into what they are thinking? Is there a disruption in the tempo of the hand? If there is a disruption in the tempo, can I figure out what they are worried about? Can I use this information to my advantage? These questions are just a misleading abbreviation of all the questions there are to be asked and answered. I must also be careful to ruminate after the game about troubling hands--for the truest answer may be so subtle that I only figure it out long after the hand is over. This questioning process--both my successes and failures--helps me develop and nurture an abundant quality of table-feel.

We have developed stamina. While many outsiders would think that bridge is a sedentary pursuit, the expert knows the truth: playing bridge is a sort of endurance contest. The expert goes into a competition with a plan to take care of their health. This may mean playing a six-man team. This may mean playing only two of three sessions per day. This definitely means eating healthy and getting enough rest. My mind is a machine that only functions well when it is feeling good. In order to have success, I have to plan diligently to take care of myself. This care enables me to feel better and achieve far greater results.

We have a unique, individualistic sort of nebulous quality. I have saved this trait for last, because--in this case--someone either has it or they don't. The first six traits--through hard work--can be learned and practiced. The first six traits can lead any player to abundant glory. This player would be deemed to be one of the best in their generation. Yet--this seventh thing--would turn this same player into one of the greatest of all time. A person with this trait--seemingly without trying or concern--seems to always find the right thing to do. A person with this trait--practices these six traits and the ten commandments without pause or fail. A person with this trait might even be deemed to be a savant.