



## How great it is to be back at a bridge tournament

By Susan Morse

Hotel reservation made? Check.  
Vaccination proof submitted?  
Check.

Flight? Argh. No nonstop flights to Hilton Head this year – one of the lesser pandemic pitfalls. Solution? Convince the Mister to drive me there with promises of sun, sand, and, most important, GOLF. Check.

Team: Me? Check. John? Check. Elaine? Check. Real? Rats.

Hilton Head is my favorite regional, even though I've only been once before. It was 2020, right before COVID hit, and I couldn't get enough of that beach; I didn't care that it was February. Our team promised to reunite for the next one, but reality eventually hit and Elaine's longtime steady partner, Real (pronounced Ray-Al) has sadly declined to travel just yet. Solution: A regular partner of mine, Lisa, wants to come. She'll play with me, freeing up John to play with Elaine – they play well together, and Lisa will help bring our points total down so we'll have a shot at second bracket. Check!

Masks? They are required for this one. Since Omicron, I've upped my game from cloth to N95. After eliminating various suffocating models, I've identified and fully stocked my best fit. Check.

Meckstroth is waiting for us when we pull in at the Marriott's main entrance on Sunday night. Actually, he has no clue who I am, even though he's kindly posed for pictures with me and other friends in past years. He's

just ambling past bellhops and valets, going wherever Meckstroth goes the evening before a tournament. It's nice to see a familiar face. I've been expecting him because a friend, John McAllister, told me he's playing with him later this week. Wow, right?

After a delightful morning walk on the beach before the Mister heads out to the golf course, I pick up my red wristband proving I'm fully vaxxed, and find John, who is wearing one of his many Lady Gaga shirts, which he thinks brings us luck. John is a Gaga superfan. He'll go anywhere and wear anything Gaga-related, including this particularly problematic item. Gaga's glancing demurely over her shoulder, but when John crosses his arms (in those rare moments when he is not playing a card or eating), it looks like whoever is underneath them has a ridiculously deep cleavage. It's really just Gaga's arm up tight against her side. Anyway, a good luck charm is a good luck charm.

John tops my celebrity sighting with one of his own. He and our other teammates decided to fly. The airport in Savannah is an hour from the hotel. John reserved a rental car for the late-night drive, and to ferry our gang off-campus for dinners. Rental cars have been in short supply due to COVID, and after landing in the wee hours, John sort of freaked

at the ridiculously long Avis line until he noticed a preferred customer counter with no line at all. When he switched, there was a loud objection from one of the nonpreferred folks: Mike Passell, also Preferred as it turned out, but perhaps not as savvy a traveler. Mike stepped in behind John once they sorted it out, and John was given the choice of either waiting an hour for a sedan to be turned in, or taking what was available: a monster pickup truck. Wonder if Mike got a monster truck too ...

Gaga delivers the luck: We make it to the second session of the Monday-Tuesday KO's second bracket,

but then she abandons us in the evening and we are knocked out. 3.25 red. On Tuesday our only option is a round robin, which turns out well – second-place tie, 8.59 gold.

Wednesday morning, the Mister enjoys a dolphin sighting on our last walk before he heads north – Hilton Head dolphins are ginormous for some reason – very dark, with flam-

boyant whale tails they like to wave around. "Ask Me" host Ricki Rogers is in top form outside the playing area; she's segued from Tuesday's Bridge Witch outfit to full Mardi Gras – crown, mask, the works. And Jeremy the bookseller is set up in the hall – glad he made it through the pandemic. Gaga is definitely our rab-



John wears one of his lucky Lady Gaga shirts.

bit's foot – we make it to the second day finals of another second bracket two-day KO, and pull off a win. 27.36 gold! Maybe we should jump into the monster truck and skedaddle home before anything goes wrong.

Friday morning brings a beautiful sunrise and an early text from John: The tournament's table count so far is 47% of the pre-pandemic one in 2020 – this is heaps better than they expected, so hooray for Hilton Head. A second text comes in: John is out of Gaga shirts. Oh no! I ask him to wear a dirty one and he declines. Where's his team spirit?

It's my turn to buy our entry, so I rush past "Ask Me" Ricki's bobbing leprechaun shamrocks to beat the line. Now that we've had a win, I'm seriously hoping we will have to play in the top bracket today – I've been waiting all week for McAllister to finally play with Meckstroth, and I want to harass him at the table. John gets excited too when he figures out I got my wish: We are playing the big kids. According to the directors, they've been putting nine teams in the top bracket all week, but for some reason when they looked at the total points of each team that entered this event, there were only three teams in our wannabe category, each holding a total of roughly 20,000 points. The directors were faced with a choice of either bumping us wannabes up with the big guns, or inflicting us on the next group down, folks who have only half as many points as us. It's a compliment – the directors think 20K tweeners like us will be able to cope much better playing against the 90K types than the 10K folks below can handle us.

John agrees to give me dibs on Meckstroth if we draw his team, mostly so he can laugh at this thing I apparently do when a star turns up at my table. I was not aware till he

pointed it out at a national – something like that arm-waving thing the robot on that '60s TV series "Lost in Space" does when Will Robinson is in peril – "Danger! Danger!" I can't help it; I get excited. Anyway, isn't my response more sportsmanlike than today's third 20K tweener team who literally dropped out to play pairs when they found out they were in the top bracket?

Entry buyer is captain, so Lisa and I are North-South. We're in a three-way, and our first opponents are not familiar to us. (Truth is, it's hard to recognize anyone wearing a mask.) We bid and make a slam, and they fail to bid a slam but make it, so we're feeling OK even though I go down in 4♥ on one hand and we compete to 4♠ on another, doubled down one. The next pair turns up fairly promptly, and again we don't know them but there's an aura – we can tell they're

important. We introduce ourselves. My LHO has an accent – I ask him to repeat his name twice and then he gives up and tells us to call him Gino like everyone else. RHO mumbles his name through his mask, no accent, and when I lean in and ask him to repeat, he says "Just call me Sir." So that's what we'll have to do from now on. First off, we have a competitive auction and we double Sir's 4♠ contract for 500. I don't remember which of us doubled, but if it was I, it's thanks to John, who got through to me a while back with what I call the Paddywhack Principle. (People like Sir and Gino smell meat when wannabes turn up, and you have to spank them when they overstep or they'll never learn to keep

out of your business.)

We set Gino's 4♥ as well, and he compliments Lisa for smoothly playing the ♦J from J-x when he broke diamonds leading to ♦AKQ106 in dummy, causing him to abandon them and run clubs instead. He then makes an overtrick in 3NT and Lisa makes six in a 4♥ contract, which would spook us a little if we weren't having so much darn fun.

Elaine and John show up to compare. John reports who these people are: The first pair was Jonathan Steinberg and Alex Hudson. I know these names; they are experts for sure. John says their team has 94,000 points. Ours has 17,620, and by some miracle we are ahead by 3 IMPs. Second team is Eldad "Gino" Ginosar and David "Sir" Berkowitz, who we definitely know about. (Of course, for the rest of the morning John will be making nonstop Son of Sam references – hope Sir never finds out.) Sir's team has 92,000 masterpoints and we are ahead by 15, which means John must have one of his dirty Gaga shirts stuffed down the back of his pants; it simply makes no sense.

Second round, Hudson and Steinberg get paddywhacked, set and doubled in another 4♠ contract. Most of our scores against them are in the plus column, so we're beginning to feel recklessly cocky when Gino and Sir turn up. This is when I have to do

my *Danger Will Robinson* thing. I scold Sir for being famous and not telling us his real name right away, and tell Gino I am going to buy his book, "Power Up Your Bridge Game," which John says is quite good. It turns out Lisa and Sir have golf in common, so while we wait for our boards, they discuss their favorite gear, and I interrogate Gino about where he's from. Chicago, he says cryptically, which is a lead-in to my Claire story – Claire



Ricki Rogers dresses in costume when on "Ask Me" duty.



Bridge celebrity at your table? Danger, Will Robinson!

Rolin, a wonderful bridge friend who sadly passed away a few years ago. Claire was bored with opponents remarking on her thickish Belgian accent. When they'd ask her where she was from, she'd say, "New Jersey," and try to change the subject. Then they'd say, "No, where were you born?" And she'd give them a death stare and say, "Africa," because she actually was born in Morocco. Gino tells me he is from Israel, so we talk Israeli TV, and I namedrop a well-regarded Tel Aviv author, now deceased, that I'm related to by marriage. Gino knows who the guy was, which leaves us mutually impressed.



The fateful hand, written on a mask

Our second set with these delightful gents starts with Lisa on a declarer tear. In a regular club game, Lisa normally apologizes for hogging the hands. In my opinion, she never hogs, she just bids her hand, and besides, I sincerely enjoy sitting back and watching her go for it because she plays the cards like a champ. Today it's 2♣ down two, followed by 4♥ making six, doggone it, and then 6NT making seven, ah well. We set Gino in 3NT and then, on the second-to-last deal we finally come to the auction this article is actually about.

Here's my hand:

♠ A J 9 8  
♥ 7  
♦ 10 3  
♣ A K J 8 6 2

West	North	East	South
Sir	Susan	Gino	Lisa
Pass	2♣	Pass	2NT
Pass	3♠	Pass	4NT
Pass	5♥	Pass	6NT
All Pass			

Lisa is dealer and opens 1♥. I have a good hand, so I skip my spades and respond 2♣, putting us firmly in a game force. Lisa then bids 2NT,

which I reject, showing my spade suit with 3♠. At least that's what I think I'm doing. Lisa then bids 4NT, which throws me. We've been playing together for years, but this is new. I decide to take it as RKC Blackwood in spades, so I bid 5♥ (two key cards, no ♠Q). Lisa then signs off in 6NT ... and goes down one. Crestfallen, we take advantage of the teachable moment and ask our venerable opponents what went wrong. Lisa had a 17-point balanced hand with a five-card major. She hardly ever opens these 1NT because she adds a length point, but Gino prefers to establish this strong hand by starting with 1NT. And, as it turns out, I need to review

the standard meaning of opener's rebids more thoroughly. Lisa's 2NT bid, not a jump, showed very specific distribution: 5-3-3-2, with either 12-14 points or 18-19, depending on her next bid. When she then bid 4NT, it was quantitative, showing the big 18-19 pointer. 4NT could not be RKC because we had not settled on the "strain," as Gino called it, meaning we had not found a fit. With 13 HCP, my response should have been to either cuebid my clubs as a slam try, or chicken out and pass.

It was fun while it lasted. John and Elaine turn up to compare, and lo and behold, we only gave back 1 IMP against Steinberg and Hudson's team, meaning we beat them by 2. Lisa's declarer streak worked out well: pushes on the first two boards, a whopping 13 IMPs on the first slam that made seven, but the doomed 6NT hand costs us 11 IMPs because Gino and Sir's teammates at the other table stopped at a sedate 3NT, making five. Still, we only gave back 3 IMPs against them in the second half, which means we won two matches in the first bracket, against the best of the best, and this, just this, is something to tell the Mister on the phone tonight.

Dying all through lunch, hoping we pull Meckstroth and McAllister even

if that will mean absolute and utter annihilation. Instead we pull the McCaw team in the afternoon round. They are the only other tweener team, with just a couple thousand more points than us. Thanks be to Gaga! This should mean we will advance, judging by our morning brilliance, but no, they blitz us by 32 IMPs.

Next morning on the beach, I find a sand dollar. I'm thinking about Elaine's good partner Real and how much he would have loved this trip. I also can't quite recall what Lisa had on that 6NT hand, and I want to share what I learned with friends and relations, so I decide the thing to do is hunt down Gino and see if he remembers. (Of course Gino will remember. He's superhuman.) He does; he recalls both our hands, and Sir's opening lead. Not only that, he will eventually get back to me in an email (I have Gino's email!) with his teammates' auction at the other table:

North	South
	1NT
2♣	2♥
3♣ <sup>(1)</sup>	3NT
Pass	

(1) Five-plus clubs, four spades, slam interest

Lacking anything for Gino to write on, I extract one of those suffocating reject masks from the bottom of my purse. Pandemic? Phooey! This is what I love most about bridge tournaments - learning from the masters and sometimes even beating them - the highs, the lows. We are back and it feels so, so good. Please everyone who can - come join us!

Meckstroth and McAllister's team also missed the cut, along with Steinberg and Hudson, and we all (since when are Meckstroth and I a "we"? ) wind up back in the round robins on our last day. And, we all win: 14 gold for us in second bracket, and 28.77 and 21.58 for the big boys. So yes, yes, yes: I definitely ♥ Hilton Head.

Oh, and Gino and Sir? They advanced, and they won that last knock-out. 🤖