

PLAY THE HAND YOU'RE DEALT

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Warren Buffet famously once said he wouldn't mind being in jail if he were with three cellmates who were decent bridge players willing to play 24 hours a day. What he could have added was that the exercise of playing competitive bridge might turn his three imaginary pals into decent people, so that the public would probably then perceive them not as dangerous felons but merely as nerds.

If you don't play bridge yourself, you've probably seen it played: in college dorms, on commuter trains, at golf clubs during rain delays, on cruise ships, at kitchen tables, and even in films. In *Animal Crackers*, Chico Marx sits down to play bridge with two ladies and asks, "So how do you want to play—honest?" Genteelly indignant, the women gasp, but when they cut for partners from a single deck, both Chico and Harpo draw Aces of Spades, which Chico then calls "coincidences." "Two aces of spades?" one of the ladies says. "Yeah," Chico says, "he's got thousands of them."

You've no doubt heard that bridge was played by celebrities like Omar Sharif, George Burns, Malcolm Forbes, Bill Gates and Martina Navratilova, and you may have been scandalized by the portrayal of Jimmy Cayne in *House of Cards* playing a bridge tourney while Bear Sterns imploded, but you might not know that bridge was a favorite of literary stars like Edgar Allen Poe, Somerset Maugham and Ernest Hemingway. The real stars of the game, however, are probably people you've never heard of, which is largely the fate of those who excel in games that

are played sitting down and fully clothed. It's a game played for pride, not money; for prestige among peers, not fame.

Bridge is a card game for four people, played with a deck of 52 cards. Like doubles tennis, it's played two-on-two, although the partners sit opposite each other (called north/south and east/west). Bridge evolved from whist, a similar but simpler game, which dates to at least the early seventeenth hundreds. Each player is dealt 13 cards, and cards are played from each of the four hands in succession, resulting in a four card "trick" which is won either by the highest card in the suit that was led or by the highest card in the "trump" suit. (Aces are high; deuces are low.) The trump suit in whist is determined by exposing the last card in the deck; in bridge, the trump suit is decided by an auction among the four players prior to the play of the cards. The auction determines how many tricks the winner of the auction (called the declarer) must take to make what is called their "contract."¹

This version of bridge is attributed to Harold S. Vanderbilt, great grandson of Cornelius, who, during a cruise from Los Angeles to Havana in 1925, devised several improvements to the scoring system to create "contract bridge," which is what is played today. Vanderbilt was also known as a formidable strategist and racing helmsman, successfully defending the America's Cup three times in the golden days of international yachting.

The glamorous husband-and-wife team of Josephine Murphy and Ely Culbertson popularized bridge in the U.S. in the 1920's, transforming it from a parlor game into an international phenomenon. They were each already accomplished players when they married in

¹ "Game" contracts are four of a major suit (spades or hearts); five of a minor suit (clubs or diamonds) or three no-trump. "Four" means that the declarer must take six plus four for a total of ten tricks; five means eleven of the thirteen tricks available. In social bridge, two games make a rubber.

1923. When contract bridge was introduced by Vanderbilt, Ely, then 40 years old, the son of a Russian mother and an American father, seized the opportunity to establish himself as the new game's foremost expert. Up to that point, he'd been a self-described revolutionary in Russia, a student in Paris and a hobo in the United States and was an obscure professional card player haunting the clubs of New York, sometimes prospering and often broke. Culberson spent weeks alone with a deck of cards, working out his own bidding system, and scraped together enough money to start a magazine in 1929 called *The Bridge World*, the first bridge magazine in the world. At the end of the decade, perhaps fueled in part by the Great Depression, contract bridge was a fad said to be approaching the proportions of a plague.

In the spring of 1930 a British bridge expert published a statement to the effect that American bridge players were a sad lot of blokes. Culbertson immediately issued a challenge: he would bring a team to London and play 300 hands against a British team. Ely and Jo raised the money for the trip on the strength of presales of Ely's as yet unwritten first book and clobbered the English by nearly 5000 points. Ely and Jo Culbertson came home famous, and Ely began to promote his system with the swagger of a Don King.

He challenged the old guard, namely Sidney S. Lenz, to a match of 150 rubbers (at least 300 and more likely more than 500 hands), betting \$5000 to \$1000 (a stake of roughly \$73,000 in today's dollars) that he and Jo would beat Lenz and the partner of his choosing. Lenz at the time was 58, an amateur magician, a Ping-Pong champion, a superb bridge player and a wealthy man. He chose Oswald Jacoby (later to become famous in his own right) as his partner. They played every night for five weeks, starting December 7, 1931, at the Hotel Chatham in New York. The place was swarmed by celebrities, socialites and reporters, among them Ring

Lardner, Robert Benchley and Damon Runyon. Lieutenant Alfred M. Gruenther, a 32-year-old chemistry instructor at West Point, was named referee.

Culbertson kept the five weeks lively; at the end of the 27th rubber, the opposition was ahead by 7000 points, but on December 15, Ely and Jo took the lead for the first time and never gave it up. Ely made himself a super irritant to Lenz and Jacoby, being consistently late, eating a fat juicy steak while playing at the table, going into long periods of meditation before bidding or playing a card, and trash talking. Three weeks into the match, Lenz criticized Jacoby's bidding in front of Culbertson, and Jacoby fired back at Lenz about his play, then quit. Lenz got a new partner, and the marathon ended on January 8, with the Culbertsons victorious by almost 9000 points. Today, Nikol Schattenstein's portrait of the Culbertsons at a bridge table hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Referee Gruenther went on to become, at 53 years old, the youngest 4-star General in the United States Army and then Supreme Allied Commander in Europe from 1953 to 1956.

In the 1940's, 50's and 60's, Charles Goren, 1950 World Champion, became the biggest name in bridge. His books, *Winning Bridge Made Easy* and *Contract Bridge Complete*, sold millions; by 1958 his daily bridge column was appearing in 194 American newspapers. It appeared in *The Chicago Tribune* from 1944 to 1970, when Omar Sharif joined him as co-author. He also had a monthly column in *McCall's* and a weekly column in *Sports Illustrated* and he appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* as the "King of Hearts" in 1958. As he continued writing, Goren began to develop a hand evaluation system by adding points to account for distributional features in addition to high cards. His style was very different from Culbertson's, emphasizing adaptability and natural tactics rather than artificial bids and

conventions. His methods became the basis of Standard American bidding, which is what is used today by most American players.

His television program, *Championship Bridge with Charles Goren*, was broadcast from 1959 to 1964 on the ABC network. It featured numerous appearances by top players and segments with celebrity guests such as Chico Marx. He had many of his tournament successes with women as partners, particularly with Helen Sobel, who appeared as a teenager with the Marx Brothers in *Animal Crackers* and is said to have been the "greatest woman bridge player of all time" and perhaps "the most brilliant card player of all time." She won 35 North American Bridge Championships and was the first woman to play in the Bermuda Bowl, the oldest bridge world championship event. Rightly or wrongly, Goren believed that women were at least as good as men at bridge, because he said women had less vanity about their ability, but that men usually won because of greater stamina. When Helen Sobel played with Goren, she was asked how it felt playing with a great expert. She said, "Ask Mr. Goren."

Competitive or tournament "contract" bridge today is known as "duplicate." In duplicate, all north/south pairs play identical hands against the east/west teams, usually 24 to 36 hands per session, and pairs are scored not against the pair at their table, but against all the other pairs sitting in their direction playing the same cards, thus reducing somewhat the role of luck. Each hand is recorded at a handheld device at each table, which permits immediate computer ranking and scoring, something which takes hours when done manually.

Card games are illegal gambling if three elements are present: prize, chance and consideration. In poker, for instance, there is prize and there is consideration—money on the table. There has long been a legal debate as to whether poker is, like blackjack, a game of chance or a game of skill. When both luck and skill are involved, most state courts will look to whether

skill or chance predominates in the determination of the outcome. Until ten years ago, no court had ever held that skill predominates in a game of poker, but courts in Colorado and Pennsylvania have now found that skill does predominate. One argument is that better players will win more consistently than they would based solely on chance. (A word to the wise: social gambling, such as a home poker game, is not illegal in most states, but Illinois law, which permits casino gambling and gambling at licensed charitable events, makes no such exception for home games.)

There is little dispute about bridge being a game of skill. A California court opined in 1962 that while of course there was *an* element of chance resulting from the deal of the cards, “there is a continually recurring necessity in the bidding and play of the hand to make decisions which, considered together will ordinarily be determinative of the outcome of the game.” In 1962 in In re Allen, (59 Ca. 2d 6, Dec. 19, 1962) [Quoting the Encyclopedia Britannica (1962), p. 329], the court said that bridge, “embraces a technique which in complexity approaches that of chess; and, in addition, a scope for deductive analysis, psychology, alertness and mental ascendancy over one’s opponents. Thus it is an art, which can hardly be taught or even described.” In determining that bridge was a game of skill, the court found it persuasive that more than 5000 volumes on bridge were published between 1927 and the middle of the 20th century, and that there were several periodicals and numerous daily newspaper columns dealing with bridge.

The court may have been wrong in comparing bridge to chess. While according to the *New York Times* computers can beat all but a handful of chess grandmasters, they can’t outplay the world’s best bridge players. Although bridge and chess are both part science, part math, part

logic, and part reason, and although both are often considered “war games,” bridge is also quite human, in part because computers can’t weigh truth and lies.

Dwight Eisenhower was an avid bridge player and thought that bridge, rather than chess, was the better war game and ultimate model for geopolitics. Michael Ledeen, former coach of the Israeli national bridge team, explains why: “Card games are better models because vital information is always concealed by the ‘fog of war’ and the deception of opponents.”² In chess, all the pieces are visible to all; in bridge, three-quarters of the cards are initially concealed, and sometimes, partners find it necessary to “lie” to each other as a gamble or in order to mislead the other side. Ledeen says, “Great bridge players are great liars—as are brilliant military leaders and diplomats and politicians.”

The math of bridge is itself staggering. The number of different hands any named player can receive is greater than 6.35 times ten to the 11th power³; that is six times the 108 billion of our species who have ever lived, 7% of whom are alive today. The number of possible deals at any given table is

astronomical, more than 53 times ten to the 22nd power --that’s a number that starts with the words 53 sextillion and has 6 commas.⁴ The number of possible auctions with North as dealer, assuming East and West pass throughout, is only 68.7 billion, but if East and West don’t pass, the number of possible auctions is 1.28 times 10 to the 47th power, a number which starts with the words 128 quattuordecillion, has 48 places and 15 commas.⁵ These numbers are part of what make the game inexhaustible and ever challenging.

² “Bridge—Not Chess-Is the Ultimate War Game,” <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bridgenot-chess-is-the-ultimate-war-game-1431899680> (May 17, 2015)

³ 635, 101, 559, 600

⁴ 53, 644, 737, 765, 488, 792, 839, 237, 440, 000)

⁵ 128,745,650,347,030,683,120,231,926,111,609,371,363,122,697,557

Both chess and bridge are recognized as “mind sports” by the International Olympic Committee. One consequence of this status is that players are subject to the IOC’s doping rules. Geir Helgemo, a Norwegian who represents Monaco, tested positive for synthetic testosterone and clomifene at a World Bridge Series in September, 2018, and was suspended by the World Bridge Federation (WBF). He also had all titles, medals and points from the 2018 World Bridge Series event revoked, although there was no evidence that the drugs had improved his bridge performance.

Competitive tournaments are sanctioned by the International World Bridge Federation and in the U.S. by the ACBL (American Contract Bridge League) which has a membership of 167,000 and is the largest bridge organization in the world. It sponsors games in 3000 bridge clubs in the U.S. and at 1100 sectional and regional tournaments plus 3 national tournaments. As many as 6500 players attend a national tournament. In 2019, these were held in Memphis, Las Vegas and San Francisco, and in 2020 these will be in Columbus, Montreal and Tampa. Winners of ACBL-sanctioned games in clubs and tournaments earn Masterpoints weighted by the number of tables and the skill level of the other players. For instance, there are games for beginners with fewer than 99 points, games for intermediates with fewer than 299 points, and open games. Persons with 500 points are designated Life Masters. After Life Master, you can become a Silver Life Master with 1000 points; a Ruby with 1500, Gold with 2500, Diamond with 5000, Platinum with 10,000 and a Grand Life Master with 10,000 and a victory in a national or international tournament.

In the past two years, I’ve earned about 75 points, enough to qualify as a lowly Sectional Master. My husband and I like to play in open games, which, at our club, Chicago Duplicate

Bridge Club, Chicago's largest and only nonprofit club, means we are competing against experienced players in the "Open" game, a third of whom are at least Life Masters, if not Gold Life Masters. Needless to say, we don't win points in those games very often, just randomly enough to keep us, like Pavlov's dogs, coming back.

There is also an American Bridge Association, founded in 1932 by black tennis players at Buckroe Beach, Virginia. At that time, blacks were excluded from most bridge events, and in fact several states made cardplaying between whites and blacks illegal.⁶ ABA maintains a separate Masterpoint system and holds two national tournaments a year. In 1956, Marion Wildy became the first ABA Life Master and in 1962, Leo Benson became the first African American ABA Life Master to also become an ACBL Life Master. In 1967, the ACBL amended its bylaws to formally clarify that membership was open to anyone regardless of race, color or creed.

Masterpoints have no cash value; they are akin to Girl Scout badges and are valuable only in prestige among fellow competitive bridge players. There are, however, a few bridge professionals who make a living teaching bridge, officiating games, and playing on teams which are sponsored, often by rich enthusiasts of the game. Fifty years ago, a Dallas financier named Ira Corn created a full-time, professional team whose singular goal was to return the world bridge championship to the United States after years of the title being in the possession of the Italian Blue Team. He assembled a team of six top players and offered them a salary plus tournament expenses. The Aces, sometimes called the Dallas Aces, won the Bermuda Bowl in 1970 (the first time since 1954), and in 1971, 1976, 1979 and 1983. Bob Hamman, who later owned a prize promotion firm in Dallas, was a member of that team for 13 years and has long

⁶Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas

been recognized as the No. 1 player in the all-time World Bridge Federation rankings. He has won nine world championships, dozens of North American titles, is a WBF and ACBL Grand Life Master and an inductee of the ACBL Hall of Fame. He is said to have had an unparalleled ability to leave hands already played completely in the past. He understands that bridge is a game of uncertainty and imperfection and counsels, “The most important thing is that it’s not how good you are at your best, but how bad you are at your worst.” He has also said that bridge is “a metaphor of life. Despite your lack of certainties, you must play at your best. And if you make a mistake, which happens most of the times, you need to carry on and think [about] the next hand.”

This is especially true in tournament bridge, which allows roughly 6-7 minutes to bid and play a hand. So the ability to make mistakes, learn from them and forget them in order to quickly move on, is essential. It is often said that because there are so many different hands and combinations and things that can happen in a game, it’s a game where experience counts more than youth, and the more you’ve played, the more situations you’ve faced, the more likely you are to make good decisions when facing different cards—but similar situations—again. One of the reasons bridge fascinates so many people is that, as David Owen wrote in a *New Yorker* article in 2018, “in order to become even sort of good at it, you have to be willing to be bad at it for a long time.” Still, Bill Gates offers this encouragement: if you are good at bridge, you’re “going to be good at lots of things.”

How did humans get so fascinated with playing cards? Many think that the first playing cards were invented during the Tang Dynasty in the 9th century, utilizing woodblock printing technology. Some suggest that the earliest cards were money cards, the paper currency which doubled both as the tools of the game and the stakes. By the 11th century, playing cards were

spreading throughout Asia and later into Egypt. Four-suited playing cards appeared in southern Europe in 1365. Over the years, various innovations and design improvements have included indices in the corners to allow the holder to fan the cards and hold them in one hand, designs on the back to hide wear and tear, and rounded corners because sharp ones wore out more quickly.

Who plays bridge today? Perhaps because of computer games, bridge may not be as common on college campuses as it was when I first learned, although an estimated 25 million people in the U.S. know how to play bridge and 3 million of them are “nerds” who play competitively at least once a week. There are about 4.5 million sanctioned tables available each year. In contrast, 80 million Americans claim to play poker.

The average player today is 51 years old, is richer than the average American, makes more than \$62,000 a year and is college educated (at the rate of 79%). Why do they play? *Bridge World Magazine* says the rewards of bridge are many: adventure, mental exercise and challenge, entertainment, pleasure, socialization, fascination, the joy of teamwork, longevity.

So, if you don't play bridge, is it too late to learn? Should you try? Somerset Maugham thought so. He once told a non-bridge playing friend, “What a dreary old age you have reserved for yourself!”

Learning a new skill after 60 is believed to reduce the risk of developing dementia. In the online journal, *BBC Future*, David Robson writes that learning something new demonstrably improves cognitive function, even more so than doing the morning crosswords. He notes:

The prevailing, pessimistic view of the ageing mind can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks. In his treatise, *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, Aristotle compared human memory to a wax tablet. At birth, the wax is hot and pliable, but as it cools it becomes too tough and brittle to form distinct impressions--and our memory suffers as a result.

Neuroscientists today use the word “neuroplasticity” to describe the brain’s adaptability, which recalls Aristotle’s *tabula rasa*, but they are more optimistic. Recent studies show that the aging brain is far more capable of making the connections necessary for learning than previously thought, and in fact, adults “can make up for some of their deficits with their greater capacity for analysis, self-reflection and discipline.”

Research at the Center for Vital Longevity at the University of Texas at Dallas found that participants in a 3-month study of learning a new activity (quilting or digital photography) had a significant improvement in memory over three months while those in more passive activities, such as listening to classical music, doing crossword puzzles or engaging in social activities like field trips, had virtually no change. The benefits lasted for more than a year afterwards. Brain scans of those learning new skills revealed lasting changes to circuits in the medial frontal, lateral temporal and parietal cortexes, areas associated with attention and concentration.

The key is that the task be novel and that it challenges you personally—that it be unfamiliar and require prolonged and active mental engagement. Although crosswords and puzzles improve working memory, they do not improve other brain functions such as reasoning and problem solving.

A publication of the Harvard Medical School suggests taking a class. I suggest bridge classes, such as those offered at Chicago Duplicate Bridge Club or by numerous local experts. Classes have the added benefit, Harvard says, of keeping your social skills sharp and boosting self-confidence. The World Bridge Federation goes so far as to say that bridge promotes physical health: it requires “particular concentration, quick reflexes and stamina, qualities only achieved through physical fitness.”

To be fair, there is also science to support the use of chocolate to improve brain cognition. Nothing says you can't do both. Play bridge and snack on "bridge mix," a mix of candy typically including chocolate-covered peanuts, raisins, macadamia nuts, Jujubes, malted milk balls, fruits, nougats, and licorice, and thought to be named for the common practice of placing dishes of snacks on bridge tables, dating back to the 1920's. Bridge mix, by the way, is a generic, not a trademark, although in Canada Hershey's owns the trademark Bridge Mixture. Jujubes, however, is a registered trademark of Farley's and Sathers Candy Company.

What will you learn at the bridge table?

First and foremost, I think bridge teaches the elements of good communication: understanding terms, asking precise questions, listening for the answers, and knowing when to shut up. During the play of the hand, it involves using the information to make a plan, paying attention to the cards being played and quickly recognizing the need to move to a Plan B. For instance, during the play of a hand, partners on defense need to signal each other what their strengths are by their discards on the declarer's tricks, although Chico Marx once said, "if you like my lead, don't bother to signal with a high card, just smile and nod your head"—which is, of course, cheating.

Bidding in bridge is a language, and although there are only 15 words used in bidding, there are easily more than 100 different languages, called systems, and dozens of shortcuts, called conventions. Each bid in the system conveys information, depending on who says it, where they sit at the table, and at what stage of the bidding. For a partnership to be successful, the partners must agree on which systems and conventions they will employ, and each partner must consistently adhere to those agreements, including agreements as to when to lie. It isn't

necessary to play a complicated system or lots of conventions, only that each partner trust the other to play correctly, that is, according to the partnership's agreed systems.

Bidding is not a secret language. The opposition is entitled to know what a person's bid means. Players carry with them "convention cards" which describe the system the team plays, and the other side is entitled to view that card anytime during the play. You are also allowed to ask the bidder's partner—not the bidder—what any bid means to him or her. "Psychic bids" -- good guesses--are permitted, but you can't use a "psych" bid more than once or twice in a session without drawing suspicion of cheating.

At the end of the bidding, everyone at the table will have a fairly good understanding of what cards the others are likely to hold. This is especially true after the "dummy" is placed face-up on the table. The person who won the auction plays his/her hand in combination with the dummy's hand to make the team's contract. (Because language is important, young people learning bridge these days do not call the dummy the "dummy," which could be considered pejorative and therefore politically incorrect. They are taught to call it the "table.")

There are, of course, miscommunications, and at times differences of opinion on what to communicate and how. Learning to disagree in a civil manner is an important part of bridge etiquette. Some might even say that a bridge player's most important asset is the mood and well-being of his or her partner, and loud, harsh or self-righteous criticism of a partner's bidding or playing has led to many dissolutions of otherwise skilled pairs, as in the famous Culbertson-Lenz match.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for partners to bicker, although it is frowned upon. At the Chicago Duplicate Bridge Club, I played with a couple in their nineties who bickered constantly. They often won, but according to the husband, they didn't argue. The first time I sat

at his table, I heard him say to his wife, “I’m not arguing with you, Elaine. I’m telling you you’re wrong!” He claimed they’d been happily married for 70 years.

For other married couples, playing bridge together can precipitate divorce, even, on occasion, homicide.

The most famous case of mistreatment of a partner involves John and Myrtle Bennett of Kansas City. Playing bridge with friends in the 1920’s, things were going well until Mr. Bennet overbid. A domestic brawl ensued, and Mrs. Bennett walked into a bedroom, returned with a gun, and shot her husband several times. She was charged with first degree murder but acquitted on the grounds that the shooting was accidental. She collected \$30,000 in insurance. The press had a field day with the speculation that the shooting was justifiable homicide, and bridge experts occupied themselves for years proving the hand could be made. Five years later, Myrtle Bennett was seen playing bridge with a stranger at a duplicate club. As her partner was laying down his hand, he apologetically remarked, “I hope you don’t shoot me for this one.” Mrs. Bennett fainted.

Competitive bridge is played according to a complex set of rules and remedies for breaches of the rules, and every game is supervised by a referee credentialed by the ACBL to resolve disputes between pairs. Bridge has had its share of cheating scandals, as documented famously in a 2018 *New Yorker* article explaining how a young Israeli team managed to give the most subtle of hand signals to each other to indicate desired leads. The system was so clever that it took the creation of a website called Bridgecheaters.com and the posting of a number of videos to finally crack it, and since then the website Bridgewinners.com has given players a global discussion and support forum. At the highest level, the WBF has instituted the use of screens to

avoid facial, hand and foot cheating. Vocal cheating has long been minimized by the use of bidding boxes for silent bidding.

So there are rules, and there are systems. And there are expectations of common courtesy and etiquette. And then, of course, there are a host of aphorisms that constitute the “folk wisdom” of competitive bridge, and which, I think, set forth a blueprint for healthy relationships of all kinds. Some stem from common expressions:

--Honesty is the best policy: In bridge, this means try not to lie about your hand to your partner.

--It is what it is: In bridge, a card laid is a card played.

--Quit while you're ahead. In bridge, when you have a misfit, stop bidding, or as we say in bridge, stop digging.

Others might be more specific to bridge, but translate well into everyday life:

--Trust your partner.

--Sometimes the best thing to do is nothing. (In bridge parlance, “Pass is often the best bid.”)

--When you don't know what to do, try to help your partner; if you can't help, don't hurt them either.

--Being first in line is good, but don't be disappointed if you don't get the best seat in the house. Three-quarters of the time, no one at the table will be able to make a game; you might have to settle for less.

--Be fearless: Play the cards, not the people.

At our club, our guest visiting instructor is Eldad Ginossar, who at 26 won the 2007 Israeli Pairs Championship and the European Open Teams Championship and was third in

the 2006 World Bridge Championship Rosenblum Cup. He is the author of a new book, *Power Up Your Bridge Game*, and gives advanced beginners this advice when they have won a bid and are planning the play of a hand:

--The better things look, the more reason there is to be pessimistic and guard against what can go wrong.

--The worse things look, the more reason there is to be optimistic and act as if the high cards are where you want them to be. In other words, if you can only see one way to make a hand, then you must play it as if every high card lies exactly where it must in order for you to make your contract.

And then there is the most basic key to happiness that there is: acceptance. You can't change your circumstance, so you must accept what is and make the most of what you have. Or, as we say in bridge, as well as in life, "Play the hand you're dealt."

