

VERITY LA

BE BRAVE



The Biker King of Contract Bridge (Catherine Harris)

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(edited by Kathryn Hummel)

Andrew Mill is a motorbike-riding, Champion Ruby-smoking Gold Grand Master and contract bridge teacher. He is sixty years old, gets around on a black 2015 Triumph Speed Master, and is the current patriarch of a Melbourne bridge dynasty: his parents, Betty Mill and the late Les Mill, co-founded the Kew Bridge Centre (at eighty-six, his mother still plays competitively—she also plays competitive table tennis); his sons, Justin Mill and Nathan Mill, have each represented Australia in international competition; his wife, Cathy Mill, coached and captained the Australian youth team. I've rung him twice now, each time a

week apart, leaving a message inquiring about lessons, but he is yet to respond (I'm inclined to take this personally, though, to be fair, he doesn't know me so there's no imperative for him to answer). Jeff Fust, the owner of my bridge club, urges me to persist. He's the one who suggested Andrew in the first place. 'For what you want, he's the best person I can think of.' What I want is to get better. What I want is to get to the next level, to graduate from my intermediate 'bunny' status of suburban duplicate games and occasional 'congresses' to be able to hold my own at advanced-level competitions. For this, I am prepared to do more than persist. For this, I am prepared to pay Andrew Mill a modest sum of money.

Bridge is a card game played by four people in pairs—similarly to beach volleyball, albeit in all weather, by fully clothed opponents facing each other across a table rather than a net. Developed from whist, a trick-taking game made popular in Europe in the 17th century, it was tweaked to its [modern form](#) in 1925 by Harold Vanderbilt on the cruise ship SS Finland while en route to the Panama Canal. It has since been [recognised as a sport](#) by the International Olympic Committee. For those outside the bridge world, the game conjures associations of genteel ladies with too much time on their hands. I remember catching glimpses of my grandmother's bridge afternoons when I was a child: hushed assemblages of distant aunts and ladies from the golf club seated around folding card tables, sipping tea and nibbling finger sandwiches disparagingly call 'social bridge', but these days you'd be lucky to find an arrowroot biscuit at an [Australian Bridge Federation](#)-sanctioned game—and Andrew Mill looks nothing like my grandmother.

The first time I noticed Andrew Mill was in 2016, outside the entrance to the hall of the St Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Frankston. Of medium height, with oblong, silver-rimmed glasses and shaggy salt-and-pepper hair, he was smoking a cigarette (he rolls his own) during a break at a bridge tournament while holding court about the morning's hands with a group of mostly younger male acolytes. As I pushed through the nicotine-tinged cloud in pursuit of some fresh air, none of his disciples moved aside to let me through.

The next time I noticed Andrew Mill was later that same afternoon, when he cut me off on his motorcycle as I was merging onto the M3 freeway to head back to the city. I was tired and disappointed with our result: after fifty-four hands played across two back-to-back, three-hour sessions, my partner and I had placed at forty-one out of sixty pairs. It was getting dark and I was not entirely confident about the route home. I didn't appreciate having to slam on my brakes. 'Son of a ... gun,' I think I said. It wouldn't be the last time.

Bridge is my dirty little secret. My guilty pleasure. My shame. Because bridge is not cool. For about three weeks in 2015, a cheating scandal gave the game a measure of frisson. Two elite players at the Spingold Knock-Out Team Championships in Chicago had been caught in an elaborate scam that was detected and exposed by their own former teammates. [The New Yorker](#) wrote about it. [Vanity Fair](#) wrote about it. [Rolling Stone](#) wrote about it. [NPR](#) reported on it. For a nanosecond, bridge was dangerous, naughty—even sexy. Then everyone promptly forgot about it. Recently, I asked a friend if he knew I played. 'Yes,' he answered, 'but I didn't know it was serious.' Serious though, it is. I play competitively several times a week. When I'm not at the club, I play online. I read books about strategy and defence. I drive for miles and miles to various tournaments and events. And I am not alone. The [World Bridge Federation](#) represents tens of millions players worldwide. Approximately 100 000 unique players log on to Bridge Base Online each day to participate in games, tournaments and lessons. The Australian Bridge Federation (ABF) has 35 000 registered members who play at 330 clubs around the country. But bridge is notoriously difficult to learn and is governed by strict [rules and etiquette](#). Clubs offer lessons and workshops, however if you really want to improve (and I want to improve!) you take private lessons.

Andrew Mill sits at number twenty-seven on the ABF [list of top one-hundred](#) Australian players of all time—though his position is likely to rise. This standing is based on masterpoints, which confer rank and status (they come in various colours based on the level of competition and are awarded whenever you place at or win an event). A Life Master must have 300 total points (at least 30 gold, 180 combined gold

and red, 120 green). Mill has in the neighbourhood of 7040 masterpoints (3500 gold, 3286.69 red, 251.82 green) amassed over a forty-year period. I have nearly thirty-seven masterpoints, accrued over five years (3.36 gold, 10.81 red, 22.67 green). At this rate, it will take me another nine hundred and fifty years to catch up. Mill is in the position to decide if he wants to compete for a place on a state or national team; my partner and I have so few points combined, we're still eligible to play in competitions 'restricted' to beginners. When it comes to bridge, Mill could squash me like a bug. But being trampled is a risk I'm willing to take for proximity to his power, which I am hoping is contagious. I call him again; leave another message. I have prepared myself to be offended by his superior attitude, wounded by a rejection ('No time, too busy'), so it completely throws me when he is not like that at all. 'Sorry I didn't call you sooner,' he says. 'I'm just back from Italy.'

'Milly', as he is affectionately known to his friends, has just returned from a professional gig partnering clients in Europe, as well as cheerleading his son, Justin Mill (3739.45 points), and Justin's bridge partner, Peter Hollands (3040.76 points), at the World Bridge Federation's World Teams Championships in Lyon. When I broach the subject of lessons, Mill tells me to contact him again when I've put together a group. He is trying to cut down his hours. He teaches or plays professionally at least five days a week, including evenings and weekends. His last holiday was three years ago—the first one since his honeymoon in 1997—though calling it a vacation is something of a misnomer. 'I love [teaching],' Mill tells me. 'I don't reckon I've ever worked a day in my life.'

Bridge is about complete information, but it can take years to develop the skill to see what's right in front of your face. 'It's not about getting the information, it's about filtering the information,' says Mill, 'because there is so much noise.' Bridge players are forever chasing the illusion of the perfect game, the perfect self, but there is never a sense of mastery. 'The learning never stops,' says bridge instructor, Peter Stein (5350 points). Players are always lamenting their errors and missed opportunities. 'That's what keeps them coming back. The punishment. Bridge players are very determined masochists.' This imperfection is built into the scoring, which aggregates the results into percentages. Most pairs are happy if they break fifty percent. A sixty percent result will put you in the winning range. Breaching that threshold is rare, but not unheard of; many clubs dedicate a webpage to the seventy-percent club.

There is an old joke that likens bridge to sex—if your partner's no good, you need a good hand. The problem is that a good hand will only get you so far. This presents a problem for control freaks, a type that bridge attracts in disproportionate number. 'Most bridge players are somewhere on the [autism] spectrum,' says Mill. 'The idea of doing one thing manically for a long time is consistent with being on the spectrum. But you still have to have some social skills because you've got a partner. If you don't have social skills you're not going to be very good.' This co-dependence leads to all kinds of tension at the bridge table, as people try to temper their frustration with or explain away their errors to their partners. Peter Stein says this accounts for ninety-nine percent of table-talk. 'People delude themselves that they're discussing the cards, but that's best done afterwards. They're just venting.' This is also why romantic couples are discouraged from playing together, because the arguments can get out of hand. An extreme cautionary tale occurred in 1929, when [Myrtle Adkins Bennett shot and killed her husband](#) after a bridge game, apparently because he didn't lead her suit. As recently as 2010, a British man [was convicted for murdering his wife](#) after constant arguments about bridge. 'If we could just do away with the howlers,' says Tim Legge (54 points), of a phenomenon understood by all developing players: the self-inflicted gaffe. Indeed, the conditions of the game seem to amplify this impulse for self-destruction—it's the open flame drawing your hand to the fire, the narrow ledge daring you to jump. For in the gaping chasm between conscious incompetence and unconscious competence, there are so many ways to make mistakes: underbidding, overbidding, forgetting systems, misreading discards and count signals, leading the wrong card, returning the wrong suit, and so on. The [laws of duplicate bridge](#) require competitors to maintain a steady playing tempo. Under that time pressure, bunnies easily implode.

The distance between that early lead-footedness and the elegance of championship level play is like the distance between a high-school eisteddfod and a performance by the Bolshoi Ballet. Yet bridge is one of the few sports where an average entrant might find themselves in the same competition as a superstar,

either side by side at a suburban club or in the same room at a tournament; possibly even in the same section if they have chanced upon a good result. For one round at the 2018 Canberra Summer Festival of Bridge, a novice pair—130 points combined—briefly found themselves pitted against Australian champion and international hotshot, Ishmael Del'monte (8645 points). In that kind of situation, it's hard to maintain your self-esteem.

'Did you hear that penny drop?' said my expert right-hand opponent to his equally expert partner at a recent duplicate game. He was referring to a question I'd asked my partner only moments earlier, which I'd then answered out loud as I figured it out. 'I was wondering which one of them was going to get it,' he continued, mocking us. This coffee-housing is designed to undermine your confidence, with the idea that insecure players quickly unspool, the damage compounding as one error begets the next. Culprits employ any number of tactics—distracting chatter, deliberately tapping their fingers, snapping the cards, flicking or throwing the cards to the table, humming, speaking disparagingly about you in the third person, rolling their eyes, playing too quickly, playing too slowly, insulting you directly to your face—anything to throw off your concentration. In a game where focus is everything, it's worse than sledging: it's the equivalent of tripping a cricketer mid-run. The practice is so frowned upon, the World Bridge Federation considers it a formal infraction and invests game directors (akin to umpires) with the authority to adjust perpetrators' scores for unsporting behaviour. Not that that stops them. 'Bridge is a nasty game,' says one of my bridge friends, who shall remain nameless because he is right (at times it can be nasty—though people can also be very nice), and also because it is a small world and people would correctly think that he was talking about them. Occasionally the nastiness is so unpleasant, violators are suspended or expelled from sanctioned competition. 'This is one of the reasons why a lot of people don't advance,' says bridge mentor and teacher, Phill Fent (1088 points). 'Because there is this bump of unpleasant behaviour at the intermediate games and many people can't tolerate it. It's easier to go back to the friendly competitions and not bother. But there's a lot less of it the higher up you go. You just have to get through this first.'

Are bridge players born or are they made? People talk about having card sense, a feel for the game, and it is clear that some people do take to it more naturally than others. But Mill, who learned to play at sixteen, resists clichés about inherent aptitude. True, he began playing professionally at only twenty-two, but he was raised on a bridge-lite diet of [Rickety Kate](#), a trick-taking game also known as [Hearts](#), [Black Bitch](#) or [Black Maria](#). 'There's no such thing as a child prodigy at bridge,' he says, 'the game is too big.' Whatever the influence of his DNA, by the time he was playing competitively at eighteen, he had well exceeded the 10 000 hours of practice *Outliers* author Malcolm Gladwell suggests it takes to become an expert. 'Bridge is just a series of puzzles,' Mill says. 'Each hand is just a series of puzzles.' What separates the bunnies from the experts is the experts' preparedness to lean into discomfort. 'All students should look forward to making mistakes—you don't learn anything from playing a hand perfectly. Any dilettante can practice what they're good at; avoid what they're bad at. A professional player will spend hours practicing what they're bad at. That's what makes them good—I understand it's not fun.'

Martin Willcox, a bridge tournament director (2895 points), goes so far as to say that 'playing bridge and having fun are mutually exclusive'. Every now and then—most often at a suburban duplicate club—a player will remind the table that they're not playing for sheep stations (a peculiarly Australian expression). Invariably it's someone uncomfortable with the level of intensity being brought to bear on the auction or the result, who will follow up with the observation that bridge is just a game. But 'fun' is the symbolic velvet rope separating recreational players from serious competitors—or those aspiring to be serious competitors. Because if you're at a tournament, bridge isn't a form of light-hearted pleasure or amusement: it is war, and any reference to 'having fun' by a player of any standing is likely just a prelude to a beating.

When he's in Melbourne, Mill spends most Friday mornings at the pub shooting the breeze over the cryptic crossword with fellow bridge whizzes Dave Beckett (2018 points), Simon Hinge (9560 points) and Andrew Macready-Bryan (1054 points). I find them drinking cappuccinos in the smoking section, a former

courtyard with a glass roof, fussing because they've found a couple of errors in the crossword clues and construction. 'The design and integrity of the crossword is paramount,' explains Hinge.

Andrew Mill is wearing jeans, a black t-shirt and black leather slides. He slips his left foot in and out of his shoe as he thinks. The mood flits from quiet focus to light-hearted banter as they tease out the answers. 'Milly, you're on fire today,' says Hinge, when Mill cracks seventeen down. *Hellenic*. 'He's concentrating,' says Macready-Bryan.

They're like poets, with their attention to detail, their regard for structure and style. They work the cryptic as they work a bridge hand, breaking it down, refusing to commit so much as a letter until they've reverse-engineered the entire clue. *Describing noir detectives resistant to soldiers*. 'I've got it,' says Macready-Bryan. 'Twenty-three across. Hard-boiled.'

'Beautiful word association,' says Hinge.

'Thank you, Simon. Have a cigar,' says Macready-Bryan, presenting him with a tin of cigarillos.

'That's why we do the crossword,' says Andrew Mill. 'For the one or two clues that make us laugh.'

It's an appreciation of the lyricism of the form, the way an abstraction can illuminate a truth.

He applies the same philosophy to his teaching. The maxims 'eight ever, nine never', 'second hand low', 'lead the top of touching honours', 'always cover an honour with an honour', often spoon-fed to newer players who are encouraged to learn them by rote, 'are all a load of rubbish,' says Mill. Bridge shouldn't be about learning rules, but how to think about the problem. 'Rules contradict each other, they always change with context. When I teach, it's much more about why to do something. You've got a toolbox. What tool do you need to solve the problem?' At a group lesson, I witness this approach first-hand. The cards are shuffled and dealt. The declarer wins the trick but is unsure how to proceed. 'What's the first job you want to do?' prompts Andrew, guiding her deliberation. She still isn't sure. 'When do you think is the right time to think about what you want to do?' he asks rhetorically. We all know the answer. *Before you play the first card*. His voice is gravelly, gruff; a smoker's voice, but he speaks calmly and decisively, emphasising the last letter of some words when he wants to make a point. Occasionally he crosses his arms, but it is less a sign of impatience than seeking a place to put them. From time to time, he stands to stretch his legs or to move position to advise another student on their bid. He tends towards the letter of the law, but he never loses his patience, even when the play is slow or a student makes a mistake. 'I'm annoyed with myself,' says a client at a tournament. 'Don't be,' he tells her. 'You're not going to play error-free bridge.' This is what makes him so effective: his steadfast focus on the tofu and not the noodles.

'I honestly think he taught me how to play bridge,' says Margie Michaels (77.25 points). 'You can be a good player and not a good teacher, they're two different things: he happens to be both.' Mill estimates he's taught thousands of students over the years. His pupils are like proselytising converts, their eyes lighting up as they recall the experience. 'It's fantastic, he's fantastic,' says Bacha Kitchener (24 points), a new pupil. 'He's a wonderful teacher, a wonderful man,' says Genie Harband (365 points), a Life Master, who started as a beginner with Andrew fifteen years ago. 'I took lessons with him when I started. He's very good,' says Peter Jaffe (82 points). Another student tells me her group's lessons with Andrew are 'the highlight of our week'.

Twelve months after my first encounter with Andrew Mill, I find myself in Frankston again, kibitzing him. This year the front entrance to the hall is locked, so the smokers all congregate out the back, the smoke wafting into the room as people arrive and take their seats (Mill chivalrously hunts down a spare chair for me, placing it just behind his so I can see). Mill's faded black windcheater is food-stained and covered in cat hair. He picks up his cards—then, like a builder tapping a wall for joints, places the fan face down on

the edge of the table and roughly pokes the back of each one as he counts them. Players are responsible for their own hand and can be penalised for any anomalies, such as a missing card, detected after play has begun. The auction proceeds and Mill and his partner are on defence. Mill is like a mind-reader. He plays to the first trick, then immediately pulls another card, anticipating the opponent's next move, holding it face down until the declarer—who determines the play—decides how they will continue. It's not magic: there's an unavoidable logic to his choice, it's just that he gets there so much faster than the rest of us.

The best players in the country are now in their 20s and early 30s. Some up-and-comers are still in their late teens. As mortifying as it is being taken down by a blind ninety-year old with a walker, that is nothing compared to the humiliation of being schooled by a youth barely eligible for their driver's licence. What then would impel a person (me!) to devote so much time and energy to a game at which one day, even if they're diligent, they may only become, at best, very good? Not excellent, certainly not champion-level. Yet above average. Able to wipe the floor at a social game. Formidable at the club level. Occasional place-getter at a tournament. An also-ran at the nationals. A spectator of the elite. Mill talks about the inevitability of diminishing returns: 'There's always more to learn—technique, reliability, concentration, consistency—but there's less to learn as you go on, so you have a steep learning curve at the beginning and then you plateau, and then you learn some more but you plateau for longer, and so on. Once you get to a certain level, bridge is mostly about self-discovery.' This rings true for nearly every player I speak to and is probably at the heart of any dedicated pursuit. For me, it's about learning to get out of my own way—to slow down, to challenge my own patterns of thinking, to concentrate my attentions, to overcome the distractions of emotion and environment on my decision-making. In that sense, bridge acts a form of prayer or meditation: a performative discipline, a ritualised staring-down of the limitations of the self.

It takes another four months before I can get a group together to take lessons with Andrew. I call him. He doesn't call back. I text. He doesn't text back. I email. He doesn't email back. I get his mother on the case (2089.42 points). She rings him directly, only to report a week later that he tells her she's supposed to text first, to say, 'it's Mum, can you talk'? But eventually we pin down a date. This is what we've been waiting for—a private audience with the king. I've booked us a meeting room at Officeworks, a loveless, windowless space with a whiteboard and access to complimentary tea and instant coffee. It is pouring with rain outside. And so we begin—



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