

A day in the life of . . .

Martin Hoffman

Martin Hoffman is reputedly the best pairs player in the world, and has enjoyed a long string of successes both in the UK and abroad.

He was also the winner of 'Master Bridge', the 1982 Channel 4 TV tournament contested by bridge stars such as Omar Sharif, Zia Mahmood and Rixi Markus.

I USUALLY wake up around 7am. I have never needed much sleep, but I do need a good breakfast, which I usually prepare myself. I am an avid reader of the news, so I take my time over coffee and cereals, and read the newspaper. I enjoy this ritual but I will also read any other newspaper that comes my way later during the day.

Having found out what's new in the world, I settle down to writing. Thirteen of my books have been published, and there is always at least one more in the pipeline. Terence Reese, my friend and first editor, used to say that I could not write without help from my wife, Audrey. I think that was putting it a bit strong! But maybe Audrey is right when she says that, left to my own devices, my books would all be written in a few days since I rattle off hands at the speed of lightning!

I know I tend to do that, but then bridge is my life, though I fell into it by chance. I was born in Czechoslovakia, and, aged 15, was liberated from Buchenwald by the US Army who made me their mascot. My family had died in the Holocaust so, after two years in rehabilitation, I went to live with a family in Finchley and worked as a diamond cutter. It was not a bad life: at a time when a policeman was earning £5 a week, I brought home £45! In spite of the money, and satisfactions such as meeting the then Princess Elizabeth – for whom my company made an engagement ring – working conditions were not healthy, and after eleven years I was ready for change.

The family with whom I lived was keen on card games, and I picked them up easily. When one day I was asked to play in a whist drive, I said yes and although I had never

played the game before, I won. The same thing happened when, some time later, a friend asked me to play rubber bridge with him at a local club. Success spurred my interest, and I set to learning the game by watching great players such as Terence Reese at play. When I won my first duplicate, I was ready to pack in the diamond trade and take up a job as a bridge host.

Mainly, I am still doing that. Nowadays Audrey and I divide our time between London and Lauderdale, Florida, but the pattern of the day is the same. I may sometimes have lunch at home first, but I soon set off for the club for an afternoon of rubber bridge. I often walk there, as that is one physical activity I do enjoy. Once at the club, I play for the house: it means I only receive half of my winnings, but I don't have to pay table money or worry about paying for food. This arrangement suits me: my game is a lot sharper if I am not risking my own money!

That's not to say that I don't like a bit of gambling. In fact, when I was younger, I was heavily into betting on the dogs; I eventually lost huge sums and was very lucky when the bookies wrote off my debts. Nowadays, dog racing is still one of my passions but I keep control of the size of my bets and limit the number of my visits to the track, where I go with my friend Moeshe. I can often be found at the Betting Office in the morning, though, studying the form for a couple of hours.

Most of my time, however, is spent playing bridge. I only ever play professionally, and am not worried by the standard of my partners. I am not worried by their nationality either: I have partnered players from



Photo: Elena Jeronimidis

Martin's Top Tip

Count the hand – then the bidding will tell you how to play!

THIS tip applies to all play situations, but is especially useful when you have a two-way finesse:

N/S Game. Dealer East. Pairs.

♠ J 8 4 3 2 ♥ 8 ♦ Q 9 3 ♣ J 9 4 3		♠ K Q 6 ♥ 10 7 5 ♦ K J 6 5 ♣ A Q 2	♠ 10 9 5 ♥ K Q J 9 6 4 ♦ 7 ♣ 8 7 5
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West	North	East	South
Pass	4NT	2♥ ¹	2NT
¹ Weak, 5-9, six-card suit			

Once West leads a heart and you win East's jack with your ace, you cannot afford to lose the lead. Don't guess the position of the ♦Q: cash all your black-suit winners first, and note that East shows up with three cards in each. As East opened 2♥, he must have six hearts and so can have only one diamond. Cash your ♦A in case the singleton is the ♦Q, then finesse against West for two overtricks!

the UK, the US, India, Iran, France, Austria, Germany – wherever they happen to be from, as long as they are pleasant people and don't mind paying my fees! I am available for rubber and duplicate, club and congress events everywhere in the world.

This does not leave much time for family life, but Audrey is very supportive and does not mind keeping herself busy teaching bridge and playing tennis or golf. We don't have children, but are lucky in that we could always play parents (now grandparents) to our friends' offsprings. I really enjoy the company of children and love telling them stories and keeping them entertained. Although they tend to go off me as they grow up, they have well repaid my interest in them. It was because of my friendship with their little girl that my Finchley family took me in and gave me a start in my English life, and later, another little girl was key to another rewarding friendship, with her parents, Judy Dench and Michael Williams. Lovely people – but what a shame they did not play bridge! □