

## Our First Slam

By Max Everett, Jihoon Kim, Geoffrey Lu, Robert Nielsen, Alex Simons, Miranda Wang, Williams College

Six brave Williams College students signed up to take an ACBL College Initiative course on “Tournament Bridge” at Williams College with Professor Frank Morgan and consultant Jim Berry. None of us had played bridge before. After introductory classes Monday and Tuesday, we started competing at the Pembury Bridge Club in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The third week we spent five days at the Joan Gerard District 3 Winter Regional in Tarrytown, New York. All six of us earned masterpoints.

There was one particularly memorable hand in the Swiss teams on Sunday: our first time bidding and playing a slam.

E (Alex):

Axxx Spades

AKQ9x Hearts

Kxxx Diamonds

---- Clubs

W (Max):

QJ9x Spades

Jxx Hearts

Ax Diamonds

AKxx Clubs

**The bidding.** Alex opened 1H. Max responded with Jacoby 2NT, showing a strong hand with heart support (we’re still doing it with just three pieces). With his strong hearts and a void in clubs, Alex knew we had slam potential. He bid 3C to show a club control (we don’t know about bidding shortness yet). In hindsight, he realizes he had controls in all suits and could have gone right to 1430 keycard. Max bid 3D showing slam interest and a diamond control. Now Alex jumped to 4N to ask for keycards. Max responded 5H, showing 2 or 5 keycards without the heart Queen, hence the ace of clubs and ace of diamonds. Alex went to 6H, where we played.

**The play (Alex).** In my hand, I had two diamond losers and three spade losers. My plan was to toss the two diamond losers on the AK of clubs, and hope for just one spade loser with a finesse. Diamonds led, I won the King in my hand to keep the Ace of diamonds as an entry to dummy so I could play AK clubs. After drawing trump (3–2 break) and ending in my hand, I went to the board with the Ace of diamonds and threw my two diamond losers on the AK of clubs. Then I played the spade Queen to finesse. Alas, the King was offside and won the trick. I ruffed the diamond return and played spades, which fortunately broke 3–2, so now my little 9 of spades was good! I could now claim the rest, making 6H. (A bolder declarer might try to

make 7 by ruffing two diamonds, but with the spade finesse off, you can't do better than 6.) I hadn't realized how much playing bridge would remind me of a puzzle. You have a certain number of losers, and you need to figure out if there's a way to make any of your losers go away while also keeping your opponents from turning any of your winners into losers.

**Max.** I had an absolute blast learning how to play bridge with all of you this month. Alex and I play cards together (Hearts, Rook, Euchre, ...) 3–4 nights a week, so I knew I would enjoy bridge, but I didn't expect how quickly I would get sucked in. When we went to the Tarrytown tournament, Robert and I got back to our room after two full sessions during the day only to play online on BBO for another hour and a half. I loved the camaraderie of our group, where everyone would celebrate the success of anyone getting masterpoints as a success for everyone.

**Miranda.** For the first two weeks I dreaded playing bridge. I often confused diamonds for hearts. I didn't understand bidding past the first two bids. I couldn't count tricks.

So I dreaded going to the Tarrytown regional, but there I improved rapidly. The Tuesday before I went through my notes, which helped a lot: I understood for the first time what 2/1 means. I was beginning to understand bidding as a language. Meanwhile the company was amazing—I had a lot of fun even while losing.

Saturday is a day I will remember. Geoffrey and I met our goal of bidding and making a slam, as well as our other goal of breaking 40%. In the evening when we went over a hand I misplayed, Geoffrey showed me how to play the trump, and something in my brain finally clicked.

Our first day back I thought for the first time, I really want to play bridge! Unwittingly, I have let bridge rise through the ranks; games I used to like are dwarfed by comparison. Thank you all, so much, for all that you've taught me, and more importantly, for the fun times!!! Geoffrey in particular—much thanks for putting up with me.

**Geoffrey.** Earlier this month I overheard Frank explaining the class to some surprised bystander as “sink or swim,” which upon reflection seems extremely accurate. I struggled to make sense of everything the first week. One time, I inadvertently reversed while trying to show a new suit, causing my partner Jim to immediately bid game to my great dismay.

With time and practice, the situation ameliorated. To my surprise, I found myself sometimes opening Bridgebase to play a few hands outside of class. The various conventions and techniques began to fall into place as a logical structure intended to

communicate a hand effectively. I also began to understand drawing trump, finessing, and setting up suits.

The Tarrytown regional was intimidating at first, but it turned out to be really quite fun and the best opportunity to get better at bridge. I think Miranda and I both improved greatly and achieved some results we were both proud of (slam!). During this time I felt that I got better at playing more cooperatively through carding and playing to my partners' strong suits, while also working on my ability to keep track of cards—although more than once I discarded a winner. We were also able to find humor in our many mistakes.

After tomorrow, I'll miss playing bridge constantly. Special thanks to Frank and Jim for being such excellent—and patient—teachers, and of course to Miranda for being such an awesome bridge partner.

**Robert.** I had a great time learning how to play bridge. I knew I would get addicted to it, but I had no idea how complex and interesting the game would be. One part of the course I particularly enjoyed was going over the hands with everyone and discussing optimal strategy. Bridge is a fascinating game, and I'm sure that I will have a lifelong relationship with it.



Williams College ACBL class earns Masterpoints at the Joan Gerrard regional.  
Pictured (left to right): Geoffrey Lu '20, Alex Simons '21, Miranda Wang '21, Jihoon Kim '22, Max Everett '21, Atwell Professor of Mathematics Emeritus Frank Morgan. Not pictured: Robert Nielsen '23, Jim Berry.