

Bridge in the Time of Corona

On Tuesday March 10th, 2020, I get an email from Unit 141's president asking me to send out a flyer confirming that the Unit Sectional scheduled for March 13th is on. That afternoon, the game is paused at Philadelphia Cricket Club to announce a member has gone home sick. No virus symptoms, we are assured; it's something else. By nightfall, I am asked to send out another flyer: the sectional is off. On Wednesday, I get a call: My husband, rehearsing a play in New York, is the first to be tested at the Broadway actor's clinic. He'll be holed up in his sublet awaiting results. At Valley Forge Bridge Club's Thursday game, Dave LeGrow, the director, announces that Pennsylvania's governor will be placing Montgomery County on lockdown. By evening, the Columbus NABC is canceled.

Friends immediately begin setting up casual games on BBO. I avoid them, shell-shocked and freaked about my husband in Manhattan and my 98-year-old mother, quarantined at her nursing home. I need my wits, and knowing me, if I head down a BBO rabbit hole I may forget to come out. I almost fused my spine, back in 2016, playing nonstop BBO on a mission to make Life Master. I know my weaknesses, and I've banned myself from BBO until there's a really good reason.

I remember being deeply shy when I started playing random games on BBO. I flatly refused to chat with my partner, Al, and I mistrusted the opponents. It seemed way too easy for them to cheat. Once I discovered BBO's ACBL-sanctioned robot games, I felt more comfortable. The only cheating the robots could really get away with was to pass cards under the table in order to crush my finesses. Frequently in the beginning, my robot partners kept overvaluing my hands – it was like those frustrating dreams where you're in a car and the brakes don't work – you're clawing at yourself, screaming "Stop! Stop!" and it accelerates even more, driving you into the bridge equivalent of a brick wall. The breakthrough came when I discovered I could hover my cursor over a bid I was contemplating and make a window pop up showing what my robot would think I had in my hand. And, I could also hover over my robot partners' bids and see what they meant. After that, playing robots became a bit like a bidding tutorial. I found myself performing tricky lebensohl auctions perfectly without actually knowing the system existed, let alone how to use it – the robots love lebensohl.

I have a steady partner, John, who plays on BBO regularly. If you're there you may run into him – he goes by the handle dickenjb. John tends to binge on the robots when a certain milestone's in sight (last one was Diamond LM). He thinks BBO may have made some adjustments, because the robots have stopped beating all the finesses. Either that or he's gained a reputation in the robot community and they're all scared of him – he has figured out their weaknesses and beats their pants off regularly. I'm still suspicious of those buggers, but I did venture back on BBO for remote lessons with Bridge Bulletin contributor Robert Todd when another partner, Lisa, wanted to work on defense. Great value in that.

My husband's test is negative, the play is postponed, and he returns. Our grownup, long-distance kids are basically stable. My mother discovers Zoom. I finally run out of things to do around the house and agree to a social game with John, Lisa and Al. Social foursome games on BBO appear to be scored in IMPs, and my interest is piqued further when I realize you can actually check your progress during a session by opening the History tab. It's like a mini-tutorial with friends. You have the luxury of immediate postmortems, with nothing really on the line. There's a strong temptation to indulge in risky bids, which causes much laughter, and the trash talk is fun.

John and I build up a significant early lead against Lisa and Al, which emboldens me to try one of my classic boneheaded moves. This causes John to tank so long that I have to double-check and make sure it's really his turn. Maybe he's figured out I've deliberately sabotaged us and wants an apology? Wait, there's a message down in the chat area:

Lisa→Table: John? You're up.

And then Swoosh!!! Dickenjb turns red (did I make him *that* mad?). He is now **dickenjb(Reserved)**. (Wow, how did he do that? And what does Reserved mean? Is he reserving judgment on my performance?) And then suddenly, boink! John pops out of the tank with a new, faintly dodgy moniker:

TeenyBopperBridgePixie→Table: Hi guys! Let's play!

I'm trying to process. This new handle is cute and everything, but John is a dude, standing 6-foot- 4 in socks. He does have a suspicious fetish for Lady Gaga (he has a full set of her concert tee shirts) but still, this is not okay for a happily married, straight man in his sixties. People will talk. Has coronavirus triggered John's midlife crisis? If so, we must be gentle. I'm typing a brief sermon for the group ("John is our friend. Our job right now is to allow him the freedom to safely express himself") when a message appears:

Lisa→Table: John tanked too long, got booted, and they gave us a replacement. We have to start over.

The entire game disappears abruptly, and a new one pops up. TeenyBopperBridgePixie has morphed back into dickenjb and the world is right again. Sort of. I spend the rest of our session fretting about Teeny. She's probably one of those teenage prodigy-types, friendless, home-schooling on lockdown, cyber-bullied, her only social life a bunch of anonymous aging bridge players. Now we've gone and rejected her, and she's scarred for life.

That night a friend forwards me an article about a club in Colorado Springs that had a 299er tournament late in February. Some of those players proceeded from there to another tournament in Tucson before things locked down. Four bridge players have died. Twenty more are hospitalized. Before this virus, we worried about bridge dying off with our generation; grave concerns that now seem almost trivial.

The world is doing its best to rally, dreaming up ways to support each other during this crisis. A District 4 newsletter arrives with an announcement: Bridge clubs, like most small businesses, are likely to fold as a result of this shutdown. The ACBL and BBO have created a collaborative allowing local clubs to offer sanctioned black-point games online, just for their regular players. This will be in addition to the nationwide ACBL games they've recently started running throughout the day. A good chunk of the proceeds from these new ventures will go to local clubs.

That sounds like something we should do. But what about cheating? Word is BBO has algorithms to detect cheating in competitive play. Can we count on that?

John asks, "Why would anyone bother cheating in an online club game? It's not like they're pros. And these local games are with people at our own club. People we know."

Not everyone has ethics like John's – it's partly what I like about him and partly why he annoys me. If I don't alert John's splinter (indicating I've forgotten what we play) and instead raise his shortness, he scrupulously forces himself to take my raise at face value as a monster 6-6 hand, which can get us into all kinds of trouble. And, I've seen him not just surprised, but deeply affronted when opponents take unethical actions.

Valley Forge Bridge Club's director, Dave, is the first to get set up in our area. Dave would describe himself as a realist, I think. We've had some interesting talks in which he's revealed some of his theories around what makes bridge players tick. What it boils down to for Dave is that most bridge players are addicts, and addicts will do just about anything to achieve the buzz they crave. What Dave thinks feeds the average bridge player's buzz most effectively is being perceived as the smartest person in the room. When I ask how he'll address cheating in an online club game, Dave says he won't rely solely on BBO's algorithm system. If he notices something repeatedly fishy going on with a pair's bidding or carding, he'll make an announcement: Serial suspicious behavior will lead to banishment from his club's online games.

Craven addicts or no, I do agree with John: What's the fun in winning if you cheat? But I'm also very reassured that Dave will watch our backs. So I decide to play a private sanctioned club game at VFBC with John. Preparation – working from John's instructions and an emailed checklist Dave sent to his regulars – takes about as long as driving to a game:

- **Give VFBC my handle so they'll recognize me and allow me in:** A lot of people don't mind if their handle includes clues to their actual name. John's handle is a combination of initials and his surname. Back when I was a shy newbie, I favored anonymity, so I tried Grasshopper, an homage to the TV show Kung Fu. Grasshopper was taken, and I eventually settled on gh99. Check.
- **ACBL number in BBO profile:** So I'll get points if we scratch: Check.
- **Real name in BBO profile:** Dave wants friends to know who's playing. Check.
- **BB\$ handy?** Upper right on home screen. Check.

- **Partnership convention card up to date in my BBO profile?** John took care of this. It's tricky to do. This is not the general profile description of the conventions you personally play. Just like at the table, a partnership needs to fill out a card, which is found under Account>Convention Cards>New Convention Card. On the new card, there's a little white window at the top where you type your partner's BBO moniker. Once that card is saved, your partnership card will be available for viewing by opponents when you play. It is found by clicking on what Lisa calls "the hamburger" – the three horizontal lines in the upper left corner of the game screen. (The hamburger is also where you go to call a director.) Dave warns us that if we don't set up our partnership cards, the hamburger will default to a Standard American Yellow Card, which will cause misunderstandings. People are being tolerant at the moment, but if you don't take care of this chore eventually, there are director calls in your future. Check.
- **Choose a skill level on your BBO profile:** John tells me I am Advanced. I tell him I am not feeling advanced today and he says "Tough, you are, and other players will be more likely to respect you if you present yourself that way – they'll stop interfering with all those unmakeable overcalls you keep failing to double." I've been struggling lately with this identified flaw in my learning. I learned bridge mostly at the table and somehow missed most of the lessons on how to tell the difference between takeout doubles and penalty doubles. I'm always pleased to spot something I need to fix, and eager to take care of it, but as usual, any tricky new concept triggers panic when it comes up at the table. So my old 2NT Yips have morphed into double yips. Anytime a double hits the table, I'm palpitating to the extent that I am actually worried I'll start misinterpreting basic artificial doubles (negative, support) even though I've been using them effectively since the dawn of time. Check.
- **Meet partner online no more than 2 hours before game time to sign up:** Some games fill up fast. You can't sign up till 2 hours before, and you can't sign your partner up. One of you has to invite, and the other has to be there to accept your invitation in real time. You log in and go to Competitive>ACBL Virtual Clubs, scroll till you find your game, click it, fill in partner's moniker, choose option to pay for yourself or your pair, and hit INVITE. Partner will then see invitation and accept. Check.

A few other things to think about: In BBO you have to self-Alert. It's like games that use screens at nationals, and it takes getting used to. Your partner will not see anything when you self-Alert. If your opponents want an explanation, they can click on your bid and ask privately. I need to break myself of a bad habit I have acquired playing casual online bridge. I forget to self-Alert before I place my bid, and then resort to chatting hasty explanations to the table:

gh99→Table: Alert. That was...darn.

gh99→Table: Don't read this, John, I mean it. Close your eyes, this is only for Lisa and Al.

gh99→Table: Are your eyes closed, John?

gh99→Table: Ok #%<@. Just forget it. Don't say I didn't warn you guys.

Claims are tricky too. We are supposed to try to claim so we don't fall behind, but I have this problem because when my Claim window pops up, it covers most of my hand, making it hard to

specify the line of play. Players are being lenient about this now while we're all learning, but I see dark days ahead if I don't figure it out.

Another thing to suck it up about: there is no longer an Undo button in your hamburger.

While I'm waiting to play, I review my Penalty vs Takeout Doubles sheet and worry about what will happen if I slow us down too much. Dave might boot me out, and John might somehow end up with Teeny, which actually could work out better for all concerned, come to think of it.

The game is not a complete disaster. I'm impressed by John's chatting skills – he's really fast clicking on the opponents' handles so he can greet friends by their real names. I'm terrible putting faces to names, so I sit back and let him take care of that stuff. There is definitely a fair amount of stress involved – my husband wanders by and pauses to listen to me mutter expletives to myself (that's another of the luxuries of playing online: you can curse all you want).

I also like having the option to privately review with partner between rounds. There is no risk of public embarrassment. And you can easily make a note of opponents' sneaky maneuvers while the hand's still fresh. ("This guy who always steals the hands—he overcalls a four-card major, did you see that? And check out that lady who jump overcalled with long diamonds and opening hand. Good to know.")

We come in second, which emboldens me, and I ask John if he'll try one of the big national Support Your Club games tomorrow morning. He agrees, and suggests I set my alarm for 7:55 a.m. so we can sign up before it fills. Yesterday's 10 a.m. game had a 600 pair limit and it was totally full by 8:12 a.m.

Me (texting): How many hands do we play?

John: Let's see, six rounds of three equals...

Me: Shut up.

John is a chemist by trade, which means he answers questions literally. When his sons used to text him college homework questions like, "Do you know the saturation of blah blah compound whatsit?" He'd answer. "Yes," and then turn off his phone. John's mother, like mine, drilled grammar into him as a kid. I thought I knew everything about grammar, but John can catch me out. He is also extremely skilled at ferreting excellent off-grid ethnic food in an unfamiliar city, which comes in handy at nationals. He got a lot of practice traveling for work, so extensively that Marriott made him a lifetime muckety-muck, which means he can score a hotel room anywhere for practically nothing.

Today I have a feeling John may be wearing his favorite T-shirt. Al gave it to him for his birthday.

I'm not always sarcastic. Sometimes I'm sleeping.

He somehow manages to be a popular teacher and mentor to many, despite having a reputation for not suffering fools gladly. Playing with him, I yo-yo between urges to kneel gratefully at his feet and stuff a sock in his mouth, particularly when we're facing off with strangers like today. My antennae go up when there's an unnatural break in tempo during a competitive auction on Board 13. According to the History tab, we are at 54% with six boards to go. I'm East, John is West, and North is dealer. Three passes to John in 4th seat, and he opens a club. Here is my hand:

E gh99	6
♠ KJ4	
♥ KJ107	
♦ J7643	
♣ 10	

North passes. I bid 1♥ and then suddenly remember that with 9 or more points I'm supposed to bid a four-plus diamond suit before a four-card major. Too bad no hamburger undo for me. Maybe it will be for the best, because South, who passed initially, now bids 1♠, at which point John takes a slight pause and then doubles.

We play the support double, which I'm pretty sure indicates John has three of my hearts. In physical bridge, I would probably yip a little to myself after John's double because of my takeout/penalty condition, but I think it's safe to assume I'd Alert, and that's what John must be doing now, even though I'm not allowed to see it.

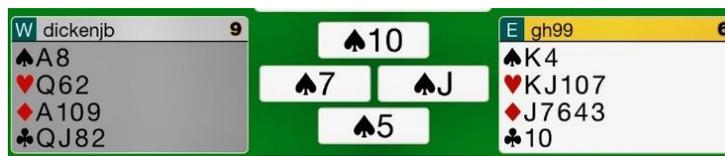
Apparently North needs a little tank time, so I use the interval to weigh my options. I have only four hearts, and John supposedly has three. If North passes, I could bid diamonds, but John's initial club bid and three-heart holding indicates he has three diamonds tops. Diamonds is a really a bad idea because I'm not sure how he'll take it – if he thinks it's some kind of distributional hearts-and-diamonds massive, distributional game try with hearts and diamonds, my hand is not good enough. Notrump isn't quite right either, with my singleton club and limited values, even though John opened 1♣ and I can stop diamonds and spades. I decide if North passes, I'll hold my nose, cross my fingers, and bid 2♥. If North makes a call, I'll deal with it.

North passes and I bid 2♥ in tempo. Pause.

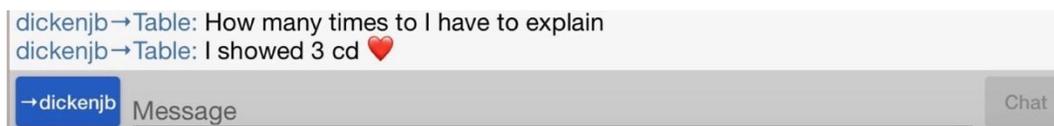
Now South's getting into it? What the heck, these guys originally passed. What on earth is going on??? Was I wrong about John's support double? Oh NO! What if he only has two hearts? What if he has none...or even fewer? Help! Somebody, do something!

My husband sticks his head around the corner to see if I'm OK. I'm not, but I wave him away. John passes, North takes another freaking pause for lord's sake, and passes, which means I'm stuck, and we might as well kiss that 54% goodbye. Oh well...

South leads the 5♠, and when John's hand comes down, it includes three – count 'em, three – glorious hearts to the queen, lord bless him:



As I play out the hand, I glance down at the bottom and notice that John has a few choice words to share with the group:



Ah, so that's what all that pausing was about. They were asking him to explain everything more times than John felt was necessary. Maybe these guys don't know support doubles?

Regardless, the defense is not stellar, and I make nine tricks for plus 140. To be fair, we don't get a top board, just 60%. The contracts are all over the place and if we'd pushed to game (fat chance) and I'd bothered with a couple of diamond finesses, I might have made it.

So I'm hooked, and you know where to find me for the rest of the pandemic. I wonder what will happen once it's over? I'm terribly worried about all our vulnerable oldsters, especially Colorado Springs and Tucson, and I really hope we all make it. No matter what, I imagine a lot of players who have been housebound all along due to one infirmity or another will be able to play more with their friends now that we've all been coaxed into trying this new venue. So there's that.

As for me, I'll be heading back to the clubs, armed with Purell and a mask if I can find one. I imagine I will keep playing these club games on BBO if they continue, if only for kicks.

I've been keeping a tally of what I miss and what I don't. In some ways it's a close call.

Here's what I miss: The chicken salad at Valley Forge Bridge Club. What I don't miss: milestone cakes. (Actually what I really miss is stopping for takeout at the Whole Foods hot bar in order to keep myself from eating milestone cake or the chicken salad at Valley Forge.)

I miss free movie recommendations and medical tips. I don't miss people who wear too much cologne or have body odor, although bad smells could be useful now, given we've been told an early sign of COVID-19 is loss of taste and smell. I miss when the opponents are yelling at each other after a round, a sure sign we're in good shape. I miss trying to read tells at the table. I even kind of miss men (mostly) who pull a card from their hand in tempo (a card we all know is a winner) and then hold it in midair so they can "think" for like an hour before carelessly letting it sort of topple over onto the table. Big deal...

I don't miss sit-outs, and faulty Bridgemates, but I do I miss the possibility that Arnold Selig will pull a can of tuna fish out of his pocket and throw it on the table when he's about to bid 3 ♦, or cast his eye around the room and ask "Where's Jack Mendelsohn?" while deciding which way to finesse for the jack. I miss shuffling too many times so Lisa will quote her grandmother: "Shuffle those cards one more time and you're going to knock the t**s off the queens."

Most of all, I miss seeing my partners. I miss sitting opposite migraine-prone Lisa in her dark specs and sunglass-green casino dealer's eyeshade, shielding herself from fluorescent lights, humming tunelessly under her breath so the opponents will think she's got it all under control as declarer when we've landed in an unmakeable slam. I miss John repeating old stories and mimicking people with British accents. I miss Deb Crisfield in deep concentration, completely unaware she's pulled her turtleneck up to her nose like Mort from Bazooka Joe (which, come to think of it, might be a good look post-pandemic).

But for now, I'm just here. So, let's see... maybe TeenyBopperBridgePixie is looking for a game.



[Susan Morse](#) is an actress and bestselling author of two memoirs: *The Habit*, and *The Dog Stays in the Picture*. Her third, chronicling a recent headlong dash into duplicate bridge, will be finished if she can just stop playing long enough to write.

