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Let's Talk About Bridge

How do you manage the pressure like a champion?



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Manage your stress, stay focused, go the distance... Manage your stress, stay focused, go the distance! Good players or great champions – even though the challenges are the same when it comes to competition, the big advantage of long-term players is their experience. Rituals, general lifestyle or mental preparation, how do they cope with the intensity of tournaments? They tell us their secrets and give easily applicable advice.

A rhythm to take



“The mind is like a muscle; you have to exercise it.” François Fel, professional coach

During my first competitions, I slept only two hours a night, I was very anxious,” recalls **Baptiste Combescure**, a professional bridge player a year ago. Little by little, the young man learned how to tame his stress, which even became an ally: “Today, the pressure makes me even stronger.” The same goes for **Sylvie Willard**, multi-medalist bridge player, with a forty year career: “**The high stakes give me strength, the greater the challenge the more I manage to surpass myself and concentrate.**” This capability for acute concentration is not due to chance. **It is the fruit of serious preparation.** Like all great athletes, professional bridge players start preparing weeks before a big competition to be on top. **Technically of course, but not only that.**

Cédric Lorenzini, European champion and vice-world champion, does a lot of sport, swimming and running: **“It’s important to be ready to make a long-term effort.”** **Baptiste Combescure** as well adapts his lifestyle a few weeks before the competitions: **“I eat a balanced diet, I sleep well, I play sports.”** Simple advice that can make all the difference when the championships are exhausting. **“39 matches in 15 days: that’s really a lot.** Therefore, it is essential to arrive well rested and with a clear mind”, recognizes the champion **Sylvie Willard** who admits that she “needs a week to recover from a tournament”.



All the more so, because the competitions often take place all over the world. This means added fatigue from **the jetlag**. **Alain Lévy**, three-time world champion, remembers: **“We often went to play in China. We always arrived a few days early** to have sufficient time to get acquainted with the place, to deal with the jet lag.” During the entire competition, too, it is important to maintain a healthy lifestyle. **“For me, a dinner without wine is not a dinner. But during a competition, it is forbidden to drink!”**, recognizes the player who declares “to enter into religion” when the tournament begins. For this regular guest at big championships this means every day **the same bedtime, the same wake-up time, the same breakfast** and, before going to play, a long energizing walk. Rituals that allow him to stay in his bubble. “If my wife also comes (she is also a top class player who has been a member of the French Women’s team) she knows I won’t talk to her,” he warns, **“I have to stay focused on bridge, and nothing else”**.

Baptiste Combescure on the other hand needs **to have breaks** during a championship, to think about something other than bridge. The young champion therefore allows himself some “getaways”: **“When I’m not playing, I will go for a swim or I connect to social networks and read messages of encouragement.** But in any case, I avoid watching the other matches.”

Others take revitalizing naps when they sit out a match; this is the case of **Michel Bessis** who played a large number of international matches in his life: **“Between two matches, I will lie down, like that I get all my energy back”**. For him, no need for long speeches to be at his best, but he has a motto that he repeated over and over to the French women’s team when he was their captain for the first time: **“No sun, no rosé”**.



What is the average number of cards a participant must measure during an event?

The answer is 30,000 cards!

A team effort

And because bridge is not played alone, the preparation is not solo either. The right understanding within the pair is essential. Discussions, fine-tuning – **you have to know the strengths and weaknesses of your partner** in order to best react in the best possible way when faced with difficulties.



“One is not there to prove that one is stronger than the other, one must not have an overly developed ego. It therefore requires a lot of personal and psychological work beforehand”, explains Baptiste Combescure.



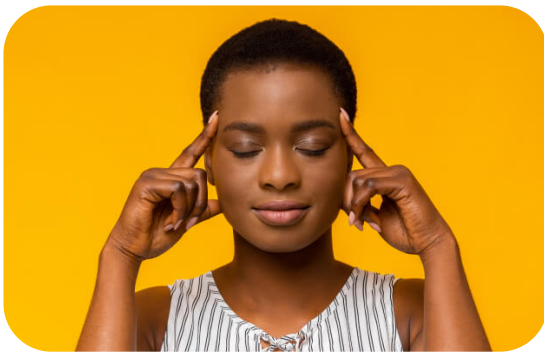
Sometimes the pressure is too great, and anger bursts around the table. **Alain Lévy** admits: **“I have sometimes been so angry that once my partner wanted to leave in the middle of a match”**. Fortunately, the captain was there to get them back on the right track. With reassuring words and encouragement, **the “team leader”** makes sure that in general there is a good atmosphere. **An essential element for victory.**

Michel Bessis, captain for many years, knows it well: **“As captain, you must know each member of your team well. This requires listening, availability, you**

must do everything to ensure that your players are at their best. For example, if you know that a player has difficulty sleeping, you let him play at the start of the championship, when he is well rested."



Once installed at the table, a player is alone with his cards. **The pressure rises, "the hands become sweaty, the heart accelerates", describes Alain Lévy,** who admits to being sensitive to stress. And he is not alone. **Everyone has their own "little trick" to calm down,** you notice this quickly at the start of the match. There are those who get up to **walk around their chair,** those who rapidly **get a glass of water,** those who **close their eyes.** **Alain Lévy** prefers to go outside and shout to "evacuate". **Cédric Lorenzini** is more discreet; he uses methods acquired during sophrology sessions. **Especially breathing exercises** that regulate his condition. "



"At the start of a match and later in the key moments **you have to be both very excited and very calm at the same time.** This is not easy and you have to know how to manage it all", describes the young player who has refined his methods over time to keep control over himself.

However, the feeling of being in control can be achieved in a more abstract way, as for **Sylvie Willard** who is attentive to the general atmosphere: **"I don't know if I am superstitious but if the match goes well, I want nothing to move.** If there are five people watching, these five people must stay in their places. I don't move either; I don't even go to the bathroom. Nothing must be changed

to the atmosphere of the moment, to what makes it work." By keeping things exactly the way they are she feels reassured.



What is the average duration of an international bridge championship?

The duration of the competition varies from 8 to 15 days, at a rate of 8 hours of daily play, it is a real sports marathon.

Like a pro



Amateur players can benefit greatly from these simple tips for healthy living and playing. If you want to apply them, you need **to pay attention to your own strengths and weaknesses, establish routines** from your own experience, **analyze your state of mind** before and during a tournament: *when do I play best? Why did I feel good at the table?* Then try to reconstruct these favorable conditions in each match.

Faced with greater challenges, **professional players are now deploying other means**. Michel Abécassis, a brilliant player of both bridge and poker, elected to get some help to improve his performances. For more than ten years **he has worked with a coach, Pier Gauthier**. The former professional tennis coach made him realize the importance of the "present" during a match. "When we play bridge, we tend to project ourselves, either towards victory or defeat. However, we must focus all our strength on the moment. For example, if there are two deals left, we quickly want to finish, to know the result. We lose focus when in reality we have to play each deal with the same intensity", he explains. In other words, and in the words of his coach, **"you should not have any impressions about the end result"**, on the contrary "you just have to stay

focused on what is happening.” Especially since bridge is a slow game, “it gives you time to let your mind wander”.

It is in those moments, **“when you think about your mistakes”**, when your attention wanders off, that you can lose the match. **Pier Gauthier** works on all this with his clients during discussion sessions: “I try to make people who come to see me aware that their success is not in the hand of God, that **they can control their emotional state and thus always be at 100% of their capacity.**”



For him, **a great champion is a good technician** who “manages to mobilize the right resources at the right time”.

And for that, you have to be trained to **“think positively”**, to not be overwhelmed by doubt. **Cédric Lorenzini** has practiced a lot to **“fix positive ideas”**. Where the novice lets himself be overcome by **a negative emotion**, the champion knows how to evacuate it quickly. “Good mental preparation allows you to know how to mobilize your own resources quickly and, with training and experience, this becomes automatic”, explains **Pier Gauthier**.

There is no doubt about this for **Michel Abécassis**: “Mental preparation is just as important as technique.” To support his conviction, he takes the great American bridge champion **Bob Hamman** as an example: “He is perhaps not the strongest in technique but he is exceptionally concentrated. **This allows him to make the difference**”.

An observation shared by **François**

Fel, a player since he was fifteen and a professional coach:

“Preparation is not taken seriously enough in bridge and that is a shame. Because the mind is like a muscle, you have to exercise it. This should not be overlooked.” **In other “disciplines of the mind”, mental coaching is even institutionalized.** In

poker, each player has his coach. But in bridge as well things are changing **Michel Abécassis** observes: "The new generations are more and more open to the question of mental preparation. It is a good thing for the future of bridge."



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What is the purpose of mental preparation?

François Fel, professional coach and bridge player, is the author of "*Mental Advantage, how to program your brain to win*". During the last world championships, he was the mental coach for **the French women's team**. A first for these players.



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**Avantage Mental, programmer son cerveau pour gagner by François Fel. ebook Kindle on Amazon.fr*

- **How did you work with the players of the French Women team?**

The summer before the competition, I sent them exercises. **There was individual work**, but also things to do within pairs. For example, I submitted **a questionnaire to them that included questions about their partner**, which enabled them to engage in discussions about what was left unsaid.

- **What other exercises did you suggest to the players?**

I asked them to put **a rubber band around their wrists** for a day and with every negative idea or thought – mockery and criticism, for example – they

had to snap it. Being aware of the number of negative thoughts is an important first step. **I also gave them lots of breathing exercises because breathing is essential.**

- **What is the purpose of this mental preparation?**

Mental preparation allows you to acquire certain routines that help you perform well. It is about automating techniques that allow you **to be at your best on the day, to focus on the task and to eliminate negative thoughts.** It could for example be repeating a phrase to yourself just before playing, such as: **"I will take on challenges, I will seize opportunities."** The goal is to find a **good emotional state**, the one in which you perform well, even in times of stress. **We are trained to be afraid, it's in our reptilian brain,** so we have to be able to work on that. **We need emotions, but we also need to know how to generate the right ones at the right time.**

- **How can breathing be an ally?**

Breathing exercises help to regulate your heart rate. If you want to slow your heart down in stressful times when the heart races, you have to exhale longer than you inhale: **six seconds of exhaling for four seconds of inhaling.** Conversely, if you want to get energized, you breathe in longer than you exhale.

The 6 commandments for a bridge player during a competition



1- Have a balanced diet before and during the tournament.



2- Arrive perfectly rested



3- Have an open dialog with your partner before the tournament.



4- Repeat "positive" phrases to yourself just before the match.



5- Do breathing exercises just before the match.



6- Be in the present, do not dwell on your mistakes.

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