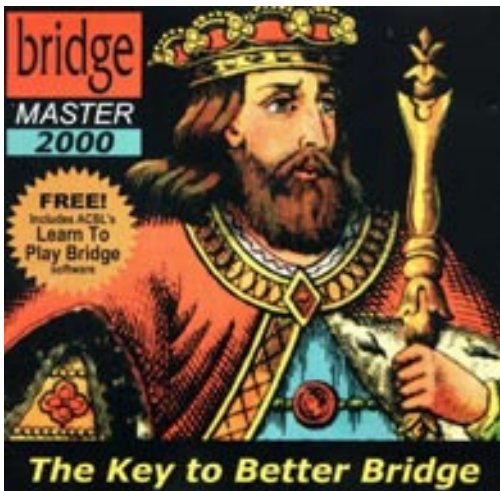


Bridgeware

2005

By Pietro Campanile

As some of our readers may recall, last year I carried out a comprehensive survey of the leading bridge playing software programs. I came across an array of quality products, often loaded with add-ons and user-friendly options, which still left a little to be desired as far as their objective playing strength, mostly equivalent to that of a good club player (still an enormous improvement over software from previous years). Interestingly enough, however, only a few years ago a new type of bridge program appeared on the market and quickly affirmed itself as a high quality educational tool:



BridgeMaster 2000, developed by Fred Gitelman, who then used its graphic interface to support his online playing site: Bridgebase.com.

This program was to open a complete new field for bridge software developers all over the world. Essentially the program gives a set of hands to declare, divided in 5 levels of difficulty, and makes sure that the user follows the recommended way to solve each problem. How can that be, you might ask? Simple, if you take an inferior

line, it rearranges the cards in the hidden hands so that you will fall flat on your face. Same goes if you suddenly feel the urge of taking an “inspired” finesse: the missing honor will be ruthlessly placed offside. This is a program where only the best will do and while the first three levels are fairly easily negotiated by a good club player, levels four and five will prove a challenge for the best among us. Gitelman’s stroke of genius consisted in developing accurate enough sequences so that the program would cater for all possible deviations from the recommended line and react accordingly. Such an undertaking required an enormous amount of time to prepare each hand, and that is why the program comes with only 180 hands (36 for each level of difficulty from beginner to expert), there are however filler packs on sale. The original program, which is still a recommended buy at an average online price of \$65, has opened a new horizon for many bridge publishers who have been able to rely on a flexible and well developed interface to support their requirements. I must point out though that one does feel the need to modernize somewhat its graphic interface along

the lines with the more up-to-date Bridgebase engine, which for instance allows full screen viewing instead of the 800x600 window of the BridgeMaster. Also a peculiar feature of the coding means that any third party program using this engine gets by default the Bridgemaster icon. This may not sound like a big deal but it does mean an unusual array of identical icons on the computer desktop for those who already use Bridgebase and/or have purchased some of the programs listed below.

Several new products have been developed recently using the BridgeMaster engine, mostly software versions of classics of bridge literature, carefully revisited in order to make the users able to fully interact with their content, thus experiencing a much more intensive and lasting exposure to the educational material offered. The unquestioned leader in the field is Lex de Groot, head of Arnhem Bridge products and a leading Dutch bridge journalist and player in his own right, who has so far published three titles which we will review this month.



Complete Partnership Defense in Bridge

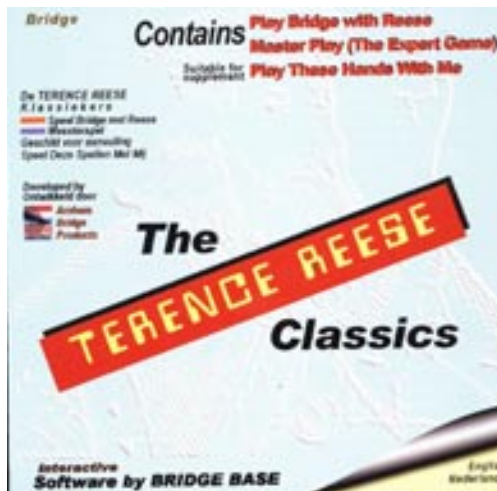
The latest brainchild of the Arnhem Bridge family is “Complete Partnership defense in Bridge” based on the brilliant book by Kit Woolsey.

Far from being a simple transfer of the book content in software form, this product shows a very thorough spring cleaning, with the text being very clearly organized and accessed sequentially in order to heighten the user’s attention, while the most important concepts are now highlighted and often boxed for added emphasis. The original content has frequently been expanded upon with more examples to make it more accessible to a wider range of players and often includes references to web sources where to complement the already exhaustive information supplied. Finally whole new sections have been introduced to facilitate the understanding of important fundamentals of defense, like the intriguing “Defensive Boot Camp” where the user is given the chance to practice on identifying hand patterns, advance thinking (the idea to anticipate a key play in the hand and decide what to do in advance to avoid giving declarer inferences that he might use in the play) and many other useful areas.

The user is invited to take an active part throughout by trying to solve the problems which underpin the concepts illustrated in each section. Such a process works much better on the computer screen than scrolling through the book, because of the inevitable “peeking effect” that affects us when we see the hands on the written page with the solution by the side.

The defensive concepts illustrated within are so comprehensive and far-ranging that it would be futile to even attempt to examine them in detail. There is a huge wealth of useful knowledge distilled to the user on subjects often little written about like "Negative Inference": ***"It is often necessary to encourage partner's initial lead even without strength in the suit, if we are really afraid of a shift he is likely to make if you discourage. In other words the attitude signal expresses an opinion about the desirability of a continuation or a shift and does not show or deny possession of any particular high card."*** It is not just the defense which is under the spotlight but, for instance, there is also some simple but practical advice to declarers on false-carding when they wish to induce or dissuade opponents from continuing a suit: ***"When a declarer is false-carding he should play as though he were signaling as a defender: e.g. against standard signalers, high if he wants the suit continued and low if he wants a switch."***

Particularly impressive is the effort Lex de Groot has gone into in order to stretch the potential of the Bridgemaster engine by ingeniously setting up partnership tests, a sort of defensive equivalent of bid-em-ups. By using print-outs and requiring the execution of each play in turn, the tests allow both defenders to proof their understandings and improve their real-time awareness of defensive problems with particular emphasis on inferential carding. The final product is quite simply a gem: the book was already one of the best texts on defense and on how to solve the problems associated with this most troublesome part of the game, but the software version brings the whole concept to a new level making it an absolute must for anyone from advanced level upwards who wants to progress in this area as well as anyone who has a serious interest in building solid partnership understandings on defense. Niggles? It would have been nice to have a cd-rom with an auto-run feature instead of forcing the user, often not that computer literate, to look up the right directory to start up the application. Apart from that, "Complete Partnership Defense" is a great product which is thoroughly recommended and that is currently available online for around \$45 + shipping.



The Terence Reese Classics

Another product from the same publisher is "The Terence Reese Classics" which includes two evergreens of bridge literature: "Play Bridge with Reese" and "The Expert Game", while a third one, "Play these hands with me", is available as a supplement at an additional cost.

For those out there who are not familiar with Terence Reese (1913-1996), suffice to say that he was considered the best British player of all time and the prolific author of many unforgettable classics. Of those by far the best are the two selected by Lex de Groot to be transferred to the interactive format and included in this cd-rom.

I must admit that reviewing this product was a hell of a lot of fun, as much as it will be for those who are smart enough to go out and get themselves a copy. Just picture yourself relaxing in the comfort of your own home while you carefully sort through a bridge hand with a great champion like Reese sitting next to you and ready to guide you along: you follow his thoughts and choices through the bidding. When the bidding is over, the opponents lead, dummy comes down and you can choose to try and make the hand by yourself or to step back and let Reese explain his reasoning as he develops a plan and builds up a picture of the hidden hands card by card. In both cases you are treated to an extensive analysis which is often a great eye-opener on the thinking lines of a truly great expert, the inferences he can draw and the way he succeeds in turning a difficult hand into an open book. It sounds simple but the results are dazzling, entertaining and instructive for players of all levels including die-

hard experts: as an example one can refer to a recent article by Pamela Granovetter where she relates how she selected "The Expert Game" to refresh her declarer play before her return to competition after many years away from the table. The new interactive format supported by the Bridgemaster engine, makes working through each hand a much more instructive and lasting experience, thanks to the certosine efforts of de Groot who carefully highlighted and sequenced the text in order to maximize the enjoyment of the user. For those who need a little push, there are frequent hints of which one can take advantage of to help unravel the puzzle. The Cd-Rom contains 205 deals, which are also cross-indexed according to different themes, and is completed by a rich biography of the author compiled with the assistance of Mark Horton, including the inevitable mention of the 1965 Buenos Aires "fingers" affaire, when Reese-Shapiro were accused of using fingers signals. All in all, another "must buy" product which is sure to provide a great and enjoyable learning experience for players from advanced level to...well... to champions of the caliber of Granovetter! The "Terence Reese Classics" sells online for around \$45 (while the supplement, containing 60 hands, costs \$15).

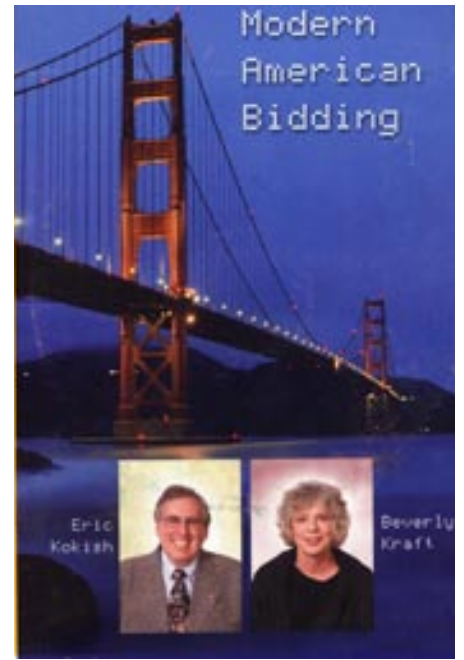


The Jannersten Collection

The third product in the Arnhem Bridge stable is the "Jannersten Collection". Eric Jannersten (1912-1982) is a legendary name in European bridge: a Scanian equivalent of Culbertson and Reese put together: in 1939 he started

Bridgetidningen, the world's second oldest bridge magazine (after *The Bridge World*) and over the next forty years he had a huge influence in the growth of the Swedish bridge movement. Apart from being the first professional European bridge journalist and the founder of the International Bridge Press Association, he was also very active on the publishing front and authored many books on the game. Arguably two of the most famous ones ("Find the Mistakes" and "The Only Chance") are present in the Cd-Rom, while my absolute favorite: "Card Reading" is included in the supplement. The interactive format of the "Collection" is very much similar to what I explained earlier, but I must admit that Reese is a very tough act to follow and both of Jannersten's products, while very entertaining and instructive in their own way, were a little bit dry and did not give me the same "buzz" I felt when going through Reese's engaging masterpieces. The 75 deals in "**Find the mistakes**" are all about being ultra-careful, a sort of Murphy's law view of bridge: "if anything bad can happen, don't worry, it will". How many times do we play hands which seem absolutely straight-forward and we quickly proceed to butcher them by not carefully examining what might occur if do not take the right precautions to ensure that we can make even if we come across a devilish distribution of the hidden hands? The program leads us through a path of discovery and hand after hand we are presented with a chance to witness the "careless" play, to try our best at tackling the hand ourselves or simply go through Jannersten's explanation of how the hand should be played. My experience with the hands was a little mixed: most of them worked well but there was the odd occasion where the BridgeMaster engine seemed to shoot blanks and not re-arrange correctly the cards to stop me from solving the hand using an inferior line, something that I did not encounter in the "Reese Classics". Admittedly, given the enormous amount of effort involved to set up each deal it is understandable that there is still the occasional quirk that needs ironing out. While the pessimists

among us thrived in "Find the Mistakes" with its horrendous "what-ifs", the second work in the cd-rom, "**The only chance**", presents us with 83 deals where the most incurable optimists will get plenty of chances to practice their "Hail Mary" approach to declarer play. Those American football fans out there will know what I mean: from time to time we come across hands which seem to have almost no chance to make but that "almost" can spell the difference between success and defeat. Like in American Football when all seems lost one can only hope for the impossible and throw a long pass in the end-zone and pray that it might get caught by the right person, here the challenge is to figure out which "Hail Mary" layout gives the contract a chance, however slim, and play for it. An ingenious idea, which is quite entertaining and can be very useful to sharpen one's declarer skills. The Cd-Rom contains a short bio of Jannersten and a thorough cross-index listing all the deals of both sections per type. The supplement (**Card Reading**) is in my view the best buy, but needs the original Cd-Rom to work with and cannot be purchased independently. Card reading is as Jannersten himself puts it in deceptively simple fashion: "all about making use of your ability to count up to thirteen". The subject itself is fascinating and constitutes one of the areas where players can make huge progress if they master the right approach to "the art of guessing right at the bridge table". The 70 deals presented here range from the relatively straight-forward, where cashing a side suit sheds light on the distribution and enables us to make an "inspired" guess in the critical suit, to the incredibly complex in the "Well played Maestro" section, close to the end, which presents some outstanding examples of card reading by the world's best players. The bidding is a little dated, but the examples are as fresh as ever. I would happily buy the Cd-rom, a worthwhile purchase in itself, simply to have the chance to have a go at this great supplement. The Jannersten Collection retails online for around \$45, while the supplement is available for an extra \$15.



Modern American bidding

Did you ever think about having your own personal expert coach to guide you and monitor your progress as you work out the complexities of a well rounded 2/1 system? Would you ever dream to be able to enroll for that critical task Eric Kokish, the undisputed Coach Numero Uno, and Beverly Kokish Kraft, a Canadian international and Eric's valid assistant and better half? Well, dreams can come true but, short of setting out a large sum for the privilege, purchasing "Modern American Bidding" is your next best option. This unique piece of software presents an elaborate version of 2/1 "a la Kokish" and a set of 200 hands to bid (and play if one so wishes) in order to test one's understanding of the system and of a variety of critical issues related to constructive auctions. The bidding is constantly monitored by Eric and Beverly's comments (best heard from their own dulcet tones thanks to the nice sound option!) which shed light on the auction within the mainframe of the suggested system and its possible alternatives. Marks are provided for the chosen bids, which are reviewable thanks to an integrated statistics table. The ingenious system is largely based on a distributional "Picture Bidding" approach supported by a wealth of artificial sequences to ascertain and clarify awkward hand shapes as

well as to better qualify different raise structures. For instance: the sequence $1\heartsuit-1\text{NT}; 2\heartsuit-2\spadesuit$ is showing either a weak minor or an invitational minor two-suiter and a heart misfit or a three card heart raise with spade values; $1\spadesuit-1\text{NT}; 2\clubsuit-2\diamondsuit$ suggests in principle five hearts but then over opener's $2\heartsuit$ relay responder can show stronger or different hands than if the same bid had been taken directly over the $2\clubsuit$ bid (i.e.: $1\spadesuit-1\text{NT}; 2\clubsuit-2\diamondsuit; 2\heartsuit-2\text{NT}$ shows now a club fit and an invitational hand, while a direct $3\clubsuit$ over $2\clubsuit$ would have been a courtesy raise with 7+-9 HCP). A lavish and well laid out 72 page manual accompanies the product and provides exhaustive information concerning its functionality and a detailed 34 pages outlook of the system. Because of the depth of its structure and the know-how needed to complete many artificial sequences which are sometimes only sketched out in the manual in order to give the user the chance to work them out in the heat of battle, the product is best targeted at an ambitious partnership, aiming to take-up this highly effective and well conceived version of 2/1 and to use the software as an interactive coaching aid. All in all "Modern American Bidding" is an absolutely unique product which is quite simply excellent at what it sets out to do: to provide a cohesive 2/1 system and a well structured testing ground to proof partnership understandings and illustrate many aspects of expert evaluation and judgment. One cannot help wonder, however, whether its marketability (and sales) would not have benefited from presenting a more mainstream version of 2/1, supported by Eric and Beverly's well reasoned comments, to target a broader range of potential users. "Modern American Bidding" is produced by "Q-Plus software" and is available online for \$50 + shipping.



Counting at bridge 2

Michael Lawrence is a name that does not need introducing: his books have regularly turned into huge success stories over the last three decades because of the author's unique mix of deep insightful analysis and an extremely clear writing style. "Counting at bridge 2" marks a very welcome return of Lawrence to interactive bridge software with a subject which must be very close to his heart: counting and card reading, the core of his first masterpiece "How to read your opponents' cards".

Ever had the impression that good bridge players seem able to see through the back of your cards? Why are they so successful in locating missing honors and guessing their opponents' distribution? Lawrence's answer is that they are usually not guessing. Whether they are defending or declaring, good players are constantly gathering clues from the bidding and play and using them to make logical assumptions about the location of the unseen cards. Lawrence presents a wealth of material: 100 hands and 25 bidding quiz hands, richly interspersed with many gems of wisdom to illustrate his point and to help the user master the steps needed to count the hand, the complex exercise aimed at figuring out how many cards each player holds in each suit. Each hand is analyzed in depth with many insightful tips while a steady stream of questions check the user's understanding of several core issues, ranging from hand evaluation to

defensive strategy and declarer play technique. The quizzes are also well chosen and thought-provoking while providing a very good test of bidding judgment. After carefully wading my way through all of the material contained in "Counting at bridge 2", I was delighted with the quality of the hands and the sharp lucidity of the accompanying text, but also surprised by the huge amount of information conveyed. In a way the title is quite misleading: "Counting at Bridge 2" should have been more aptly titled "Lawrence on Bridge" since the author seems to have used the vast knowledge and experience that come from three decades of top level bridge, both as a player and as

an author, to pass on to the user his take on bridge issues which go much further than just card reading. My only grumble is that I would have really liked a better organization and grouping of the hands, which are merely listed in numerical order, either with a short snappy title for each one to make them more memorable or by separating them in chapters according to their characteristics. On the other hand it is worth pointing out that such arrangement, or lack thereof, was deliberate since, as Lawrence himself stated in his reply, "I have always felt that since at the table hands come in random order, it would have been best to do the same here". "Counting at Bridge 2" is produced by Bridge Base Inc. and is available online for \$35 + shipping.

