

A day in the life of . . .

Gunnar Hallberg

Gunnar Hallberg started his bridge life in Sweden, and was a regular on the Swedish national team in the 1980s. He was six times Swedish teams champion, Nordic champion and European silver medallist. He moved to England to play bridge professionally in 1995. A losing semi-finalist for England in the 2000 World Olympiad, he has won the Cavendish Teams, the Australian National Open Teams and North America's prestigious Vanderbilt Trophy. He was also a member of the England Team that won Gold in the 2009 World Seniors Championship.

I ALWAYS set my alarm for 7.30, but am usually up before then. I make my coffee and study the weather to decide whether I might be able to play pitch and putt later in the morning. At 7.45, if she is staying with me and not at her mother's, I wake up my 9-year-old daughter, Nisha, and admire how efficiently and quickly she gets herself ready for school. Nisha is definitely the best thing that has happened to me in recent times, and I dote on her. I chose her name on a whim, but it is most apt: it means 'Messenger in the Dark' in Armenian, and she is very much a ray of sun in my life.

When Nisha is ready, I walk her to school. I don't have a car, as I don't have any need for it. If I am not playing pitch and putt, I will carry on walking and enjoying the sea

air. I live in Brighton, and there is always plenty to see during my walks: the other day I took some visiting friends on one of my routes and we were treated to a magnificent display of starlings flying in ever-different patterns and formations. It was fabulous.

If the weather is really awful, I return to my flat earlier and try to make the most of the computer I acquired about a year ago. I am not very good at it, but I do use it to keep in touch with my family in Sweden. I have thirty-four cousins, and enjoy a good relationship with them all. I am very fond of my extended family, and proud of the fact that not one of them has ever had serious problems in life. I was born on the west coast of Sweden, near Gothenburg, in a hard-working family. I am the second of three brothers and have a younger sister. We all grew up knowing that we would have to start working early, as father was a

fisherman and there wasn't much money around. We had a fishing boat that supplied us with fish to eat and some money, and my mother saw to it that we were always well fed out of the produce of our little farm. Butchering the pig at Christmas was a special treat!

I left school at 15, having been taught to play bridge by a very talented teacher who was my first regular partner. At first I worked as a mechanic locally but after doing my National Service, at 21 I left to seek my fortune in Stockholm. Unlike most Swedes, I am not very organised, so a fortune is not what I made; I mostly worked as a builder while playing as much bridge as possible. Even then, I was happiest when I could be outdoors: Swedes

have a law, 'All Men's Right', which gives them the right to walk wherever they like provided they are considerate of the environment and other people's property. As a result, I know Sweden fairly well!

When I'm in Brighton – and I could not live anywhere but near the sea – I follow my Swedish ways. Long walks morning and sometimes afternoon are broken up by cooking my lunch, mostly fish. I love sprats and if I can get them fresh enough I shallow fry them in butter. The taste is heavenly! I don't follow recipes, as I have an instinct for seasonings and food combinations, but I will sometimes consult my elder brother on the finer points. He wrote a well-known cookery book for chefs, so he can be trusted to know what he is talking about.

When it's time, I pick up Nisha from school and if she's not due at her art or

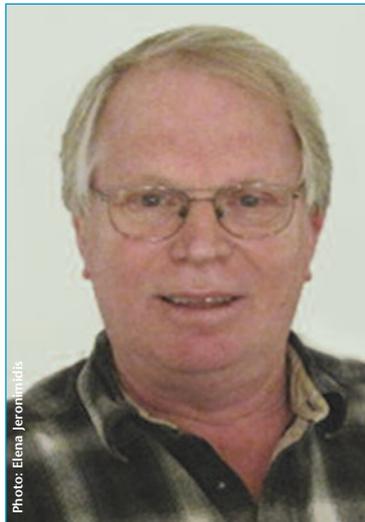


Photo: Elena Jeronimidis

Gunnar's Top Tip

Practise self-discipline and pursue harmony if you want to do well in serious competitions.

If you play at your local club, then of course you want to enjoy yourself so you can let your hair down. But if you are playing in a tournament and you want to do well, you have to practise self-discipline: no staying up all night drinking and having a good time – leave that for the last evening, when you celebrate your success!

Not only is it important to be well rested before facing several hours of play, but you need to be relaxed and in harmony with yourself. When my team won the Vanderbilt, I was early to bed in the evenings and up at 6.30 for a walk to the local farmers' market and breakfast outdoors. This gave me the time and the opportunity to put the previous day's play behind me and be at peace with myself when the competition resumed.

If you are in harmony with yourself, it will be easier to be in harmony with your partner, and you will both be able to play to the best of your ability. Nothing spoils potentially good partnerships as much as one of the two being unhappy with themselves and taking it out on partner.

cartoon classes and I'm playing at Young Chelsea or TGR's (where she is everyone's favourite), I take her with me to London. We both enjoy travelling by train, where we shock people by chatting to fellow passengers and playing with other kids on board. When Nisha stays with my wife, I spend the afternoon teaching bridge in Hove, or playing bridge, mostly in London and in whatever competitions my sponsors want to enter. Almost all of my bridge is played with sponsors, and I am lucky that they are good players and nice people to spend time with. I enjoy a good reputation both in England and the US, so I have several partnerships going in both countries and I travel quite a lot.

So, in a sense, I don't have a typical day. I play whenever and wherever my sponsors want me to, and enjoy the rest of my life, and especially my daughter, as much as I can in between. I like it this way and my family in Sweden, old Vikings that they are, are now quite proud of the wayward youngster who left a traditional way of life and his country to become a bridge professional. When all is said and done, I have not changed all that much. □