Why Bridge trumps other trick-taking games

An interview with contract bridge players and CU students Lucie Kohutová and Erik Klemš

By Jan Velinger
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Charles University students Lucie Kohutová (First Faculty of Medicine) and Erik Klemš (Faculty of Law) competed and won two silver medals in bridge at the 14th European Youth Pairs Championships in Opatija, Croatia in the summer. Now, as part of the Czech team at the World University Championships in China just days ago, they placed third. In our interview, taped earlier, I asked the champions to tell us more about themselves, before we discussed what’s great... about bridge.

LK: “Hello, my name is Lucie Kohutová. I am beginning my second year at Charles University’s First Faculty of Medicine.”

EK: “I am Erik Klemš and I this semester I was in my third year studying law at Charles University.”

You enjoyed great success over the summer clinching not one but two silver medals at the European Championships in Bridge in Croatia. When did you start playing bridge together?

LK: “We are a bit unusual because in bridge it is common for partners to play together for quite a while and we both each have regular partners in the game. Erik and I aren’t regular partners but my usual partner turned down the chance to compete so Erik and I decided to team up.”

So you have been together in bridge for only a little while?

EK: “When we were younger we played together. Back when we were 15 or 16. We decided to get together again just for this event.”

But your love of bridge obviously goes back some time…

LK: “We both attended the same high school and there was a teacher there who really likes bridge who introduced us to the game.”

What impression did it make on you, once you got past the initial learning phases and rules?

EK: “I like to win so it helped when it became clear I wouldn’t be bad at the game. I was 12 years old when I started and began to play better than my friends. I started to win some events and that was the hook which got me for life. I can’t see myself giving up bridge – not ever.”

You feel the same I take it?

LK: “Yes. I owe thanks to one of my classmates who introduced me to the game. I tried it and I liked it a lot. It was really something new.”
I want to ask you what makes a good bridge player and a good partnership, because it is a partnership game. But before we get to that, I should say I myself never played it and want to see if I grasp some of the basics correctly… I understand the principle of trick-taking games, where you try and win a number of tricks or rounds. That’s a simple way of saying it and you win by playing a higher card than everyone else, so that means when you play what can make a big difference. There are easy trick-taking games (like 5 Cucumbers) but from what I have heard, bridge is not one of them.

LK: “It is true that bridge is quite a difficult game. Generally-speaking there are two parts when playing: one part is bidding. You have to use information available to ‘communicate’ or convey to your partner what kind of hand you have. It’s a card game played with 52 cards so each player has 13 cards and there are 13 tricks (or rounds), and two pairs play against each other. There are special ways to convey the information because obviously you can’t vernally tell the other player what you’ve got.

“You play the 13 tricks and you count how many you win and how many you lose.”

Essentially, are you kind of betting or making a decision based on how many tricks you think you will win?

EK: “That is a good way to explain it to a non-Bridge player and the bidding itself, how you bid, is part of how you convey information. You bid on a contract and with the bids try and show your partner your hand and you try and reach the best contract you can.”

Is there a lot of tension?

EK: “There are people who say that the bidding is 85 percent of the game: it is really hard because when things go wrong, they go really wrong! And you usually can’t go back. You can try and save the situation but that often leads to an even bigger disaster!!

“So while trick-taking games are quite common but what makes bridge special is the bidding phase. It takes a while to get better at it and there is always room to improve; that is another aspect of the game that I like. But there is no level that you can’t be even better.”

I am curious about that and also how that fits in with luck. I mean, there is obviously one slight element of luck still there which you can minimise by how you bid, how well you assess or read the situation… But you can have a bad hand right?

LK: “You can certainly get something that can be called a bad hand. But the way bridge is played in competition, you have special boards and you always use only your 13 cards which then move to the board and that board will then be moved to another table of competitors. Those cards will go to someone playing on the same side of the table as me (North, South, East & West). And that person will play – and have to make do – with the same cards I had. And that levels the playing field.

“Consequently, I have to try and be the best even with the cards I have, of all those who will use them. That means that luck doesn’t play such a big role and again brings us back to why bidding is so important.”

Is it the case, like in chess, that if you have a certain kind of game state, it is a given that there are certain opening moves you make?

EK: “Yes. In some ways it is like that. It is comparable.”

But in chess you have perfect information…

LK: “That is the difference. In chess, you can always see everything that is going on but in bridge you never know for certain what is in the others’ hands.

“I just want to say one more thing about luck: you can always get a bad hand or you can get the greatest cards ever. And you can’t complain to the tournament director that you got a bad hand! (laughs) But you play your cards and then put them on the board as Lucie said, and another partnership or pair will play with the same cards and you compare your results with theirs. Maybe you will get a better result.”
The difference is the difference in skill, effectively, how much you squeeze out, compared to the others…

“Yes, exactly, just skill.”

As partners in the game, do you develop a kind of sixth sense after a while? I guess each person you team up with is different and even if there are some 'standard' moves, everyone brings a different style or approach to the table. Is that true?

LK: “Yes, it is true. It’s not only about their style in bridge but also about them as people. My regular partner is a bit calmer than Erik and playing Bridge with each is very different. It’s not just about the style of play but also their character.”

What are you preparing for now?

LK: “We are preparing for another competition – the World University Championships held in China – and actually that is a team event, meaning there will be three pairs. I will be with my regular partner and Erik with his. Hopefully we can clinch a medal at the event.”

Ed. Note: That event wrapped up just days ago. China came first, Poland second, and the Czech squad clinched the third. Source: https://www.fisu.net/news/world-university-championships/china-wins-wuc-bridge-at-home