

THE ALL-TIME BRIDGE GREATS (4)

Howard Schenken

Howard Schenken (1905-1979) of New York was a real estate investor, a bridge author and a long-time bridge columnist. As in any sport, it is almost impossible to compare the best from different eras - even if they overlap, the two will not be at their peak at the same time - but Schenken would earn many votes for the position of 'best player of all time'.

As early as 1927-29, Howard's Raymond Club team was having major success in tournament play. Ever on the look-out for rising stars who might strengthen his team, Ely Culbertson invited Schenken to play as a substitute during the much publicised 'Battle of the Century' against Sydney Lenz. But a year later Schenken had moved to the P. Hal Sims team to join his favorite partner, David Burnstine.

The Four Horsemen, as the team was known, was the most successful around the tournament scene for the next couple of years but then Schenken and Burnstine broke away to form the Four Aces with Oswald Jacoby and Michael Gottlieb.

The Four Aces were the most successful team yet seen at Contract and had a string of successes. They published a book of their methods, *The Four Aces System of Contract Bridge* and tried to inveigle Culbertson into another of his much publicised challenge matches. But Culbertson could see that he was very likely to lose such a match and with his commercial empire well established had everything to lose and nothing to gain, so he ducked out of the confrontation.

Instead, Schenken and Gottlieb went to England where they played a strange challenge match where hands were bid and the opening lead made but no more. An expert panel would then judge the relative merits of the contracts reached at each table. The English captain, Whitelaw, was trying to promote a new system called the Pachabo Club and he wanted the match to be purely a bidding duel in case too clever declarer or defensive play might obscure the triumph of his methods.

The result over 300 deals was a thumping 13,000 aggregate point win for the Americans and their Four Aces bidding system, much to the chagrin of Mr. Whitelaw.

Returning to New York, the Aces took on a French quartet who called themselves the champions of Europe. The match was held in a hotel near Madison Square Garden, and in the Garden men dressed as playing cards were used to show the progress of play in an attempt to arouse the public interest. The venture was a failure but the result of the match was yet another triumph for the Four Aces.

The Bermuda Bowl was first held in 1950 and the winners were the USA. Howard Schenken was on the winning team and also took part in the successful defense of the trophy in 1951 and 1953. He dropped out of the team for a while but then played in four World Championships in the early sixties - but that was during the reign of the Italian Blue Team, of whom we will hear much more later.

In North American domestic competition, Schenken set records which still stand today. He won the Life Masters Pairs five times, and the Spingold and Vanderbilt ten times each. All three are records which still stand today. He had several other wins and no fewer than nineteen second places in nationally ranked events.

Howard was an ACBL (American Contract Bridge League) board member for many years. In 1943 he took over the Four Aces syndicated bridge column and in 1957 merged it with the column of Richard Frey. The two co-authored what became the longest continuously published national bridge column until 1970 when Schenken became sole author once more.

Schenken only produced a few books but his writings included some important ideas. He is credited with the discovery and introduction to the tournament world of several play techniques and examples of deceptive play which are now considered standard.

In the field of bidding theory, Schenken is credited with the idea of the forcing two-over-one response, the prepared opening bid, and the weak two bid - though as that last was also a part of Harold S. Vanderbilt's Vanderbilt Club System, it is unclear to whom the credit truly belongs. Schenken also developed his own strong club methods and played the Schenken Club at World Championship level with Peter Leventritt.

This is one of my favourite hands of all time. It comes from rubber bridge and Schenken, South, was vulnerable and with a 60 partscore.

North

♠ J10653

♥ 82

♦ 532

♣ 1072

West

♠ void

♥ Q654

♦ K10987

♣ Q986

East

♠ A982

♥ KJ97

♦ J6

♣ KJ3

South

♠ KQ74

♥ A103

♦ AQ4

♣ A52

West	North	East	South
Pass	Pass	1 ♠	1 NT
2 ♦	Pass	Pass	2 NT
All Pass			

West led a diamond to the jack and queen and Howard could see seven tricks: three spades, two diamonds and two aces. But where could he find an eighth as surely East would duck three rounds of spades, cutting him off from dummy's fifth spade?

Schenken's vision was superb. At trick two he returned his ♠4. West, looking at two potential entries, won and returned the suit, and East had to find a discard. Wouldn't you discard a discouraging spade, not wishing to weaken either of your king-jack holdings? That is what top expert Sam Fry pitched and now he could no longer duck three rounds of spades. When he had to win the third round Schenken had an entry to take two more spades and eight tricks in all.

There was no clever technique involved in Schenken's play, just the ability to look at things from his opponents' point of view and see a way in which they might be induced to make an error. It is easy to say that the low diamond return at trick two was a strange play and should have aroused somebody's suspicions, but for a defender to get inside declarer's head to see that declarer was actually inside the defender's head would have been quite exceptional.