

How do you win a national title?
Our path to victory in the 2018 ACBL Truscott USPC Senior Swiss
By Cris Barrere

We won the event, so perhaps I can offer a little insight into winning. The win provided Bill Harker and me our first unrestricted national titles as Bruce Noda and Mark Ralph added their third and second national wins, respectively, to find ourselves walking on air for quite some time. Here is a play-along report with some observations about what helped us achieve success. Try your hand at some of the decisions we faced.

We started out the first day with disasters in our first two matches. In the first round I made a vulnerable five-over-five bid to go for 500 against a contract they would not have made. It seemed right at the time but I neglected the excellent general advice that the five-level belongs to the opponents. The net for the set was an inauspicious 1 IMP loss. Do not let your spirit be broken by a minor set-back. Everyone makes mistakes; it's how you handle yourself for the rest of the match that matters.

In the next set we had a bidding misunderstanding for our second disaster. I held something like:
♠x ♥Qxxx ♦xxx ♣AQJxx and passed in first seat to hear: (1♠)-4♥-(4♠) back to me. Intending to continue to 5♥, I bid 5♣ to tuck in a lead-director in case they competed to 5♠. But partner passed and I went down two for a 13 IMP loss when 5♥ was cold. Not a word was spoken – what could be said that would have been helpful at the table? Luckily, the rest of our set was very good and our teammates also picked us up at their table so we emerged with a 15 IMP win. This put us back on track but could have left lingering doubts. My self-made private scorecard has plenty of space for notes; that's the place to leave issues for later discussion. Put past results and any attendant negative energy immediately behind you and out of your mind. This is similarly true for good results. Don't dwell on distractions; your focus must always be the current hand.

We had a couple of other good rounds, one against an always tough Jeff Roman and were in solid shape entering the last two sets of the qualifying day. But then we hit a giant pothole with a 42 IMP loss and a flat finish with a tie against Ron Powell and Bob Sanner on the last set of the day to qualify 31st of 54 teams, more than a blitz behind the Sherwood team and the very formidable Beth Palmer team who lay in second.


The next day started well; we won our first four matches to steadily gain ground. Our only double-digit loss of the day came from a missed slam against Howard Parker's team. We recovered those IMPs and more when our teammates took a good save against the creative George Jacobs and Claude Vogel who bid on to a failing grand slam. After the dinner break we played Gary Soules' team (with tough locals Gene Simpson and Ed Nagy at the other table), winning by 16 IMPs with two defensively based game swings. Now we were really rolling and I think we all felt the possibility as tension ratcheted up another notch. To keep centered I took a break between each round, stretching my legs and visiting the water cooler frequently.

The set-up to our win came in the 6th round when we played Beth Palmer's team. They had gone in with a substantial lead and were still solidly ahead. But not after we played them. On the first board I dropped a partscore trick but came right back to make a doubled game on the second board. We then bid and made a vulnerable slam as our teammates found a profitable save, and beat 3NT two tricks while our teammates brought it home. Doing well is a collective accumulation of good play. The result was a decisive 23 IMP win. We entered the 7th round of the finals in second place, mere 100^{ths} out of the lead.

We won the penultimate round against Jerry Helms by 14 IMPs on a thus-far unbeaten day to claw our way into the driver's seat. This is what I wrote on my score sheet at the round's end: "Leading with one to go, like last year. But this will be different." Last year my partner, another Bruce (Tuttle) and I had a good last set but our teammates didn't and we dropped from 1st to 5th in the event. Very respectable, but not a win.

We entered the final set leading by 6 VPs; the event was ours to win. I don't think in terms of bride's maids, but rather that being regularly close is a sign of both strength and opportunity. Stay positive. That's easily said but there were other strong contending teams, all ready to pounce. The tension was palpable. We were playing a team I felt happy to find at the table; I thought we'd beaten them day one and was pumped to play them again. Actually, they'd beaten us 44-2 for a full blitz! But my confident impression did prove correct. As we waited for the pre-duplicated boards to arrive, they conferred in whispers over a small note showing the score they needed against us in order to win the event. I thought about asking what that number was but felt as if they'd cast themselves as second best and didn't want to tamper with their negative point of view.

What follows is the last set of the 2018 Atlanta Nationals - Truscott Senior Swiss finals, reported in the order we played the pre-duplicated boards at our table. How will you do on the decisions we faced?

West	North	East	South	Board 26	♠ Q 7 3
			1NT	IMPs	♥ A J 9 7 6 3
Pass	4♦	Pass	4♥	Both Vul	♦ 8 5 2
AP					♣ 4
					
					♠ A J 10 4
					♥ K 5
					♦ Q 4 3
					♣ A J 8 2

4♥ South


Bidding: Normal. The same contract was reached at the other table.

Opening lead: K♣. Plan the play.

I considered the hand at length. This is the time to do it and it's important to not reveal whether you're worried or just weighing options. If you show weakness, opponents will find it. If I lose a trump finesse there is a strong chance they'll cash three diamonds for down one, especially since if East wins there's no way he will shift to a spade holding the king. It occurred to me that if trump were (3-2) I might be able to get a diamond discard if spades behaved real well, and that if the spade finesse lost they might not shift to a diamond. A bit of long shot since if the Q♥ isn't doubleton I may have four losers no matter what. I cashed the K♥ and led a low heart to see what would happen. On the K♥, LHO played the 8♥ and on the low heart she played the 2♥. She seemed like a straight-forward player and I suspected she wouldn't card that way holding Q92 and backed that assessment boldly by going up with the A♥. The doubleton queen of trump tumbled down offside and as I drew the last trump the opponents' shoulders drooped in disappointment. Now I led the Q♠ and finessed twice more when it won, using a club ruff as an entry, to make an overtrick. The guy on my right whined about how unlucky they were to be playing against someone who didn't know the right percentage play of a suit. I loved it – there's nothing better than having the opponents complaining or arguing. That's a boost for the other side, diminishes focus and seems to provide self-permission to lose.


At the other table Bill started the defense with a high diamond and then switched to a club, a better plan to establish winners. On the trump play he false carded with the 10♥ on the second lead to persuade declarer that he held the Q♥, a devious spot choice. You have to decide which spots to trust. Would you have noticed and correctly interpreted what was going on? We picked up 12 IMPs on that first board, setting a pivotal positive tone for the match.

Here's the entire hand:

West	North	East	South	Board 26	♠ Q 7 3	
			1NT	IMPs	♥ A J 9 7 6 3	
Pass	4♦	Pass	4♥	Both Vul	♦ 8 5 2	
AP					♣ 4	
						
					♠ 5 2	♠ K 9 8 6
					♥ 10 8 2	♥ Q 4
					♦ A K 9 7	♦ J 10 6
					♣ K Q 10 5	♣ 9 7 6 3
					♠ A J 10 4	
					♥ K 5	
					♦ Q 4 3	
					♣ A J 8 2	

4♥ South

The second hand presented a play problem for the opponents, and then a defensive one for us.

West	North	East	South	Board 27		
			Pass	IMPs		
1NT	Pass	2♣	Pass	None Vul		
2♦	Pass	3NT	AP	♠A 6		♠Q 8 7 4
				♥A J 8		♥7
				♦A K 8 5 3		♦10 9 2
				♣9 3 2		♣A K 10 8 6
				3NT West		


Lead: J♠. *How would you play the hand?*

Since hearts is the bigger weakness of the hand, I think I'd prefer to lose a trick into North and so would travel to dummy by leading the visually tempting 9♣ (in case of a foolish cover from QJx♣) and then float the 10♦. Perhaps North would win and clear spades providing nine tricks. Our declarer chose instead to attack the known minor, dummy's visible clubs.

On defense, Bruce led the J♠. Declarer didn't cover, won the A♠ and finessed a club into me. I won and knowing from the bidding that declarer has fewer than four hearts and that hearts was thus a possible source of tricks for our side, shifted to the 10♥, covered by declarer's J♥ and won by Bruce's Q♥. We play that after the opening lead, a jack denies and a ten or nine shows zero or two higher which resolves many defensive positions without giving away opening lead information. So Bruce can tell by my lead of the 10♥ that I don't have the A♥ and by deduction the likely layout of the remaining honors. Not knowing whether I held the 9♥, he reverted to spades by leading the 10♠, as he put it, "hoping that declarer would err, otherwise I did not think we could set the hand." He was right to force an early decision. Declarer did cover with the queen; I won and continued a heart. Declarer now had only eight tricks and had to go down one.

At the other table, the jack of spades was led and covered by the Q, K and Ace. *Would you have played it that way?* Covering ensures a second trick but creates two immediate defensive tricks – a tricky tradeoff. Bill next led a club, his LHO playing the Q♣, won the A♣ and ran the 10♦. North won the J♦, went into the tank and finally led the K♥, ducked, and continued a heart giving Bill his 9th trick. The opponents must have missed or misinterpreted a spot. As with the previous hand, you must maintain focus to notice and correctly interpret the spots that are played. It is often the accumulated details such as this that win or lose a match.

Here is the complete hand:

West	North	East	South	Board 27	♠J 10 9 5 2	
			Pass	IMPs	♥K Q 5 3	
1NT	Pass	2♣	Pass	None Vul	♦J 6	
2♦	Pass	3NT	AP		♣Q 5	
				♠A 6		♠Q 8 7 4
				♥A J 8		♥7
				♦A K 8 5 3		♦10 9 2
				♣9 3 2		♣A K 10 8 6
				3NT West	♠K 3	
					♥10 9 6 4 2	
					♦Q 7 4	
					♣J 7 4	

A team effort of good defense and good play gave us 10 more IMPs, two solid pick-ups in a row. Our opponents were now a little edgy and I think we both felt confident and in control even without knowing that the contract had been made at the other table.

The following board included an opening lead problem. As a result of computer analysis and simulations there has been a lot of new thinking about opening leads, particularly at notrump. It's no longer considered best practice to "lead fourth best from your longest and strongest." Instead, you should guess to lead partner's five-card suit and generally not away from four-card strength, especially containing high honors or at low-level notrump contracts. Alternatively, try a passive lead to avoid sacrificing a trick with the lead.

West	North	East	South	Board 28
1♣	Pass	1♦	Pass	IMPs
1♥	Pass	1NT	AP	N-S Vul

1NT East

	N	
W		E
	S	
♠	A 8 4	
♥	A Q 10 5	
♦	Q 9 4 2	
♣	10 2	

What would you lead?

While the unbid suit, spades, may seem obvious, I noted that partner didn't overcall in spades. Our style is to get in at the one-level on pretty much any light overcall, so the absence of a spade overcall suggests that one way or another the opponents were prepared for a spade lead. A question before the lead might be whether the opponents play a California/Walsh style, bypassing diamonds with a less than invitational hand. If that's the case it may be that, paradoxically, the 1♦ bid was a weak waiting bid, hoping that West would bid notrump. A diamond lead also seemed, rightly or wrongly, unlikely to blow the hand early.

The complete hand:

West	North	East	South	Board 28
1♣	Pass	1♦	Pass	IMPs
1♥	Pass	1NT	AP	N-S Vul

♠	Q J 5 2
♥	K 8 7 6
♦	K 7
♣	K J 7

1NT East

♠	K 7 6 3
♥	9 4
♦	A 10 6
♣	Q 6 5 4

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠	A 8 4
♥	A Q 10 5
♦	Q 9 4 2
♣	10 2

♠	10 9
♥	J 3 2
♦	J 8 5 3
♣	A 9 8 3

A major suit lead would have fared poorly. After much thought I led a low diamond. Declarer ducked in dummy, Bruce inserted the 10♦ and declarer won the J♦. Now the 10♠ went to Bruce's A♠, followed by A♦ and a diamond. I cashed the remaining diamonds and played ace and spade to exit without helping declarer. In the fullness of time declarer drifted down one. At the other table our teammates played 2♣ down two for a loss of 2 IMPs, our only losing board of the match. *Would your methods have gotten you to the lower and easier 1NT contract?*


Next up is a bidding problem that underscores the importance of having good methods for slam investigations after a major fit is found. *Bid these opponent hands with your favorite partner to see how system agreements affect the level of your contract:*

Board 22
 IMPs
 E-W Vul
 Dealer: East

<p>♠ A Q 5 4 ♥ K 6 4 ♦ K 10 7 6 2 ♣ K</p>		<p>♠ K J 9 7 3 2 ♥ A Q 10 9 ♦ J 4 ♣ 6</p>
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With hands like these someone needs to apply the brakes before reaching the unsafe five-level. Modified Jacoby agreements where you can show a strength-range coupled with the presence (but not specific location) of shortness really help with these sorts of hands.

Here is the full layout:

<p>Board 22 IMPs E-W Vul Dealer: East</p>	<p>♠ 10 ♥ 7 5 3 ♦ A 5 ♣ 10 9 7 5 4 3 2</p>	
<p>♠ A Q 5 4 ♥ K 6 4 ♦ K 10 7 6 2 ♣ K</p>		<p>♠ K J 9 7 3 2 ♥ A Q 10 9 ♦ J 4 ♣ 6</p>
	<p>♠ 8 6 ♥ J 8 2 ♦ Q 9 8 3 ♣ A Q J 8</p>	

E-W had a tortuously stilted auction to explore a possible spade slam. West appeared to contemplate bidding a slam off two key cards before signing off in 5♠. Perhaps she was considering a potentially missing king of trump being onside, or felt they needed a big board to get back into the match? The auction had revealed club shortness so I started with the A♣, with Bruce playing low, probably a suit preference signal for diamonds. After some thought as to whether declarer might have a heart discard for a losing diamond or I might be blowing a trick by leading the suit, I led a low diamond. Declarer had a rather wild look about him, perhaps from the tension of the match or from the two prior poor results. He seemed to be vaguely self-destructive or overly suspicious that I was playing with his mind, and rose with the K♦. Bruce snapped it up and quickly returned a diamond for down one. Dummy questioned declarer's play a bit sharply, effectively providing an extra roofer for our side – welcome aboard! Partner knows when he's gone wrong and never needs a public reminder. People have been shot for far less. At the other table a pre-emptive bid in clubs made the correct diamond guess fairly straightforward for 13 IMPs, what turned out to be our third big pick-up of the set.

The next board represented a play problem for me and there's nothing that makes you feel more alive than playing a tough hand in high-stakes match. It's important not to let on when you have a long-shot hand that may not make as that only encourages the opponents to look for the defense they might not otherwise find and discourages them from giving up and making a desperation play that gives you a contract that would otherwise elude you. Your goal at the table is to be unreadable to the other three players.


West	North	East	South	Board 23	♠A 8 4 3
			1NT	IMPs	♥K 10 4
Pass	3♣	Pass	3♦	Both Vul	♦10 4
Pass	3NT	AP			♣A 7 4 3
					
					♠Q 7 2
					♥Q 5
					♦A K 8 7 6
					♣K 9 5

3NT South

I opened a light notrump, partner responded with puppet Stayman (designed to find 5-3 major fits and hide opener's 4-c major), and placed the contract in what turned out to be a tenuous 3NT.

Opening Lead: 6♣. *How would you play the hand?*

Here is the complete hand:

West	North	East	South	Board 23	♠A 8 4 3
			1NT	IMPs	♥K 10 4
Pass	3♣	Pass	3♦	Both Vul	♦10 4
Pass	3NT	AP			♣A 7 4 3
					
			♠J 10 5		♠K 9 6
			♥A 9 6		♥J 8 7 3 2
			♦9 5		♦Q J 3 2
			♣Q J 8 6 2		♣10
					♠Q 7 2
					♥Q 5
					♦A K 8 7 6
					♣K 9 5

3NT South

With the opening lead diminishing the chances for a length trick in clubs and only six sure tricks, the contract looked pretty dicey. I ducked the first club to see what would happen. Lo and behold, a small diamond came back which I rode around to the winning 10♦ in dummy. This certainly illustrates the idea that it can be a good idea to give the opponents an opportunity to help. True here in spades, or diamonds, more specifically. The opponents attacked the suit I was going to work on and also adjusted the timing to my benefit. Now I led a low spade from dummy and East hitched, revealing the K♠ it seemed to me. The contract went from wobbly to wow! Later, I managed a red suit squeeze and finished by felling the now stiff J♥ offside to make an overtrick. At the other table it was played from the opposite side where a normal heart was led from jack fifth. Declarer later floated the 10♦ through East. *Would you have covered?* It would have made life tougher for declarer on this layout but would lose in the more common case of declarer holding the 9♦. Was declarer intending to go up all along? You won't ever know. What you do know is that in cases like this you must pre-decide your play and follow smoothly in tempo, especially if you intend to duck. Covering would not have defeated the contract. The opening lead and subsequent diamond play made the hand easier for their declarer but we still won 1 IMP because I remained diligent in the play to score an extra trick. We were feeling very confident at this point, just the time to be careful of a silly misstep.

The fifth board had various significant decision points, mostly at the other table. Consider decisions from several seats:

West	North	East	South	Board 24
1♠	1NT	2♠	?	IMPs
AP				None Vul


♠7 3
♥7 4
♦9 4 3
♣A J 9 8 7 6

What would you have bid as South after East's raise to 2♠?

After East's spade raise, South made an ambitious leap to 3NT. This certainly could work on a good day.

West	North	East	South	Board 24
1♠	1NT	2♥	3NT	IMPs
AP				None Vul

	♠10 8 6
	♥A J 10 9 6 5
	♦J 8 7
	♣10
♠7 3	
♥7 4	
♦9 4 3	
♣A J 9 8 7 6	

3NT North

Consider the defense as East after your opening J♥ is ducked. *What would you lead next?*

Now jump over consider North's position:

West	North	East	South	Board 24
1♠	1NT	2♥	3NT	IMPs
AP				None Vul

♠K J 2
♥K Q 8
♦K 10 2
♣K Q 5 3

♠7 3
♥7 4
♦9 4 3
♣A J 9 8 7 6

3NT North

Declaring as North, how would you proceed with the J♥ lead ducked around to you?

Conclusion: Tips for winning

We won every match of the final day, our only double-digit loss coming early on a missed light slam. The final match was a definitive 38 IMP near-blitz to win the event by a commanding total of 134.27 Victory Points, a sizable margin over the second place Katz team with 121.36 with the Palmer team less than a VP behind them. There were bridge decisions to be made on every hand and a high level of focus and mental sharpness that had to be maintained. The outcome determined that we would win a prestigious and coveted national title. We could not have been more pleased. You had the opportunity to play along with the thought process although perhaps not the emotion. *How did your decisions fare?* The good news is that you really only had to get one hand right to win as the opponents helped lose it for themselves. Of course, you sure don't know that at the time. You must do your best on every single hand right through the last board of the event, never letting up. That's the winning way.

So, how do you win a national title? The exact same way you win any event from club game on up.

Habits and practices that contributed directly to our success in winning this national event:

- Play the best events as often as you can. It's trite but true: *If you don't enter, you can't win.*
- *Know your agreements.* We have a written set of meticulous and well-articulated agreements which we study and review regularly. We often exchange emails in the week or so before a tournament clarifying any questions we might have. We build on our past play and experience few system misunderstandings.
- *Be confident and composed.* Play your game knowing that you play well. It is important to believe in yourself even if the other pair or team is also very good. Never run yourself down or admit doubt in front of your opponents; it deflates you and pumps them up.
- *Maintain unwavering focus,* particularly after a big loss or gain. Either frustration or elation can induce slips or silliness. Keep steady, don't fall sway to the temptation of wildness (note to self).
- Leave a played-hand behind; *devote all your energy to the current hand.* Never re-hash hands or criticize partner at the table. The only thing potentially worth discussing is a misunderstanding about an agreement that might reasonably come up again in the match.
- *Don't lose the match at your table.* Trust your teammates to do their job at their table.
- *Don't be afraid to back your judgment.* An inference from a spot card or hitch in tempo can guide you to a winning play others might not find. Double check that a hunch is consistent with the known facts.
- *Relish the pressure;* it's part of the greatness of the game. Don't let it spin you into a tizzy.
- *Give the opponents every opportunity to defeat themselves.* Letting them win an early trick where the winning shift may be obvious to you but not to them could be your key to success. I usually don't correct mistaken analysis by the opponents. If one opponent says something like, "If you'd only shifted to my suit we'd have beaten the hand," but I know I would still have made the hand on a squeeze, I will probably be quite content to let them think they blew the hand.
- Winning is a team effort; everyone played solidly throughout. *You can't win on your own, only lose.*
- *You've got to get at least a little lucky.* Bruce and I have done well recently in the Wernher Open pairs, finishing 4th this year and 9th last year. But we also played well three years ago and did not even qualify for the finals. Bridge is a tough game and no matter how well you play, you will mostly lose. Learn to take satisfaction in a well-played session and savor every victory, at any level, that comes your way.

Physical preparation for success:

- *Get a full night's sleep.* I don't share a room and avoid watching TV as they both contribute to less restful sleep for me.
- *Eat light and lay off alcohol.* Maybe caffeine-up when playing through your normal resting time.
- *Quiet your mind before you play.* Even as social as I am, I often sit quietly by myself before game time, perhaps reviewing the key points of our agreements or simply reading some junk detective story.
- *Give yourself downtime and physical exercise.* I read a lot during big tournaments and often arrange to stay some distance from the tournament site in order to provide myself some daily walking.

- *Keep hydrated* – your brain functions better lubricated by the liquid of life. I make a point to drink quite a bit of water before and during play. This was especially important in Atlanta where it was plenty warm.

Post script: **The integral importance of the sociality of bridge.**

The game of bridge is far more than the meanings of bids or the percentage of plays. Bridge is an inherently social game. We play with a partner and sometimes, as in this event, with teammates. The dynamics of the human interactions are a huge component of the game and also of its enjoyment. The personalities of players, styles of partnerships, the emotional ebb and flow as hands unfold in a match, and the subtle but significant interchanges at the table – from a soothing and supportive “It’s ok, no problem” spoken to an erring partner, to a barely perceived hitch as a card is delivered to the table – all certainly affect our play and add a dimensional richness to the game. Sharing the challenges with others, from triumphs to disasters, is a fundamental component of the game that extends beyond the session itself. Just look at all the clusters of animated conversation at the end of every session, or at dinner or the bar afterwards.

One silent social interaction with a big emotional content is the act of kibitzing. I watch friends and fellow experts more than most and vicariously enjoy experiencing their decisions and always discover something new. The camaraderie you feel from a friend or student kibitzing you adds to the enjoyment and appreciation of the game for everyone. In the last match of our national win I was fortunate to have my friend Jerry Premo, just out of the hospital, at my side for both the support and the sharing. I welcomed his presence but quickly tuned him out so I could focus on the task at hand. At the other table, Bill and Mark had Bill’s daughter, Cheryl, and her life-partner, Yul, kibitzing them. Having someone at your side that is also close personally can add an extra layer to the pressure. But in their match it also served to defuse the pressure by injecting some humor. As Bill puts it, “I mentioned to our opponents that my daughter was kibitzing and my RHO turned to her and said ‘Your mother must be really good looking.’ Hilarious, but sadly true.”

The over arching social context of bridge permeates and binds a complex array of sophisticated bidding, thoughtful play and wily strategy to marry the challenge of reason with the perplexity of human interaction. You can’t help but love this game. I am happy to have been able to share parts of our experience at the 2018 Atlanta Nationals with you and hope you were able to find an occasional touchstone or useful tip for yourself.

Thanks to my teammates Bruce Noda, Mark Ralph and Bill Harker for their strong effort, consistently fine play, and supportive spirit throughout. Thanks to the reader for following the path to our win.