

Ike's Favorite Bridge Hand

HOW GOOD IS IKE'S BRIDGE GAME ?

Since 1942, when Dwight D. Eisenhower was sent to take charge in Europe, his bridge-playing has been recurrently noted in the newspapers and he has usually been described as a bridge "expert."

The question is, what is an expert and just how good is Ike's bridge? There are thirty million bridge players. They can be divided into at least ten thousand different levels of skill, in which every player is an expert to all below him and a palooka to all above.

In golf you can pretty well judge a man by his scores. It is known that Ike's handicap is 11, which places his game in the middle 80's and him among the top 5% of all golfers.

Unlike golf scores, bridge scores mean almost nothing. Victory can be the result of skill, but it can also result from good cards or bad opponents. Ike is exclusively a rubber-bridge player, so he cannot be officially rated as are the 50,000 tournament-playing members of the American Contract Bridge League. However, in recent years some of the best American players (notably Oswald Jacoby and Ely Culbertson) have had an opportunity to play with the President, and they have returned with convincing reports of his prowess.

President Eisenhower, it seems clear, is not overrated as a bridge player. Says Culbertson, "He plays in the same class as Al Gruenther." (General Alfred Gruenther, NATO Supreme Commander, is Ike's favorite bridge partner and for nearly thirty years has been considered the best bridge player in the United States Army.)

The consensus is that in the best bridge-club games, the President would be on a par with anyone except the "pros," and that if he played in official tournaments he could be at least a Senior Master (the second-highest rank). This would place him just under the top 500 players, whose rank is "Life Master."

Says Jacoby, "I know a lot of persons who play good bridge. They have learned how the game should be played. But their play is wooden. The President obviously plays intelligent bridge. He thinks about what he does and what he does is done with good reason. He's the nicest person at the bridge table that I've ever played with. He doesn't get excited about winning or losing but he plays hard. He plays better bridge than golf; he tries to break 90 at golf; at bridge you would say he does break 80."

In a bridge game, Eisenhower is serious and studious. He does not play "poker bridge," the style of play in which one tries primarily to fool the opponents by unconventional play. Rather, he tries to do the right thing. While both styles of play can be effective, the majority of the topflight players favor the straightforward game that Eisenhower plays. Eisenhower plays a simple bidding system. The Blackwood slam convention is the only artificial bidding device he uses.

Eisenhower bids and plays fast and decisively. He does not hog the bidding and try to play all the hands (traditionally a weakness of men in commanding positions). He often chooses a trump as an opening lead, which is if anything a strong point in his game, for the average player leads trumps too seldom.

No one could possibly enjoy a bridge game more than Eisenhower does. In November 1942, the invasion of North Africa was all in readiness but some 800 Allied ships were fogbound off the African coast. "What'll we do now?" the other ranking officers asked. "Let's have a game of bridge," Eisenhower replied. So they did. Eisenhower, Gruenther, General Mark Clark and Commander Harry Butcher, Ike's Naval Aide, played bridge until the fog lifted and the invasion could begin.

In January 1946, when Clark was American Commander in occupied Austria and Gruenther was his Chief of Staff, Eisenhower summoned them to join him at a mountain resort in the Alps. When they arrived, Eisenhower was waiting for them with one of his staff officers, Brig. Gen. Raymond Moses. The first thing he said was, "Let's play some bridge." It was at this time that Ike's favorite hand (shown at the left) was played.