

Profile

Eric Kokish is not only a champion player in his own right but also the coach of champions. He is the full-time coach of all the Canadian teams and currently on retainer to the USA's Nick Nickell team (Meckstroth, Rodwell, Hamman, Soloway, Freedman and Nickell). He has also coached teams from Australia, Bermuda, Brazil, China, Chinese Taipei, Egypt, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Netherlands, and Russia. Teams from Brazil, Iceland, Netherlands (open and women), and the United States (open and women), have won world championships while Brazil, Canada (open and women), China, and Indonesia have second place finishes.

BB: What do you feel are some of the characteristics that have led you into a career in coaching?

In addition to an extensive knowledge of systems and players, my experience has given me some empathy for the problems players face at the table and in their lives—including issues such as partnership morale, pressure, team compatibility, self-image, and ego.

I feel I have the ability to listen and keep doors open without being dogmatic. I've been able to create useful material and organize it into comprehensible formats that can help people focus on the truth of the situation rather than emotional reactions. But I'm still a player at heart. Unfortunately, for nearly all the events I'd like to play in I'm coaching a team competing in them.

BB: Do you think there is a national character that affects the way a bridge team competes?

Any team can do well with hard work and the right attitude but there are differences based on nationality and environment and—the bottom line—the way the game has been played by the best players in that country. I've been to places where nearly everyone plays the same style, for better or for worse, and

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has the same misconceptions, but it's those countries that benefit the most from being introduced to new ideas and approaches.

BB: Are some teams uncoachable?

No, it's essentially a matter of finding the right approach. To an extent, national customs, habits and personalities can make it particularly challenging, but once you can catch the group's interest and open some minds to the truth, the biggest battle is won. Sometimes this requires diplomacy, but at other times it's essential to employ sarcasm and humor to break through.

2004 CHAMPIONSHIPS

Istanbul, the historic city laying on two continents, will be the site of the 12th World Team Olympiad. More than eighty countries are expected to participate. Every member country of the World Bridge Federation is entitled to have one team in each of the three series of the competition: Open, Women, and Seniors.

Two more events will take place in Istanbul on the second week of the Olympiad. These are the World University Bridge Championships and the Transnational Mixed Team Championships.

BB: You've coached both women and men. Is there any truth to the rumor that men are better players?

There's no conclusive answer. Women are more aggressive and men are more thorough in their analysis. There's absolutely no reason for women not to be as technically proficient as men.

Where coaching is concerned, I've seen many different reactions and it certainly doesn't boil down to gender. Stamina and focus vary, of course, but some of my most successful projects have involved women.

BB: You've coached Juniors. What are the unique features of coaching players of ages 18 to 25?

As much as Juniors love the game, most would rather play than work at the game, so it's important to keep things moving and lively and to encourage them to get involved and speak. Punctuality and organization are often a challenge. When signs of real talent manifest themselves, it's important to channel that talent in the right direction and stay on top of that player to maintain his interest.

BB: How do you coach world-class players for a world championship?

Every project is different and, the better the players and stronger the support we get from their federation, the faster we can work. I once spent five days in Iceland and went through as much material as I had in other countries in over a full month.

When time and funding permits, I develop profiles on the other teams competing in the event, including personal information: whatever I know from experience about their tendencies, strengths and weaknesses; the conventions they use; summaries of their methods and how to combat them (some defenses to complex methods might be more than 20 pages and can be kept at the table for reference, so we make them as comprehensive as possible); as many illustrative deals as I can gather.

For the Nickell team, it usually takes my wife, Beverly Kraft, and myself a couple of months of intensive effort to produce these profiles, which we then send to all the team members and to the non-playing captain a few weeks before the team leaves for the world championship. Strangely enough, I'm unable to do for the Nickell team what I do for nearly everyone else with whom I work: get together for weekends or for week-long projects. They are just too busy.

BB: How long does a team train with you in preparation for a world championship event?

As long as possible. My longest assignment would have been Indonesia—1997 until the World Championships in 2001—but politics ended the project after only six months. Since coaching is a luxury item for most bridge federations, a typical visit would be 7-10 days in the year of a championship, but I've had projects that involved many long weekends or two-week visits over a significant period of time.

BB: Do players ever disagree with your advice?

My style is to suggest some alternatives rather than offer advice. When the players have the right mind set, they're aware that what they've been doing isn't working as well as they'd like. So, when they see something that might help them, they're more inclined to adopt it.

We look for ways to make things easier or better, but we never try to tamper with their system if they're comfortable with their overall methods. The trick is not to sell anything but to reveal what's behind Door A, Door B, and Door C. It's amazing how often players will make the right choice when they see the true cost of what it is they are currently doing.

BB: Do many of the teams competing in world championships have coaches?

There were almost none when I started in the mid-80's, but there are many now. Certainly all the serious national teams, albeit to different degrees. In North America only a few sponsored teams have coaches.

How much credit are the coaches given for the results?

The teams I've been with seem to think that having a coach has made a difference. But, really, an effective coach is more of an enabler than an instructor. If he does his job well, the team has good morale and has a



certain comfort level in knowing that they've done their preparation properly and won't be taken by surprise at a critical moment. In truth, much of the strange stuff never comes up, but not having to worry about it makes a big difference.

BB: In 1991, Iceland surprised the bridge world by winning the World Championships. Did they train differently from other teams to achieve such a victory?

That team did a lot of bonding and physical training—endurance stuff. Most teams can't get together as much as the Icies did that year. Great bunch of guys, with whom I

had the pleasure to work a few years later. Their non-playing captain and coach were good people too, which helped a lot.

BB: If you were coaching us on a specific topic, such as responding after your right-hand opponent comes into the auction, how would you go about it?

We have dozens of prepared bidding sets involving all sorts of competitive actions. We'd have the players bid these deals and record their auctions, then discuss them as a group, offering suggestions on how to cope with each situation. Sometimes this would involve a special treatment rather than just common sense, but the experience level of the group would tend to dictate how we would approach each deal.

BB: You have an astounding amount of information about how players can improve. Could you give us some tips ... five hints on how to improve our game?

1. Play in a steady partnership with someone you respect in the best competition you can find. Don't be afraid to ask an expert for advice.
2. Look for the truth about whether an action was reasonable; the actual result on a particular deal is not as important.
3. Always discuss the boards *after* the session; both good and bad results. Blame is not the issue. If a solution is found, add it to your system notes.
4. Make the computer one of the tools for improvement: play and watch online; look at the hand records after every set. Many excellent software packages are available. Start with one each on bidding, play, and defense.
5. Read everything you can, including at least one good bridge magazine a month and the World Championship Book each year. ♦