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With no introductions, no hint of who's who, the tyro's evening passes in a blur of faces, hands misbid, cards misplayed. At the end, their name appears at the bottom of the leader board. They will never risk the humiliation again. They repeat this vehemently, grumpily, despairingly, because they know they'll be back next week, re-engaged in the eerie maelstrom of silent play. They look at the poker faces without recognition, they stumble awkwardly between tables with others seeking their next opponents, their attempts at interplay chat are ignored. These players are here for the bridge. Again they come last, but they no longer kid themselves they won't be back.

Two shots is all it takes. One more than heroin, but a lifetime addiction nonetheless. And that's where this short but definitive guide comes in. It sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in any discussion about your bridge obsession, and to equip you with a vocabulary and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will provide you with a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that will allow you to be accepted as a bridge player of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling onlookers with your knowledge and advice without anyone discovering that, before reading it, you didn't know the difference between a rubber of bridge and a royal pontoon.

THE SET-UP

KITCHEN ESSENTIALS

Table, four chairs, two packs of cards (one at a pinch), scoring stuff: a complimentary biro from a bank or hotel and the back of a used envelope marked out in vertical columns with a horizontal line halfway down – otherwise known as the planet saving option. This is the moment for the bluffer's first nugget of wisdom, namely that cotton paper playing cards, originally Chinese, later Egyptian, are symbols of human energy: **clubs** for industrious peasants, **diamonds** for wealth-creating merchants, **hearts** for clergy working on inner purity and joy, and **spades** for noble warriors inciting conflict. And the highest of these shall be spades – what else?

Once the 'who will play with who' draw is completed, the cards are shuffled and cut to he who had the highest so he can fire the opening salvo. He deals clockwise, starting with the player on his left (the dealer-in-waiting); 52 cards later, everyone should have 13,

north/souths, including the Director and the partially abled, get to sit in the same seats all evening. Excellent for maintaining focus and keeping track of your drink. Everyone else moves in formations reminiscent of an eightsome reel performed by Americans at a New Year's Eve ceilidh in Dundee. You always follow the man in the check shirt. Detecting a draught, he puts his woolly on. Where is he now? You mill some more. When there's one seat left, it's yours.

TEAM TORMENT

Every self-respecting club torments its members with monthly four-man teams: north/south sit at the same table all evening while east/west rotate to play the other north/souths. Getting into a good team is like waiting to be picked for school games. Lots of scope for rejection and affront: the bluffer suffers in dignified silence. Named squads must be signed up for a year, with reserves on the bench in case of injury or bereavement. Maestros are recruited swiftly, the rest accept the best they can get or stay at home. Would you rather be first reserve on a winning team or a founder member of a losing one that guarantees monthly play? It's easy to make the wrong choice.

You'll wonder why your relatively relaxed club is suddenly full of sharp-eyed opportunists. Easy: team bridge is the favoured expert format, assessed as more challenging, enjoyable and skilled than pairs. Winning is more prestigious. Crossing counties at midnight in mid-January is a small price to pay.

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Each session starts with a team huddle. Pairs are scored in Match Points: if you go down massively in one hand, absorb the zero and move on. You may be able to recoup later. Teams are scored in IMPS (International Match Points), a cumulative system where every hand counts in the end result. In pairs, making more overtricks than your opponents is the difference between mediocrity and triumph; in teams, making games is the route to the top of the leader board. At the end, scores are correlated to produce a combo plus or minus table. Blame and shame? It's in the pipeline – a team's minus score can easily top 80 IMPS and the breakdown reveals exactly who's responsible.

In area league matches, your club fields a team of eight, two north/souths and two east/wests. If you're north/south, you'll play all four opposing east/wests in the course of the evening. And vice versa. With a break for tea and home-made cake. You may be asked to bake it. As in many other grass roots sports, club teams range far afield to meet up with league adversaries. Don't expect to be selected for home matches, but an approach from a desperate organiser for a distant away fixture is imminent.

executives with cash to buy a pro rather than risk a cock-up with a mate. Interested? Take your pick from pro-bridge.co.uk – you can check out their photos first.

Warren Buffett, America's investment supremo, is in the market too. 'We can afford to lose money – even a lot of money. But we can't afford to lose reputation – even a shred of reputation.' Although he didn't say this in a bridge context, he'd happily hire a world champion for a six-figure sum to play with him for a week in a prestigious American tournament. Given the Buffett global reputation for steeliness in financial judgement calls, it's hard to say who'd be getting the better deal.

Vanity hiring can be even more expensive. As with polo, a rich man who plays to win at international championships must buy pairings and partners with enough skill to carry him to the podium. The team that bears his name should have five members who are more skilful than he is. By tournament rules, every participant must play in 50% of the games; the more the sponsor minimises his own play, the better his team will do. A more certain route to victory is signing up six pros and standing down himself, but where's the fun in that?

COME DANCE WITH ME

'Good bridge is like good sex,' quipped Mae West. 'If you don't have a good partner, you'd better have a good hand.' How right she was, but how to find one? Bridge is never a game for singles. Partners come in all degrees of ability and outlook. Some ask what trumps are as they play the hand; usually a guarantee of an unsuccessful outcome. Others shamelessly pass the buck: those who sneer whenever things go pear-shaped can never be in the wrong. Others interject snappy comments about systems flouted, basics forgotten, conventions (*see* page 43) misunderstood. As bluffers are likely to commit all these crimes in the quest for perfect play, enjoying bridge means finding *co-equipiers* with manageable egos. And rejecting those without.

A wannabe might be ambushed by a viscountess wearing a shirt-waister in a floral pattern at the bar of a club posh enough to provide partners for solos. 'Here on your own?' she'd trumpet. You nod numbly. 'Then you will play with me,' she says, brooking no dissent. You nod dumbly. You might think you'd done well