

## **Learning Bridge: Developing your card sense**

One of the keys to becoming a good bridge player is to develop "card sense", which is generally defined as an aptitude for card games. Many people will tell you that you have to be born with it, or that it must be acquired at an early age. But is it an inborn talent, or an ability that can be developed?

It's true that some people seem to have a natural gift for cards, and if you played lots of card games as a child, you probably have a head start. Bridge card sense, however, is something that almost any intelligent, motivated learner can develop. It involves knowing the relationships between cards, visualizing how the deck is divided among the four hands, and in general, just having a good understanding of how tricks are won.

Even if you're an adult who's never seen a deck of cards, you can develop these mental facilities. With practice, you can actually "teach" your brain to process information about cards. In doing so, you'll develop memory skills that are useful not just for playing bridge, but for many other mental activities. Here are some activities you can use to speed up the process:

### **Try memory exercises.**

Take 6 or 7 cards out of the deck and look at them for 5 seconds. Turn them over and try to remember as many as possible. As you improve, try dealing out more cards and looking at them for a shorter time.

### **Practice "double-dummy" play.**

You don't need other people to practice bidding and playing a bridge hand. Deal out a hand with the cards face-up. Decide what each hand would (or should) bid, what the final contract should be, what the opening lead would be, and how you would play the hand if you were declarer. Then play out the hand trick-by-trick, pretending you're each hand in turn.

### **Experiment with suit combinations.**

One of the best ways to learn how to take tricks with various card combinations is to practice them in isolation. Take 13 cards of one suit out of the deck. For declarers' and dummy's hands, take 7, 8 or 9 of the cards out, deal them into two piles (any number in each pile) and turn them face up. Decide how many tricks you think you should be able to take with the two face-up hands and in what order you would play the cards to achieve that result.

Next, "test" your play by adding the defenders' hands. Deal the remaining cards into two piles (any number in each pile) so you have a full layout of the suit as it might be at the table. Decide which card you would play to each trick if you were a defender.

Repeat the exercise by making small variations in your original layout. Move a jack from declarer's hand to dummy's, change the number of cards in each defender's hand, etc. and see how it would change your play and the number of tricks you can take.

### **Read and deal.**

Bridge books will teach you how to play card combinations and give you other basic knowledge you need to develop card sense. Reading and practicing don't have to be separate activities, though. Keep a deck of cards with your bridge book and use it to translate the book's diagrammed hands into "real" bridge hands. Deal out the cards to match the example in the book and play it out on a tabletop next to the open book. Replay it as many times as you like until you understand the principle or the technique. This exercise is especially beneficial if you're studying suit combinations or reading a book on declarer play.

### **Practice daily.**

To add continuity to the learning process and keep your brain stimulated, try to spend at least a few minutes with some bridge-related activity every day. Here are some good practice and study activities that are fun, but not time consuming:

- Keep a deck of cards handy -- on your desk at work, or on your coffeetable or nightstand at home -- and when you have a few minutes (or the boss isn't looking), deal out a practice hand.
- Read the bridge column in the newspaper. Keep in mind that most columnists write for intermediate-level players, so don't be discouraged if some of the bidding and explanations don't make sense. Just use what you know and do your own analysis. Look at the hand diagram and decide what you would bid with each hand, what opening lead you would make, how you would declare or defend the contract, etc.
- Keep your class notes and bridge book accessible. Read a chapter, or even a few pages, during your coffee break, between TV shows, before you go to sleep.
- Bookmark some bridge web sites and visit your favorites to see what's new.

### **The play's the thing.**

Experience itself is the best teacher of card sense, so the more time you spend actually playing bridge, the faster you'll develop your abilities. As soon as you've finished a few lessons, organize a weekly game with some friends or the people from your class, or recruit co-workers for a lunch-time game at work. You'll pick up more skills every time you play, especially if you can get some more experienced players to join your game.

Try these suggestions to see which work best for you, and use your imagination to identify other learning and practice opportunities. Developing your card sense will take time, but if you are committed enough to put some effort into it, it will come. And with every small step you make, you'll probably find that you enjoy playing bridge even more than before.