

Bridge Cheating Scandal by Derrick Browne

It is now 45 years since the greatest cheating scandal ever to rock the bridge world. At the 1965 Bermuda Bowl (World Bridge Championships) in Buenos Aires, American player BJ Becker noticed British pair Terence Reese and Boris Schapiro holding their cards oddly.

Becker's partner, the leading bridge author Dorothy Hayden, was keeping a day-to-day diary. From the entry for 17 May: "After the session Becker took me aside. He thinks we have been cheated by Reese and Schapiro... I doubt this can be true... Reese is... not only the best bridge player in the world but apparently one of the most ethical."

By 20 May, her diary entry had a different tone: "Something terrible is going on... Sometimes two fingers show. Occasionally one finger, usually three or four fingers... The fingers only last during the bidding. Once play begins, they hold their cards normally. Can we break the code?"

They went to Alan Truscott, New York Times bridge columnist and later husband of Hayden. American captain John Gerber was also informed. Records started to be kept of the number of fingers Reese and Schapiro each showed on different hands.

Truscott "spent hours on the records and has eliminated several possibilities but has found nothing positive," states Hayden in her entry for 22 May. "I said the way to do it was to lay out all the one-finger boards side-by-side, then all the two-finger boards, etc."

These were the only one-finger boards:

S KQ83 H K D J83 C QT765 *and*

S KQJxxxx H A D Kxx C Qx

"Quickly we looked at the two-finger boards. Doubleton heart!" As they looked through the hands, consistent patterns emerged. "The code was broken! Two fingers together meant two hearts; spread apart, five hearts. Three fingers together meant three hearts; spread apart, six hearts. Four fingers together meant four hearts; spread apart, seven hearts. One finger was only used for a singleton heart."

On the following deal, Schapiro opened 1S as East, Garozzo doubled with the South cards (deeming the hand too strong for a simple 2H overcall), Reese passed as West, and Forquet bid 2C as North. Knowing partner's heart length, what action should East take?

Dealer East, NS vul.

| | | | |
|--------------|-----------|---------------|--|
| | | | |
| | ♠ Q 10 | | |
| | ♥ K 10 7 | | |
| | ♦ 9 8 7 4 | | |
| | ♣ K J 7 4 | | |
| ♠ J 6 5 | N | ♠ A 9 8 7 2 | |
| ♥ 6 5 | W | ♥ 9 2 | |
| ♦ J 3 2 | E | ♦ K Q 10 5 | |
| ♣ 10 9 8 6 5 | S | ♣ A 3 | |
| | | ♠ K 4 3 | |
| | | ♥ A Q J 8 4 3 | |
| | | ♦ A 6 | |
| | | ♣ Q 2 | |

| WEST | NORTH | EAST | SOUTH |
|----------|-------|------|-------|
| Pass | 2C | 1S | Dbl |
| 2S | Pass | 2H! | Pass |
| All pass | | Pass | 2NT |

Over North's 2C, Schapiro bid 2H on the East cards! This is a psych, designed to mislead the opponents. The danger of course is that you mislead partner but the psych is quite safe, noted Truscott, if East knows partner is short in hearts and will not support. (Reese countered by pointing out that he could have psyched a 2H response on the West cards if he knew East had only two hearts.)

Top British and World Bridge Federation officials were informed of the allegations, and after further observation, the suspects were told that they were suspected of cheating and a verdict was reached: "The World Bridge Federation has found Terence Reese and Boris Schapiro guilty of conveying information illegally".

The public knew nothing yet. Italy had won the event but England and America were still concluding their match. Proceedings moved from tragedy to farce as the pairs sat the wrong way so no result could be gained; then British captain Ralph Swimer announced that, in any case, Great Britain would concede its match to the USA.