

How to Run a Successful Group Mentoring Program

By Ally Whiteneck



In March of 2009, I started a group mentoring program at The Bridge Center in Pleasant Hill (now located in Walnut Creek). I had recently become a board member in Unit 499 and was given the responsibility of the newly formed Mentoring program. The first thing I noticed was a list of 0-50 mp players wanting to be mentored and no mentors available. I started thinking about how many beginning players our unit had and two things entered my mind. One is that getting a mentor who was a life master to mentor a beginning player who actually needed simple classroom lessons was out of proportion. Second, that if every novice player had a mentor, our unit would spend a great deal of money subsidizing this program. So, I simply changed the program.

The result was an incredibly popular, well attended group program. We signed up 23 new ACBL members the first year of the program. The following is a description of how it is run. The first and most important step was to find participants. I did have a list of 10 beginners from the mentor program, but that was not enough so I sent out emails to newcomer's groups, private golf clubs, SIRS & AAUW advertising a beginning mentoring bridge session & also placed a free listing in a local newspaper under local events. I asked clubs in the unit to mention it to their students. As a result, I got 14 tables of mentees for my first session!

The procedure for the session is as follows: The mentees sit at tables (either randomly or pre-assigned). A mentor sits at each table. There are 8 boards which are shared by 4 tables, which get passed around during the 2 hour session. Prior to the play of the hands, there is a 30 minute presentation from a local teacher on the subject of the session. For these sessions I chose Barbara Seagram's book 25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know. Teachers were willing to give the lecture as it gave them the opportunity to get visibility for their own bridge lessons. The mentees then started playing the hands. Each mentor was given a script* (see below) a week prior to study. The bidding would proceed but before the play would begin, the mentor would review how the bidding should have gone and correct the auction. Then the mentees played each board. On completion of the play, the mentor used the script to review the opening lead, play of the hand and defense. Although the theme was a specific convention, the bulk of the time was spent on discussing the actual play. The goal was not to teach conventions, it was secondary to learning how to make proper leads, count, play the hand & defend. The hands were compiled and the scripts edited by an expert bridge player and teacher who chooses to remain anonymous.

Regarding the mentors, I did not limit it to life masters or better. Anyone with 150 masterpoints who can study a script could mentor. The mentors received a free play coupon for volunteering. We would often get more mentor volunteers than we needed! There is no doubt some of the mentors were learning new material along with the

mentees, but with some longevity in the game, they were able to grasp the concepts and explain it. Sometimes you learn more by trying to teach someone else.

The cost for the session was \$5 and the unit did subsidize the free play coupons. However, after 9 months, we made the program profitable by raising the fee to \$7 and the unit no longer needed to subsidize it. We continued to run this program for 25 sessions on alternating Saturdays until we completed the book. We were fortunate to time our ending with the arrival of Barbara Seagram who gave a one day seminar on defense. Our plans are to start again with another of Barbara's books, i.e. 25 Ways To Be A Better Defender and have her lecture again at the completion of our session next year. She is the best and everyone loved her!!

I have many tools I used to organize to make the mentor session run smoothly. I have spreadsheets to organize the tables of players & mentors. I made it mandatory to sign up in advance (otherwise I would not know how many mentors were needed) and I did it 100% by email. I also made a point of making sure people let me know if they could not come as having a mentor arrive without a table was not acceptable to me. I had table markers which showed which board numbers coinciding with the hands, as with 32 boards, hand 1 was 1, 9, 17 & 25. The boards were made ahead of time with the use of a dealing machine; however, the boards could be made up just prior to the session if necessary. I placed an envelope on each table for registration. Each person inserted his own session fee & optional 50 cents for a convention "card".

The convention "card" is a 4 x 6 index card with a summary of the convention. The mentees insert the card in a small photo album and were encouraged to study them just before they play in duplicate games. In this album they could also make up their own index cards for partnership agreements. This card system was devised from a method my partner, Lynne Humphrey and I worked on together after watching her use index cards as her study guides. These are available for all 25 conventions.

Example of a card:

The Stayman Convention

Used after a 1NT opener. Responder has at least one 4+ card major & 8+ HCP & bids 2♣ to ask opener about length in major suits

Rebids by 1NT opener: 2♦ = no 4 card major

2♥ = 4 hearts and maybe 4 spades

2♠ = 4 spades and less than 4 hearts

Rebids by responder:

- Bid value of hand by inviting (8-9), bidding game (10-15) or inviting slam (16+)
- No major suit fit: 2NT (8-9), 3NT (10-15), 4NT (16-17) inviting opener to go to slam with a maximum NT bid, 6NT (18-20)
- Major suit fit: 3♥/3♠ (8-9), 4♥/4♠ (10-15), with 16+ explore for slam

- If 1NT opener has 4 in both majors & responder rebids NT after 1NT-2♣-2♥, opener can correct to spades
- All of these bids can be used after 2NT or 2♣ opener with rebid of 2NT or 3NT.
- Garbage Stayman. Responder can bid Stayman with less than 8 HCP, 0-1 clubs, and at least 3 in the other suits. Pass whatever opener rebids.

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Palo Alto Bridge Club in California is now using these scripts & boards for their own mentoring program. They have on average 25 tables! Additionally, these are given online via bridgebase.com at <http://www.bridgesights.com/hondobridge/everythingsignup.php>. A detailed convention summary is emailed to the participants in advance, and then the day of the lesson, practice boards are played in the tournament area and then followed by the bidding discussed at a teaching table. For more information on these programs, I can be contacted at bridgeliaison@gmail.com or 925-820-7203. Recently, Howard Schutzman & I have started to offer a lecture series to clubs as well. We currently have 2 audio video presentations, one from Ron Klinger on Modern Losing Trick Count and the other from Marty Bergen on Hand Evaluation. Local clubs can purchase these to present to their members. These programs use a state of the art software which allow a 2 ½ lecture to be shown via the internet by way of a large projection image. Locally, we have presented these at a cost of \$20 per person and they have been very well received. Any club could easily set this up for their members.

*Board 1 Stayman

None Vul

Dealer N

S – Q43
H – J1085
D – AQJ
C – KQJ

S – KJ652
H – Q9
D – K76
C – 642

S – A1087
H – 632
D – 985
C – 1075

S – 9
H – AK74
D – 10432
C – A983

West	North	East	South
	1NT	Pass	2C
Pass	2H	Pass	4H
Pass	Pass	Pass	

The Bidding:

- **1NT** 15-17 HCP, balanced hand
- **2C** Asks about a 4 card major
- **2H** Shows 4+ hearts
- **4H** A fit & enough for game

The Lead: D-9, top of a worthless suit

Defensive Strategy: *Once dummy comes down, the defense should be visualizing what his partner has in his hand. W can count NS for 26-28 HCP leaving partner with 3-5 HCP. On the D-9 lead, W should not play the king since the D-9 is from a weak suit. Declarer should play D-J.*

Declarer Plan (*Defense in italics*):

Analyze the lead & think about distribution: The lead is from 9, 9x, 9xx. W should have the D-K.

Count Losers: With a 4-4 fit, you can make either hand the main one. Counting losers from N, there are 3 spades, 1 heart & 1 diamond for a total of 5 losers. If S is the main hand, your losers are 1 spade, 1 heart & 1 diamond.

Note: To count the losers as declarer, decide which hand you are going to set up. Then count as losers, all the cards that are not high, or are not covered by high cards in partner's hand. Therefore Axx opposite a singleton starts off as 2 losers, if you are counting losers from the hand with Axx. There are no losers if counting from the hand with the singleton. Counting Axx initially as 2 losers is done even if you have a huge trump fit. Ruffing the small card in the dummy is part of the plan. If you don't start off counting those losers, you might forget to include that ruff in the timing!

Make a plan before playing to the first card from dummy: Plan to make the S hand good. Win the diamond lead, take 1 top heart, cross to dummy with a club & take the trump finesse. *On this deal W wins the H-Q & should return a spade. Then E should win & lead another heart (nothing is better).* You win the H-K, finesse diamonds again; cash D-A & C-QJ & dummy are good.