

The **JACK** Who Would Be
KING
TO LIFE MASTER & BEYOND

Jim Kaplan



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BORN TO CLIMB

I have always loved to play games. If there's a competitive spirit gene in the human genome, then I've been blessed with a pair, one from each of my parents.

As I was growing up, my late mother Felicia Lamport Kaplan, a poet, playwright, essayist and entertainer par excellence, gently pushed me onto the sports stage: golf, tennis, swimming, horseback riding, mumblety-peg, kick-the-can. She taught me chess and bridge herself. My father Benjamin, a lawyer, law professor and judge, sported neither a trophy case nor medals to display, but in what must have been a highly competitive field, he won the grandest prize of all: my mother. That made him a champion in my book.

Games provided the tenuous link between a painfully shy boy and his theatrical mother; but slow, weak and uncoordinated, I had no future

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in sports. I might have made my mark as a scholar, but I was too busy trying to figure out what puberty was all about.

Cards sort of snuck up on me. Card players are not made. Nor are they born. We *evolve*—from Old Maid and Go Fish to Crazy Eights to Steal the Old Man’s Bundle and on to rummy and hearts and that final step up, bridge.

What is it about a deck of cards? What’s the turn-on about holding a hand of these paper things, this “family of fifty-two” we’ve been a part of for so long?

I wish I could remember the first time I held cards and played. I couldn’t have been more than five years old. Was there a special bond made back then that would last my entire life?

Renowned pool hustlers wax eloquently about the first time they took a cue stick in their hands. Hall of Fame sluggers tear up reminiscing about their first bat. Did Wayne Gretzky feel a divine tingle holding a hockey stick that very first time? Jimmy Connors was hitting tennis balls shortly after he had learned how to walk. Tiger Woods was swinging a golf club from the day he climbed out of his crib. Are we card players blessed, and sometimes cursed, with a similar affinity, or is it an obsession?

I began playing “serious” bridge during the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, when I was in France with the Experiment in International Living. The players were all Americans, but we bid in French to placate our hosts—spades were *piques*, hearts *coeurs*, diamonds *carreaux*, clubs *trèfles*, and notrump *sans atout*.

Alas, I thought I needed 13 points to bid at any time. My partner would open, and I’d glance dumbly at my 12-point hand, shrug and pass.

“*Il passe toujours,*” the other players grumbled.

Eventually, I was playing *toujours* at college, to the detriment of my grades. I was an enthusiastic partner, but not always a forgiving one. The day I was married for the first time, my bride and I received a telegram reading, “Congratulations and best wishes—don’t play bridge.”

(The marriage wasn't in the cards, but bridge had nothing to do with it.)

While working for *Sports Illustrated* in the 1970's, I fact-checked Eddie Kantar's annual Christmas bridge quiz. In 1990 I became a bridge columnist myself. The second time around I married a red-headed charmer named Brooks Robards, an honors graduate of Bryn Mawr and a fellow writer who pens everything from poetry to movie reviews. She also trains a quarterhorse.

I had joined her in Smith College country in Northampton MA, a community dubbed the "paradise of America" by 19th century "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind, but my early years in Northampton were not quite Paradise Gained. Brooks was teaching Mass Communication at Westfield (MA) State College and I found myself home alone in a new community. How to get out? How to meet people? With Brooks' encouragement I entered the world of duplicate bridge and began writing a bridge column for average players in the local *Daily Hampshire Gazette*.

"Do you really want to call it 'Dummy'?" asked the paper's editor. Yes, I did. The title described the author to a tee: unqualified to write an expert column.

Two years later, I added another Massachusetts subscriber, the *Vineyard Gazette*, whose editor insisted on calling my scribbling "At the Bridge Table." The column has connected with other ordinary shufflers who relate to the self-deprecating accounts of my doltish mistakes and the lessons I learn from them.

Not until I signed on a bridge guru in 1992 did I begin writing authoritatively. Now, before submitting each column to the papers, I e-mail my friend Marty Fleisher, once the youngest player to reach the finals of a national event. Marty later won the Intercollegiate Championship and dozens of regional titles, then the Greater New York Bridge Association's individual and team Player of the Year honors and Cavendish Invitational Pairs championship with Eric Rodwell. Fleisher reads my file and sometimes replies with subtle comments like, "This is

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the stupidest bid I've ever seen." I learned to check my ego at the door.

But how long could I pass myself off as a bridge everyman? After eight undistinguished years playing at the Northampton Bridge Club—and more meritorious service in summer games on the island of Martha's Vineyard, thanks to crack partner Fred Williams—I connected with a retired psychiatrist named Chuck Jackson. Suddenly, we were atop the Northampton Bridge Club standings many Tuesdays. Then we won the club championship and another local event, the Batcheller Pairs. Was this former bridge chump finally ready for prime time?

What peak to aspire to? Once the highest player ranking in the American Contract Bridge League, Life Master remains the standard that all serious players covet from the day they start competing. To become one, you need 300 masterpoints for achievement in club and tournament play. The total alone won't get you the title. Within the 300 masterpoints, you need 25 red/gold points, 50 silver points and 25 gold points that are awarded in various local, sectional, regional and national events.

Whatever path you take, it's a long, long way to the summit.

My quest began in November of 1999 at the American Contract Bridge League's Fall Nationals in Boston. I arrived at my parents' house in Cambridge with Jackson and Phil O'Deane, another fellow traveler from the Northampton Bridge Club. Jackson would be my partner, and O'Deane would fill out our team once he found a partner in Boston. Chuck and Phil settled into my childhood bedroom, and Phil told stories about Celtic exploration and writing in pre-Columbian America. By dawn, Jackson believed that every advance in human history was made possible by the Irish.

When O'Deane discovered his partner in Pat Wagner, a retired reading teacher from Philadelphia, we entered the team knockout event. As per its definition, teams are eliminated as soon as they lose. Classification is determined by the total of masterpoints team members have earned. Our aggregate was low, so we entered the C division. We played many opponents in this and other events over the weekend. Three types stood

out: friendly retired gentlemen who lorded over their cards as if they were former employees; sweet little old ladies with tissues stuffed under their shirt cuffs; and charming suburban blondes wearing the latest styles, lots of makeup and gold jewelry.

“So, what do you do in Akron?” I asked one woman.

“Play bridge!” she said, almost indignantly. *The very thought!*

We won the event easily, carrying our matches by margins of 42, 56, 69 and 87 points. To put it in baseball parlance: was I a hot-shot rookie bound for the Hall of Fame or a flash-in-the-pan headed back to the bush leagues?

On our final day at the tournament, reality—and doubt—set in when we barely placed in a Swiss teams event, an all-day affair in which every team typically plays eight seven-board matches with different opponents.

A man can’t help second-guessing himself after such an apparent heartbreaker:

Dlr: South	NORTH		
Vul: None	♠ K		
	♥ Q 9 7 5 3		
	♦ K J 8 5 3	EAST	
WEST	♣ K 4	♠ 4 3	
♠ A Q 9 7 5 2		♥ K 10 8 6	
♥ J 4	SOUTH	♦ 7 4	
♦ 10 9 2	♠ J 10 8 6	♣ J 10 8 6 5	
♣ A 2	♥ A 2		
	♦ A Q 6		
	♣ Q 9 7 3		

West	North	East	South
	<i>Jackson</i>		<i>Me</i>
			1♣
1♠	2♥	Pass	2NT
Pass	3♦	Pass	3NT
All Pass			

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West led the ♠7. I won in dummy, played a heart to the ace and returned another one toward the queen. I hoped West would have the king and my queen would set up. Alas, East won and returned a spade. West took two winners and forced out my last spade stopper. When I tried to sneak a club trick, West went up with her ace and played two more spade winners. Down two.

Partner Jackson, a math major who thinks nothing of pondering a diabolical textbook hand for ten hours, went to work on me.

“You should have played a diamond to your hand and led a low club,” he said.

“But hearts looked so inviting,” I replied. “Maybe the queen will take a trick. Maybe they’ll break 3-3.”

Maybe pigs will fly. A good rule of thumb in bridge is to develop sure tricks rather than potential tricks. By leading a low club, I had to make a club trick—two if West went up with the ace immediately. If the ♣K is allowed to hold, I could return to my hand with another diamond and play the ♠J. West would win and probably exit with a diamond (the most obnoxious defense), forcing me to cash my diamond tricks immediately. This causes discarding problems for everyone, but at that point in the play I could probably work out that West started with the doubleton ♣A. In any case, this line is clearly much better than the one I actually used. My misplay cost us one of our Swiss teams matches.

Nonetheless, I had won my first gold points—3.65 of them—and 9.58 red points. Flushed with success, Chuck and I kept finishing in the money back home. By late January my lifetime totals stood at 191.34 points, including 3.65 gold and 26.36 red, and I had contracted to do a series on my quest for the ACBL’s monthly publication, *The Bridge Bulletin*.

Now my every move up to Life Master would be personally documented. I was committed to the mountain, but I had barely left base camp.