

AN HONORS eBook FROM MASTER POINT PRESS

Kim Frazer

"I would just like to bar all of my regular  
opponents from reading this book."  
Ron Klinger

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# Gaining the Mental Edge at Bridge

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## Foreword

This bridge book is unlike any other that you have read. You will not find a new bidding system or conventions or lessons on play as declarer or tips on opening leads or defence. There are already plenty of books on those subjects.

Instead, you will find plenty of invaluable advice on how to maximise your potential by what you do before play even starts, how to bring out your best during the session, how to recognise and eliminate negative thinking, how to deal with conflict at the bridge table, how to relax after a bridge session is over and be at your peak the next day, and much more. You will have come across many of the situations reported and which can arise during a bridge session. You might even recognise yourself.

Kim Frazer, a gold medallist in shooting competitions at international level, brings her wealth of knowledge and experience to show you how to apply similar principles and behaviour at the bridge table. Here is a winner giving you advice on what you can do to win, too. In the same way that she used these mental skills to succeed in her shooting, so Kim illustrates how you can use and benefit from the same skills at bridge.

Just as every individual is different, you might find that not every suggestion is suitable for you. Still, there are so many ideas that can lift your game and improve your results, it would be sensible to try to apply as much of Kim's advice as you can. Since bridge is a mental game, whatever you can do to stimulate and boost your mental prowess must be worth adopting.

Some of the concepts in this book are already part of my training routine, but there are also some that I have not seen before. I am anxious to try out these new ideas and incorporate them as part of my regular regime.

I can't wait for my next bridge game! I would just like to bar all of my regular opponents from reading this book.

Ron Klinger

2019

# Introduction

Since the early 1970's there has been an explosion of understanding in the area of sports psychology with sports psychologists now readily accessible to help athletes with the mental side of their game. There is also a large amount of material on sports psychology available online and in libraries and bookshops. I am neither a sports psychologist, nor a psychologist of any kind. However, I have acquired a lot of knowledge that helped me to win at international target shooting, and which I believe can also be applied at the bridge table and more broadly.

My initial involvement with sports psychology started in the mid-1980s when I was invited to join the National Development Squad for Target Rifle Shooting. The squad participated in a one-week training camp held at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra, Australia, and it was here that I was first introduced to the mental side of sport. At that time, the AIS was using sports psychologists to help teams. One of these sports psychologists (Graham Winter) had worked extensively with some of the Australian shooting team that competed at the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. One of the shooters who had taken his ideas on board was a coach at the camp, and she spoke about mental training. It was the first time I heard of the concepts of visualisation and imagery being systematically applied to help improve shooting skills.

A couple of years later, an American friend whom I had met while competing overseas sent me a series of audio tapes which had been recorded when the top American shooter and Olympic gold medallist, Lanny Bassham, had travelled to Canberra and worked with some of the National Squad. His series of tapes were enormously influential on my development as an international shooter. Over the next 20 years, I read

more on the topic from a variety of sources. Lanny has gone on to make a business out of delivering seminars on Mental Management Systems<sup>1</sup>. I acknowledge the significant part his work has played in both my success as a shooter and in my understanding of the mental side of sport.

After retiring from competitive shooting, I took up bridge, which I had played a few times while at university. Second time around, I fell in love with the game which has become a passion for me. A chance conversation with the captain of the Australian Open team in 2013 led me to consider how mental management techniques could be used in bridge. This in turn has led to a series of articles on mental management in the Australian Bridge Federation's bi-monthly newsletter and in the Australian Bridge magazine. However, newsletters and magazines don't lend themselves to in-depth discussion, and so the articles have been expanded and turned into this book.

In writing this book I have drawn upon the knowledge I have acquired during my sporting career and translated it into practical uses at the card table, particularly in my chosen game of bridge. More generally, the concepts can be applied to any card or board game, as well as other aspects of sport and life.

Since my background is sport—specifically target rifle shooting— I have used several examples from different sports which may be familiar to many and assist with illustrating the points being made.

Naturally, since this is a book about mental tools for bridge, it would hardly be complete without a few bridge hands to illustrate particular points, but you won't find loads of analysis on how to play, defend or bid each particular hand. There are hundreds of books on these topics and much better players than me to write them. The situations depicted in the hands in this book are all real and nearly all are hands I and/or one of my partners have played or defended, but I have left the other players anonymous for obvious reasons.

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1 [mentalmanagement.com](http://mentalmanagement.com)

I have also included some very basic technical material on sports psychology and psychology in general. This information is generally detailed in boxes. It's not necessary to know the underlying theory in order for you to use mental management, but this material is there for the people who are interested, along with some references for further reading if you want to find out more on any particular topic.

Finally, I thought it might be useful to include some tips on training, goal setting, training plans and other aspects that were common methods I used in my sport. If you want to take your competition to the next level and put in more effort, you might find these chapters helpful in guiding your bridge training.

Although this book has been written with bridge players in mind, the tools and concepts are applicable to any mind-game activity—whether it is poker, chess, backgammon or any of the other competitively played card and board games. Not everything in this book is for everyone, and what one player needs, another may have little use for—but I would be surprised if you didn't find something useful in these pages. Just like you decide which bridge method you use, you must evaluate what is best for you to help you to deal with your own weaknesses and enable you to play at your best!



# Chapter 1

## Why is Mental Management Important?

*"I always felt that my greatest asset was not my physical ability — it was my mental ability."*

- Bruce Jenner, Olympic gold medallist (decathlon)

Dealer: East

Vulnerable: EW

♠ 64  
♥ AK5  
♦ Q109752  
♣ K5

♠ J75  
♥ 86  
♦ 643  
♣ AQJ92

♠ K10832  
♥ Q32  
♦ J8  
♣ 643

♠ AQ9  
♥ J10974  
♦ AK  
♣ 1087

West	North	East	South
		Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All pass	

North-South were playing a 15-17 no-trump and South became declarer in three no-trumps.

West led the queen of clubs. With this club-suit combination, playing the king is the correct play. It gains whenever the ace is onside or if East has the nine of clubs. Yet on this hand our expert declarer failed at trick one by ducking and the defence took the first five tricks to defeat what should have been a cold contract.

This is a hand where clear thinking would have led the player in question to the right decision, yet an expert player failed when faced with the problem at the table. We use phrases like ‘he had a brain fade’ or ‘she had a blind spot’ to describe this kind of situation. If you are reading this book, you are interested in reducing these sorts of things happening to yourself and your partner.

Let’s have a look at why mental skills are important to competitive bridge players.

Bridge is a game with many facets. To be successful, a player needs to achieve a high degree of skill in each of these facets—whether it is technical ability, partnership understanding or agreements, concentration, match fitness and stamina in a long tournament and other factors which go into being a good bridge player. I believe having strong mental skills is simply one of these facets.

It is now widely recognised in sport that strong technical skills alone are not enough to win. While the players who are successful must possess strong technical skills, they must also pay attention to other areas such as mental training and preparation and allied areas like nutrition, recovery and so on.

Strong mental skills allow sportspeople to perform at their best. The concept of improving mental skills to enhance performance has now been translated into many fields and used by many different professions such as business people, surgeons, fighter pilots, public speakers and so on.

In his book ‘Outliers<sup>1</sup>’, Malcolm Gladwell set the benchmark of 10,000 hours as the magic amount of training or effort required to achieve a high

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1 Outliers, M. Gladwell: 2008 Chapter 2.

level of expertise in a field, whether it was sport, art, computer sciences or other fields of endeavour. If we consider what this means in bridge terms, a player needs to play for roughly twenty hours a week for ten years to achieve a high level of knowledge and expertise. However, there is a caveat here—playing for 10,000 hours doesn't mean you will be a world class player or even an expert player. Just as not everyone is athletic enough to become a champion tennis player or golfer, it's the same in bridge—not everyone will be world class or even expert just because they did 10,000 hours of practice. After achieving a certain level of expertise over time, a bridge player's skill level is limited by their individual ability.

This concept is roughly depicted in the chart shown on the next page. The bottom, middle and top lines show the respective learning curves for club, national and international level players.

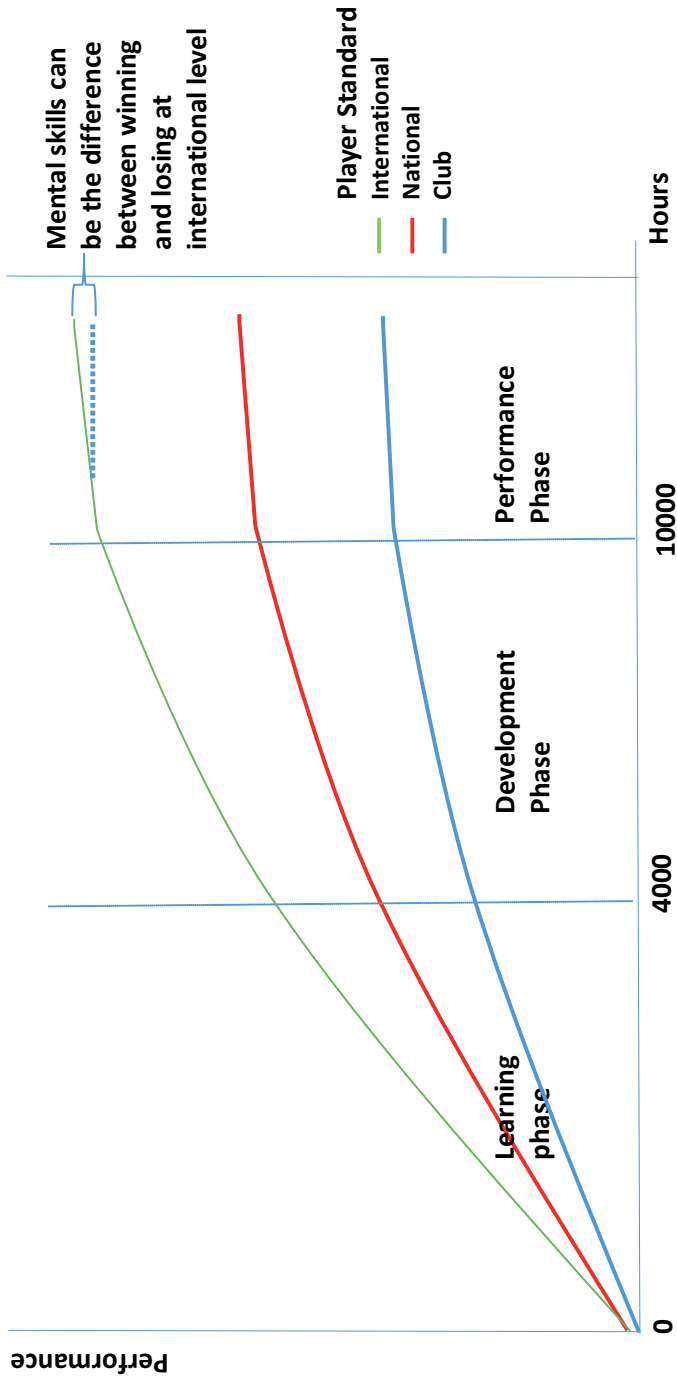
In the **learning phase**, improvement happens relatively quickly as basic bidding, defence, play techniques and other aspects of bridge are acquired. For a player who will eventually become an international level player, the rate of improvement is faster than for one whose final level will be in club bridge.

In the **development phase**, the rate of improvement slows as more complex techniques such as endplays, squeezes and advanced bidding skills are acquired.

In the **performance phase**, players are utilising all their knowledge and acquired skills. There is less scope for improvement from skill acquisition and performance is reliant on other factors such as concentration, making the right decisions at critical times in the match, keeping calm under pressure and so on. In this phase, the difference between players who have reached the performance phase is attributed to their ability to implement these other factors. A club level player who has strong concentration is more likely to beat another club level player whose attention wanders, even if their other skills are equivalent.

A player will reach their optimum performance level after working on

# Skill Development – Maximum level limited by player ability



20 hours per week for 10 years to reach Performance phase

their game for thousands of hours, but that level will be limited by their innate ability. The higher one's innate 'ability', the higher the end skill level.

So, what is the difference between a player who wins and one who loses, where the players have had roughly the same number of hours of training and both have acquired the same amount of ability and possess the same level of expertise? Experts now generally agree that the answer to this question lies in how good players are at a number of factors *beyond their ability* at their sport/technical activity. One of these factors is mental skills.

Sportspeople have used sports psychology to help them with the mental side of the game for many years with its use becoming more widespread from the mid-1970's. There are certainly some instances of earlier use than this, but I don't believe there was a formalised, widespread and structured approach before that time. Certainly, there wasn't the wealth of knowledge there is today. Yet despite bridge's huge mental components, I have found little documentation on using sports psychology in bridge. Perhaps the best players are already using the techniques described in this book and the rest of the bridge world is left in the dark? However, it seems unlikely that many players are using mental tools given the lack of published information or public discussion on the topic.

This book will give players of all levels a mental toolbox—i.e. a set of mental skills that can help them with their game in the variety of situations that are thrust upon them in competitive bridge. Just as we have a range of system conventions or card-play techniques that we draw on in competition, each of us should also have a number of mental 'tools' to assist us with achieving the best performance level possible within the limits of our technical ability.

These mental skills include:

- » the ability to relax when under pressure;
- » rehearsal techniques to improve your play;

- » the ability to maintain concentration and focus;
- » pre-match preparation; and
- » match management.

If you are a player who gets off to a bad start in tournaments or who struggles to win in tournaments when you are leading or who loses concentration or gets nervous or loses your cool—mental tools can help you. Understanding how to improve your mental skills and gaining the necessary skills in this area will assist players of all levels to maximise their potential at bridge and get the most out of the game.

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## THE INNER GAME OF BRIDGE

Bridge players spend countless hours working on bidding conventions and cardplay techniques, yet give little attention to the mental side of the game. Maintaining focus and concentration, dealing with nerves, and other issues are largely ignored.

In this book, Kim Frazer—an Olympian, winner of gold medals at three consecutive Commonwealth Games and an Australian international bridge player—has adapted the mental techniques that brought her success in shooting and explains in simple terms how to use these at the bridge table.

Just like Kim's sport of target shooting, a loss of concentration in a bridge event can cost you a win. No matter your standard and irrespective of whether your errors are caused by distractions, nerves or other non-technical factors, this book offers simple, practical techniques to improve your mental approach to the game, allowing you to enjoy your time at the bridge table even more.



**KIM FRAZER** (Australia) won gold medals at three successive Commonwealth Games for target shooting. She took up bridge in 2005, and in 2018 made the Australian women's team at her first attempt. Her articles on bridge psychology have appeared in *Australian Bridge* and (in France) *Le Bridgeur*.

