

# Chapter 1

## Going to Bridge Boot Camp

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Gathering what you need to play bridge
  - ▶ Spelling out your bridge ABCs
  - ▶ Building your bridge skills with available resources
- 

**W**elcome to Bridge Boot Camp! In this chapter, I talk about some basic concepts that you need to have under your belt to get started playing bridge. Consider this chapter your first step into the game of bridge. If you read this whole chapter, you'll graduate from Bridge Boot Camp. Sorry — you don't get a diploma. But you do get the thrill of knowing what you need to know to start playing bridge.

By the way, I want you to know that you made a good choice, a very good choice, about learning to play bridge. Perhaps I'm biased, but bridge is the best card game ever. You can play bridge all over the world, and wherever you go, you can make new friends automatically by starting up a game of bridge. Bridge can be more than a game — it can be a common bond.

## *Starting a Game with the Right Stuff*



Before you can begin to play bridge, you need to outfit yourself with some basic supplies. Actually, you may already have some of these items around the house, just begging for you to use them in your bridge game. What do you need? Here's your bottom-line list:

- ✓ Four warm bodies, including yours.
- ✓ A table — a square one is best. In a pinch, you can play on a blanket, on a bed, indoors, outdoors, or even on a computer if you can't find a game.
- ✓ One deck of playing cards (remove the jokers).
- ✓ A pencil and a piece of paper to keep score on. You can use any old piece of paper — a legal pad, the back of a grocery list, or even an ancient piece of papyrus will do.



I've been playing bridge for a long time now, so let me offer you a few hints on how you can make getting started with the game a little easier:

- ✓ Watch a real bridge game to observe the mechanics of the game.
- ✓ Round up three friends who are interested in playing. Don't worry if you all don't know what you're doing. We all begin knowing nothing; some of us even end up that way.
- ✓ Follow the sample hands in this book by laying out the cards to correspond to the cards in the figures. Doing so gives you a feel for the cards and makes the explanations easier to follow.

## Ranking the Cards

A deck has 52 cards divided into four suits: spades (♠), hearts (♥), diamonds (♦), and clubs (♣).



Each suit has 13 cards: the AKQJ10 (which are called the *honor cards*) and the 98765432 (the *spot cards*).

The 13 cards in a suit all have a rank — that is, they have a pecking order. The ace is the highest-ranking card, followed by the king, the queen, the jack, and the 10, on down to the lowly 2 (which is also called the deuce).



Because each card has a ranking, the more high-ranking cards you have in your hand, the better. The more honor cards you have, the stronger your hand. You can never have too many honor cards.

## Knowing Your Directions

In bridge, the players are nameless souls — they're known by directions. When you sit down at a table with your three pals to play bridge, imagine that the table is a compass. You're sitting at due South, your partner sits across from you in the North seat, and your opponents sit East and West.

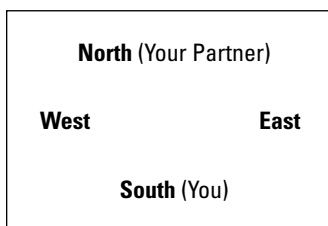


In Parts I and II of this book, you're South for every hand, and your partner is North. Just as in the opera, where the tenor always gets the girl, in a bridge diagram, you're represented as South — you are called the *declarer*, and you always get to play the hand. Your partner, North, is always the *dummy*. Don't worry about what these terms mean just yet — the idea is that you play every hand from the South position.

Figure 1-1 diagrams the playing table. Get acquainted with this little diagram: You see some form of it many, many times in this book, not to mention in newspaper columns and magazines. For me, this diagram was a blessing in disguise — I never could get my directions straight until I started playing bridge.

**Figure 1-1:**

You're South, your partner is North, and your opponents are East and West.



## *Playing the Game in Phases*

Obviously, more is involved in playing a game of bridge than I can tell you in the following sections. If playing bridge were that simple, it wouldn't be half as challenging, rewarding, and fun (and you certainly wouldn't need this book). I'd like to give you a fast-forwarded view of one bridge hand so you can get acquainted with how it all works.

First and foremost, bridge is a partnership game — you swim together and you sink together. Your opponents are in the same boat. In bridge, you don't score points individually — you score points as a team. (To get the drift of the first several parts of this book, don't worry about keeping score. See Chapter 20 to find out more about scoring if you can't wait.)



Each hand of bridge is divided into four phases, which always occur in the same order:

1. The deal
2. The bidding
3. The play
4. The scoring

## *Phase 1: The deal*

The game starts with each player seated facing his or her partner. The cards are shuffled and placed on the table face down. Each player selects a card, and the one who picks the highest card deals the first hand, but not before the player to the dealer's left cuts the cards. (After each hand, the deal rotates to the left so one person doesn't get stuck doing all the dealing.)

The cards are dealt one at a time, starting with the player to the dealer's left and moving in a clockwise rotation until each player has 13 cards (you deal the entire deck of cards).



Wait until the dealer distributes all the cards before you pick up your hand. That's bridge etiquette lesson number one. I throw in a few other etiquette tips throughout the book to keep you in line.



When each player has 13 cards, pick up and sort your hand using the following tips:

- ✓ You can sort the cards in any number of ways, but I recommend sorting your cards into the four suits.
- ✓ Alternate your black suits (clubs and spades) with your red suits (diamonds and hearts) so you don't confuse a black card for another black card, or a red card for another red card. It's a bit disconcerting to think you're playing a heart, only to see a diamond come floating out of your hand.
- ✓ Hold your cards back, way back, so only you can see them. It's difficult to be a winning bridge player when your opponents can see your hand.

## *Phase 2: The bidding for tricks*

Bidding in bridge can be compared to an auction. The auctioneer tells you what the minimum bid is, and the first bid starts from that point or higher. Each successive bid must be higher than the last, until someone bids so high that everyone else wants out. When you want out of the bidding in bridge, you say "Pass." After three consecutive players say "Pass," the bidding is over. However, if you pass and someone else makes a bid, just as at an auction, you can reenter the bidding.

In real-life auctions, people often bid for silly things, such as John F. Kennedy's golf clubs or Andy Warhol's cookie jars. In bridge, you don't bid for cars, art treasures, or precious gems; you bid for something really valuable — tricks. Because the whole game revolves around tricks, you really need to understand the term.



Some of you may remember the game of War from when you were a kid. If you don't remember, just pretend that you do and follow along. In War, two players divide the deck between them. Each player takes a turn placing a card face up on the table. The player with the higher card *takes the trick*.

In bridge, four people each place a card face up on the table, and the highest card in the suit that has been led takes the trick. Because each player has 13 cards, 13 tricks must be fought over and won in each hand.



Think of bidding as an estimation of how many of those 13 tricks your side (or their side) thinks it can take. The bidding starts with the dealer and moves to his left in a clockwise rotation. Each player gets a chance to bid. The least you can bid is for seven tricks, and the maximum you can bid is for all 13. A player can either bid or pass at his turn.

The bidding goes around and around the table, with each player either bidding or passing until three players in a row say "Pass."



The last bid (the one followed by three passes) is called the *final contract*. No, that's not something the Mafia puts out on you. It's simply the number of tricks that the bidding team must take to score points (see Parts III and IV for more about bidding, and Chapter 20 for more about scoring).

## Phase 3: The play of the hand

After the bidding for tricks, the play begins. Either your team or the other team makes the final bid. Because you are the star of this book, pretend that you make the final bid — for nine tricks. Therefore, your goal is to win at least nine tricks in the hand.

If you take nine (or more) tricks, your team scores points. If you take fewer than nine tricks, you are penalized, and your opponents score points. (See Chapter 20 for the details on scoring.) In the following sections, I describe a few important aspects of playing a hand of bridge.

### *The opening lead and the dummy*



Once the bidding determines who the *declarer* is (the one who plays the hand), that person's partner becomes the *dummy* (no offense intended). The person to the declarer's left (West, assuming that you're South) *leads*, or puts down, the first card, called the *opening lead*, face up in the middle of the table. The opening lead can be any card of West's choosing.

When the opening lead lands on the table, the game really begins to roll. The next person to “play” is the dummy — but instead of playing a card, the dummy puts her hand face up on the table in four neat vertical rows, one row for each suit, and then bows out of the action entirely. After she puts down her cards, she says and does nothing, leaving the other three people to play the rest of the hand. Ever heard of the Sphinx?



The 13 cards that the dummy puts down are also called *the dummy*. Yes, the dummy puts down the dummy. I know, it doesn't make much sense — I didn't make up these terms.

Because the dummy is no longer involved in the action, each time it's the dummy's turn to play, you, the declarer, must physically take a card from the dummy and put it in the middle of the table. In addition, you must play a card from your own hand when it's your turn.

The fact that the declarer gets stuck with playing all the team's cards while the dummy is off munching on snacks may seem a bit unfair. But you do have an advantage over the defenders: You get to see your partner's cards before you play, which allows you to plan a strategy of how to win those nine tricks (or however many tricks you need to make the final contract).

### *Following suit*



The opening lead determines which suit the other three players must play. Each of the players must *follow suit*, meaning that they must play a card in the suit that's led if they have one. For example, pretend that the opening lead is a heart. Down comes the dummy, and you (and everyone else at the table) can see the dummy's hearts as well as your own hearts. Because you must play the same suit that is led if you have one, you have to play a heart, any heart that you want, from the dummy. You place the heart of your choice face up on the table and wait for your right-hand opponent (East, assuming that the dummy is North) to play a heart. After she plays a heart, you play a heart from your hand. Voilà: Four hearts now sit on the table. A trick! Whoever has played the highest heart takes the trick. One trick down and only 12 to go — you're on a roll!



What if a player doesn't have a card in the suit that has been led? Then, and only then, can a player choose a card, any card, from another suit and play it, which is called a *discard*. When you discard, you're literally throwing away your card, knowing that it's worthless because it's not in the proper suit. A discard can never win a trick.

In general, you discard worthless cards that can't take tricks, saving good-looking cards that may take tricks later. Sometimes, however, the bidding designates a *trump suit* (think wild cards). In that case, when a suit is led and you don't have it, you can discard from another suit or take the trick with a trump card. See “Understanding Notrump and Trump Play” later in this chapter.



If you can follow suit, you must. If you have a card in the suit that's been led but you play a card in another suit by mistake, you *revoke*. Not good; if you are detected, penalties may be involved. Don't worry, though — everybody revokes once in a while. I once lost a National Championship by revoking on the last hand of the tournament.

### *Playing defense*

Approximately 25 percent of the time, you'll be the declarer; 25 percent of the time, you'll be the dummy; and the remaining 50 percent of the time, you'll be on defense! You need to have a good idea of which card to lead in the first trick and how to continue after you see the dummy. You want to be able to take all the tricks your side has coming. Remember, defenders can't see each other's hands so they have to use signals (yes, legal ones) to tell partner what they have. They do this by making informative leads and discards that announce to partner (and the declarer) what they have in the suit they are playing.

I show you winning defensive techniques in Part V.

### *Winning and stacking tricks*

The player who plays the highest card in the suit that has been led wins the trick. That player sweeps up the four cards and puts them in a neat stack, face down, a little off to the side. The declarer "keeps house" for his team by stacking tricks into piles so anyone can see how many tricks that team has won. The defender (your opponent) who wins the first trick does the same for his or her side.



The player who takes the first trick *leads first*, or plays the first card, to the second trick. That person can lead any card in any suit desired, and the other three players must follow suit if they can.

The play continues until all 13 tricks have been played. After you play to the last trick, each team counts up the number of tricks it has won.

## *Phase 4: The scoring*

After the smoke clears and the tricks are counted, you know soon enough whether the declarer's team made its contract. You then register the score — see Chapter 20 for more about scoring.

After the hand has been scored, the deal moves one player to the left. So if South dealt the first hand, West is now the dealer. Then North deals the next hand, then East, and then the deal reverts back to South.



Play continues until one team bids and makes two game contracts, which is called winning a *rubber*. When the rubber is over, everyone can go home or start playing another rubber. If you play tennis, think of winning a rubber as *winning a set*, not necessarily the match.

## Understanding Notrump and Trump Play

The names of the first two parts of this book have some funny words in them: *trump* and *notrump*. You can't get very far playing bridge if you don't decode these funny phrases.



Have you ever played a card game that has wild cards? When you play with wild cards, playing a wild card automatically wins the trick for you. Sometimes wild cards can be jokers, deuces, or aces. It doesn't matter what the card is; if you have one, you know that you have a sure winner. In bridge, you have wild cards, too, called *trump cards*. However, in bridge, the trump cards are really wild because they change from hand to hand, depending on the bidding.

The bidding determines whether a hand will be played with trump cards or in a *notrump* contract (a hand with no trump cards). If the final bid names a trump suit, that suit is the "wild" suit for the hand. For example, suppose that the final bid is 4♠ — this bid determines that spades are trump (or wild) for the entire hand. For more about playing a hand at a trump contract, see Part II.

When the final bid ends in *notrump*, the highest card played in the suit that has been led wins the trick. All the hands that you play in Part I are played at *notrump*.



More contracts are played at *notrump* than in any of the four suits.

## Building Your Skills with Clubs, Tournaments, and the Internet

You know, you're not in this bridge thing alone. You'll find help around every corner. You won't believe how much is available for interested beginners.



- ✔ **Clubs:** Most bridge clubs offer beginning bridge lessons and/or supervised play.
- ✔ **Tournaments:** Many tournaments offer free lectures for novice players, as well as novice tournaments and supervised play. Watching experts (or anyone else) play is free.
- ✔ **The Internet:** Once you get the knack, you can play bridge 24 hours a day on the Net . . . free!

To check this out, head for Part VI.

## So what's the fascination with bridge?

You may have met a few unfortunates who are totally hooked on playing bridge. They just can't get enough of it. Being a charter member of that club, I can offer a few words on why people can get so wrapped up in the game.

- ✔ One fascination is the bidding. Bidding involves a lot of partner-to-partner communication skills, and cleverly exchanging information between you and your partner in the special language of the game is a great challenge. Your opponents also pass information back and forth during the bidding, so figuring out what they're telling each other is another challenge. Bidding is
- such an art that some bridge books deal entirely with bidding. (I cover bidding in Parts III and IV.)
- ✔ Another hook for the game is taking tricks. You get to root out all kinds of devious ways to take tricks, both as a declarer and as a defender.
- ✔ And don't forget the human element. Bridge is much more than a game of putting down and picking up cards. Emotions enter into the picture — sooner or later, every emotion or personality trait that you see in life emerges at the bridge table.

