

Winnipeggers Winning the Canadian Bridge Championships

By

Neil Kimelman

I recently got back from my Phoenix winter home, and as luck would have it, I was fortunate to attend the Unit 181 2024 Winter Bash at the Winnipeg Bridge Club, the next day.

Part of the festivities was an auction of the best players from our unit. As John Hindle was doing a great emceeing this soiree, he touched on how a Winnipeg team achieved a feat no other local squad has ever been able to do – become the Canadian Champions in the premiere Bridge event of our land. So I thought I would share that heartstopping story with you now.



2017 CNTCs - Tournament Prelude

Our team, left to right: Steve Mackay, Neil Kimelman, Bob Todd (captain), Brad Bart, Doug Fisher and Danny Miles. Bob, Doug, and I, all born and live in Winnipeg, have been playing in this event together for almost 20 years. We had made it to the finals once before*, semis and quarters almost every year,

but have never gone all the way. Brad Bart from Vancouver, BC, was my partner, and this was his first final. Danny is also a native Winnipegger, but moved to Toronto with his family at a young age. His partner, Steve Mackay, also from Ontario, has won this event once, Danny twice.

*We also made it to the final in 2018, with Ray Hornby subbing for Bob Todd, who was unavailable that year. See pics below:



2018 CNTC Finals: L to right: Steve Mackay, Paul Thurston, viewgraph operator, Nader Hanna, Danny Miles and Martin Caley.

The Three of Us

When Bob and I first talked about creating a new team back in the early 2000's we agreed to only play with players who had good temperaments, and were 'team' players. Winning, although very desirable, was secondary. In 2017 you couldn't ask for a nicer group of guys. We all got along, really, really, well!!



2018 Unit 181 Masterpoint Milestone Party. L to R: John Gilchrist, Neil, Sekhar, Bob and Doug.

April 29, 2017- First day of the five day round-robin

This is the first day of **nine** grueling days to determine who will represent Canada in the World Championships. **428** boards. 12 teams from across Canada are competing. Although we are considered contenders, two teams, are overwhelming favourites: L'Ecuyer (Nick L'Ecuyer, Kamel Fergani, Nicholas Gartaganis, Judith Gartaganis and **Amoils** (Les Amoils, Drew Cannell, George Mittleman, Ken Bercuson and David Sabourin).

Quarter and Semi Finals

All three pairs are playing well and we easily qualify for the knockout Phase. After a so-so 1st quarter, we ride a great 3rd quarter, 63-27, to defeat a good, upcoming team, YAN (Rock Shi Yan, Alex Hong, Yan Wang, Monica Angus.) in the quarter finals. The semis was a tougher challenge against perennial finalists LITVACK (Irvng Litvak, David Lindop, Doug Baxter, Vince Oddy, Roy Dalton, Ian Findlay). Like the Quarter-Finals, we got off to a sluggish start, but used a strong 2nd quarter, 40-18, to stem the tide, and win a reasonably close match.



Semi-final action: L to R: Ian Findlay, Brad Bart, Irving Litvack, Neil.

Here is an interesting hand from the 2nd quarter that resulted in a decent gain:

Contract: 5♥		♠	-		
Dealer: West		♥	AQ73		
Vul: N-S		♦	KQJ109		
		♣	AQ76		
♠	K10542	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> N </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center; margin-top: 10px;"> W E </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; align-items: center; margin-top: 10px;"> S </div>		♠	AJ987
♥	K982			♥	6
♦	8			♦	7642
♣	KJ4			♣	1098
Lead: 2♠		♠	Q63		
		♥	J1054		
		♦	A43		
		♣	532		

	Brad		Neil
West	North	East	South
1♠	Dbl	4♠	Pass
Pass	4NT	Pass	5♥

All Pass

Brad decided to declare, instead of defending against 4♠. In fact, 4♠ makes if the Q♣ was onside. His 4NT was a three suit takeout the way we play it. A low spade was led.

After I ruffed the spade at trick one, there were enough tricks (assuming the club finesse worked) if trumps could be drawn. I used a common expert technique in this situation – I led the Q♥ from dummy, keeping my transportation more flexible, while limiting defensive choices. When that lost to LHO's King, I ruffed the spade continuation low in dummy, cashed the A♥, entered my hand to draw the remaining trumps, entry to draw trumps. West could have done better, by ducking the Q♥! I can battle, but good defence will always prevail.

Finals

L'Ecuyer are our opponents in the final. We have had some success against their players, but usually lose, albeit close matches. Their resume is impressive: Hall of Fame members, World championships. Among the six of them they have **24** Canadian Championships to their credit, to our measly 3. In fact their captain, Nick L'Ecuyer was inducted into the Canadian Bridge Hall of Fame this week.



Neil and Nick L'Ecuyer at Hall of Fame Ceremony in Winnipeg, 2017

Once again, we were not in top form at the outset, dropping the 1st quarter 52-18! We are like the Winnipeg Jets in many ways, our 1st quarters are crappy! We are down 52-18 after the first of eight

quarters, and the pundits are predicting a blow out, with our team conceding at some point. It didn't work out that way. Our only big pickup we had the whole 1st quarter was:



2017 CNTC Finals. Left to right Brad Bart, Nicholas Gartaganis, viewgraph operator, Neil Kimelman and Judith Gartaganis.

Judith G.

Contract: 6♥		♠	KJ109		
Board 9:		♥	3		
Dealer: North		♦	J32		
Vul: East-West		♣	J6543		
Neil				Brad	
♠	-	N W E S		♠	842
♥	Q10852			♥	A974
♦	AK98654			♦	7
♣	9			♣	AKQ107
		Nicholas G.			
Lead:		♠	AQ7653		
		♥	KJ6		
		♦	Q10		
		♣	82		

Here is our exciting auction:

Neil	Judith G.	Brad	Nicholas G.
	Pass	1♣	1♠
2♣ ¹	3♠	Pass ²	Pass
4♥ ³	Pass	4NT ⁴	Pass
5♣ ⁵	Pass	5♥ ⁶	Pass
6♥ ⁷	All Pass		

1. 5+ diamonds, 8+ HCPs.
2. No diamond support, likely minimum unbalanced hand.
3. Although undiscussed, we did have the principle that if a bid could be natural, it is!
4. Keycard in hearts, playing me for a good 5-6 or 5-7 hand.
5. 1 or 4.
6. Signoff.
7. I knew partner had a good fitting hand for hearts, so with my void in spades, I made the reasonable assumption 6♥ will either have a play, or be cold!

Yet, despite this start, we maintained our composure, and were playing good bridge. Quarter 2 and 5 we won comfortably while losing IMPs in Q3, Q4 and Q7.

May 7, 2017

Here I am in Winnipeg, playing in the 4th final session of the Canadian Open Bridge Championships, with my best friends, and a chance for our team be considered the best in the land! It doesn't get any better than that!! Having said that, down 40 IMPs with 14 Boards to go against a great team is a huge mountain to climb!



Picture from the final segment: Left to right: Brad, Fred Pollack, Neil, and Kamel Fergani.

Board 15, first board of the 14 board final. I am declaring in 3NT. We are stuck 40. Almost impossible, but our team has had enough experience to know it is one board at a time...and you never know. Bob and Doug are E-W at the other table playing against the Gartaganis's, and Danny and Steve are sitting out, chewing their fingernails.

		Brad		
Contract: 3NT Board: 15 Vul: N-S Fergani		♠ A6	Pollack	
		♥ AK		
		♦ KJ3		
		♣ QJ10973		
♠ J43	N W E S		♠ K982	
♥ J854			♥ 63	
♦ 98752			♦ AQ6	
♣ 2			♣ K865	
		Neil		
Lead:		♠ Q1075		
		♥ Q10972		
		♦ 104		
		♣ A4		

I wind up in 3NT, vulnerable. Kamel lead a small diamond which goes to the queen. Fred returns a small spade.

A hand that is complicated by the transportation issues. I think for a minute and decide if I duck, I am not home but if I play the queen and it wins I have a sure fire 9 tricks. From the table presence I think Fred has underled his king, and play the queen. Winning! 12 IMPs to the good guys, and a ray of hope, when my counterpart in the other room, put in the ten and went down in a complicated ending.

The set is up and down: win 12, win 1, lose 5, win 7, lose 3, push, push, win 3. We have trimming our deficit to 25, but time is running out – 4 boards to go! We didn't know it at the time, but the other table was done. Just the four of us left to grind it out. All players (and bridge players around the world are watching live on BBO), the locals in the hospitality room at the playing site in the Delta Hotel.

Board 25:

Contract: 7♠ Board: 25 Dealer: North Vul: E-W		♠	84		
		♥	976		
		♦	Q97		
		♣	J9653		
♠	K1052	N W E S		♠	AQJ7
♥	AJ4			♥	KQ1085
♦	A62			♦	1085
♣	AQ7			♣	2
Lead:		♠	963		
		♥	32		
		♦	KJ43		
		♣	K10844		

Doug	North	Bob	South
		1♥	Pass
1♠	Pass	2♠	Pass
2NT ¹	Pass	4♣ ²	Pass
4NT ³	Pass	5♣ ⁴	Pass
5♦ ⁵	Pass	5♥ ⁶	Pass
5NT ⁷	Pass	6♥! ⁸	Pass
7♠! ⁹	All Pass		

- Asking.
- Short clubs.
- Keycard.
- 1 or 4
- Do you have the queen of trumps?
- Yes, and I also have the ♥K.
- Do you have any more kings?
- Yes, the ♥ K!
- He must have the ♥Q, as he has already shown the king. I can count 4 spades, 5 hearts, 2 aces, and 2 club ruffs. +2210 was a 13 IMP pickup when they had essentially the same auction at the other table up to 5♥, except they closed with 6♠ instead of the asking 5NT.

Doug and Bob had a great auction to arrive at the cold 7♠! Doug ruffed 2 clubs and had 13 tricks! Win 13, down by 12 when Fergani-Pollock stopped in 6♠. Down by 12 with 3 boards to play.

Board 26:

Contract: Board: 26 Dealer: E Vul: Both		♠	4		
		♥	AJ43		
		♦	AKJ63		
		♣	J53		
♠		N W E S		♠	
♥				♥	
♦				♦	
♣				♣	
Lead:		♠	AQ73		
		♥	KQ76		
		♦	104		
		♣	A109		

West	Bart	East	Kimelman -
		Pass	1♣
Pass	1♦	Pass	1NT ¹
	2♦ ²	Pass	2♥
Pass	3♥ ³	Pass	4 ⁴
Pass	4 ⁴	Pass	4NT ⁵
Pass	5♥ ⁶	Pass	5NT ⁷
Pass	6♦ ⁸	Pass	6♥ ⁹
All Pass			

1. 15-17.
2. Game forcing stayman.
3. 4 hearts, slam try.

4. Cue bids.
5. Key card.
6. Two without queen of trumps.
7. Guaranteeing all the key card, grand slam try.
8. ♥K, no club king.
9. Conclusion.

Despite trying for a grand, 6♥ was far from cold, and it was unclear how I should play it. With the fate of the match hanging in the balance, I thought the best thing I could do was.... go the washroom! The director, Matt Smith, and one of the opponents accompanied me to ensure there was no impropriety. I was unaccustomed to having an audience in that situation. Eventually I left the washroom and decided on my best line. I won two rounds of trumps and banged down the ♦AK. This was the full deal:

Contract: 3NT		♠	4		
Scoring:		♥	AJ43		
Dealer:		♦	AKJ63		
Vul:		♣	J53		
♠	K862	N W E S		♠	J1095
♥	982			♥	105
♦	8752			♦	Q9
♣	87			♣	KQ642
Lead:		♠	AQ73		
		♥	KQ76		
		♦	104		
		♣	A109		

Not only did I drop the ♦Q offside now I had a 100% line of play: Ruff a diamond, pull the last trump ending in dummy and lead the ♣J. If it loses to an honour, West must return a black card, giving me my 12th trick! We won 13 and were in the lead by 1!!!

Two boards to go!! Board 28 we won 1, but board 27 held the match in the balance.

Board 27 neither vul, Dealer South:

Contract:		♠	K75		
Board: 27		♥	KQ984		
Dealer: South		♦	J4		
Vul: None		♣	K98		
♠	AJ62	N W E S		♠	1094
♥	A653			♥	72
♦	KQ86			♦	A97
♣	A			♣	107642
Lead: K♥		♠	Q83		
		♥	J10		
		♦	10532		
		♣	QJ53		

Closed Table

Doug opened 1♦ with the West hand, 1♥ by North, pass, pass back to him. He decided to double. Bob bid 2♣ which ended the auction. Although it wasn't their best spot, Bob did well to go down only one.

Open Table

Fergani chose 1NT in the same position and Brad led the ♥K. 1NT is very difficult to beat. Declarer had six top tricks, and lots of paths for a 7th. Declarer ducked the first two hearts, and Brad continued with a 3rd one. What should I discard? A diamond is off the table, (no pun intended), so that left a black card. Without a lot of extra thought, I chose the ♠3, thinking that a club was more dangerous.

Fergani, expected me to be discarding from length and led the 2♠ at trick two. Brad ducked smoothly and I won the queen. I made the necessary club shift, and now declarer had to decide how to play the diamonds and the spades. He won the ace of clubs, and ran three rounds of diamonds ending in dummy. Brad had a tough pitch, but he made a slight error by discarding the ♣9, not the king. Fergani had a partial count on the hand, and couldn't count on end playing Brad in clubs, I might have had the king. So at trick 9, remembering my spade discard at trick 3, he led a spade from dummy and finessed me for the king. Down 1 for a push!!

The last board was an overtrick IMP for team Todd in a routine game contract. Team Todd wins by 2!!

Hollywood could not have scripted it better! Hometown-hero underdogs stage a late game rally to come from behind and win in a photo finish!



The celebrations began in the hospitality room, and believe me, the room could not have been more hospitable!! It seemed like everyone wanted to talk to us, to shake our hands, to take our photo. Once we retreated back to Bob's house, there were more drinks, which included beer, scotch and champagne.

And yes Keith [Balcombe], we actually DRANK your champagne, and didn't spray it all over captain Bob like a sporting cliché.

Epilogue

In 2017 I was the President of the **Canadian Bridge Federation**. I ran out of time preparing for the tournament to do TV interviews. Had I done them, I would have said something similar to what I and others said the last time the CNTCs were held in Winnipeg. Karl Gohl and I (also Jerry Cohen and Marielle Brentnall) were interviewed as to our chances to win. We thought a team from Winnipeg could do it one day. We were right Karl.



Karl and Bob in St Louis for NABC, 2007

