

Build Your Club with New Products

By Marti & Gary Ronemus & Ed Scanlon

Each year we try to introduce a new product for our customers...our players. The goal is to help our club grow and offer more choices for our customers. In 2005 we introduced Bridge Boardroom University, a once-a-month all-day event, including a workshop and a triple-masterpoint game. We slipped in 2006—nothing new! So in 2007 we started two new products. Each has turned out to be a winner, and it seems time to share the ideas.

Saturday Night Special. Over the years, we've tried to get a Saturday night game going, with very little success. But we noticed that when we had a theme party or something special on the occasional Saturday night, we had great attendance. Hmmm. So we put our heads together, brainstormed, and came up with a formula that has created an event that grows each month.

Saturday Night Special combines a family-style comfort food dinner with a Fund game that pays almost triple masterpoints. Our guests arrive around 5:30 so they can enjoy the appetizers before game time at 6 p.m. The pre-game snack table is usually pretty basic...bologna & cheese, veggies, dip, and some pre-made frozen treats that are served hot, like egg rolls, or piggies in blankets.

After about three rounds, we stop for dinner. Experimentation proved that our folks enjoy the party more when the courses are spread throughout the evening, rather than eating the entire meal first and then playing the game.

Dinner is true comfort food. We've had Chicken a la King on Toast Points (remember that?), Homemade Macaroni and Cheese, Spaghetti and Meatballs, and other dishes like mom used to make. We serve each meal with a nice bread or homemade Cornbread (you haven't lived till you have Ed's homemade cornbread) and a huge salad with Boardroom Secret Salad Dressing.

Then they play another three rounds and, if their partners feel they deserve it, people can hit the dessert table. Our dessert is always homemade and something home-y rather than fancy bakery. We've had bread pudding with caramel brandy sauce, Chocolate Pumpkin Squares with whipped cream, Apple Pie Cake...well, you get the idea.

Our goal is to create a family environment, with food we ate around the table with people we care about. One thing for sure...no one goes home hungry, and the masterpoints are HUGE!!

We usually have enough people that we must divide the group in two: Non-life masters, and Open. We guarantee a partner with no notice.

This has become a fixed date on many of our players' schedules. We have people coming from almost 1-1/2 hours away, and we have a group who make it a monthly treat, staying overnight and playing in our two Sunday games.

We staffers enjoy this event a lot...we get to watch our folks enjoy themselves and take part in some very competitive bridge. What could be better?

Hour of Power!! We have two workshops for beginners a week usually, but we needed something for our more advanced and intermediate players. Again, some staff brainstorming: We wanted something different, something that would appeal to those not attending our other classes.

We chose an hour-long format at 11 a.m. on a day where we serve lunch at noon, before a 12:30 Open Strat game. That way, the players can attend Hour of Power, have a free lunch and stay to play. We offer a discount for the afternoon game for lesson attendees.

The lesson goals for HOP are a little different: We want to help players enhance their ability to count hands and visualize where opponent cards are. And we want to refresh playing skills, and focus on creative defense.

Here's how it works: We pick four hands with a common theme, usually hands from Eddie Kantar or from the many books of expert hand analysis in our library. Before looking at the hands, the instructor calls out the bids. "South opens 1♥. What do we know about that hand?" "Next, West overcalls 3♣. What does West hold?" By the end of the bidding, the students have figured out as closely as possible what is held in each hand. Then the instructor tells the opening leader what card to lead and we discuss what story the opening lead tells. Still, no one has seen a hand! Now the dummy comes down and we discuss if it has what we expect from the bidding.

If the hand is meant to be a declarer puzzle, the declarer now reveals his hand, and we discuss if it is what we pictured. We then develop a line of play with a backup (if likely to be needed), based on what we expect defenders to hold, based on the lead and the bidding.

Only then are all hands revealed. We discuss if the plan will work.

If it is a Defender hand, after the dummy comes down, one of the defender hand comes down (is it a third hand puzzle? A signal puzzle?) and a similar discussion is held. Is the hand what was expected? What should the defense plan be based on the bidding and the opening lead? Then all four hands are faced and a discussion about whether the plan was workable or not.

We do a hand every 15 minutes. It's a challenge to keep to the time, as discussions can get very long. The instructor has to remember that it's not so much a class about bidding, but rather what inferences can be gained to enable players to count hands.

The hands aren't played, so it is possible to keep it to 15 minutes a hand.

We start exactly on time and end on time...very high energy!

Feedback from players has been very gratifying. They tell us that they are benefiting from visualizing what the hands are from the bidding rather than deciding what to bid with the hand. The emphasis is just different enough that it makes them think in a slightly different way.

At the end of class each person gets a handout of the four hands, with the complete analysis.

If anyone would like help with either of these ideas, we welcome you to contact us at mronemus@comcast.net or by going to our website, www.bridgeboardroom.com and using the contact links.

Julie! If you decide to run this, in any form you want, I'd like to make sure Ed Scanlon is introduced. He joined the Boardroom staff in March of '06, with absolutely no bridge knowledge or experience. At the end of '06, he was 11th in the nation in the Ace of Clubs and 13th in the Mini-McKinney (I might have that backwards). He's now a terrific director also. (Sometimes people call in to see if Ed is directing...they love his games.) He is bringing all kinds of fresh ideas to Gary and me...and after 12 years he and I need it. He is doing all our cooking (we serve roughly 200 meals a week—thank heavens not everyone eats, or we couldn't afford the free meals!) and his soups are legendary.