"The bridge world's a rat race," says Kehela. "Many tournament players aren't the best types. They're not too sociable, very intense"

The trick that turned Sam Kehala (north) and Eric Murray (south) into the world's toughest bridge partnership

BY ALAN EDMONDS

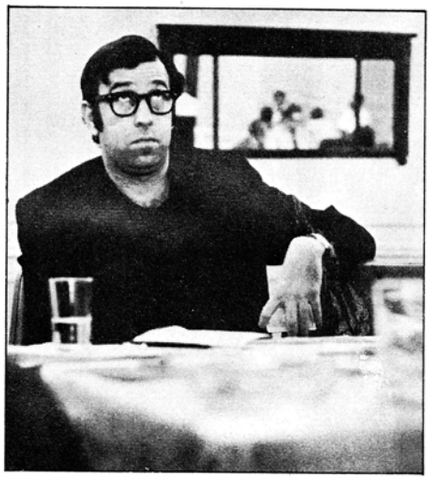
IN ALL THE ENDEAVORS of man there are those who transcend the merely brilliant and become so outstanding that when most of us measure our efforts against theirs we despair. When doing whatever it is they do so surpassingly well, such people have a charisma, an electricity, about them. Arnold Palmer on the golf course has it. Or Nancy Greene on a slalom slope; Sir Laurence Olivier on stage; Glenn Gould at the piano. Bobby Orr is such a person. Stirling Moss used to be; Rod Laver is. Hemingway was; Sammy Kehela and Eric Murray are.

Kehela and Murray are possibly the best bridge partnership in the world. But Canada, and more particularly hometown Toronto, rarely sees this magic because Kehela and Murray devote most of their time to the international bridge circuit. But there was, briefly, a demonstration of this surpassing, electrifying excellence at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto in August, at a relatively undistinguished tournament staged by the Ontario Bridge Federation.

Murray, the affluent amateur, had agreed to join a team competing in the knockout event. Alone, and without a partner really worthy of him, he was an attraction. But on the second day of the four-day tournament — a Friday — he couldn't play, so Kehela sat in for him. Then, at half time for the session, Murray appeared. The teammate with whom Kehela had been playing, somewhat lackadaisically, relinquished his chair. Murray sat. "Well, how many have you put us down, Kehela?" he said. Suddenly an anteroom away from the hall where 600 merely first-class players were competing in the Ontario sectional bridge tournament, an event of the third rank, came alive. Suddenly, the Kehela-Murray table was surrounded by a score or more of people. Suddenly, there was an excitement. Suddenly, the opponents — two young men, students perhaps — became relaxed, rueful almost, knowing what would happen. Suddenly, there was that tangible air of heightened awareness that, even if you can't play and don't comprehend what's going on, makes the back of your neck tingle. Rod Laver on the centre court at Wimbledon . . . Gould at the piano . . . Moss at Le Mans . . . Kehela and Murray at the bridge table.

Sammy Kehela, 35, bachelor, born in Iraq but Jewish in origin; raised in India, partly educated in California and now very Canadian. Medium height (five-foot-10½) and now slightly paunching; a bridge professional, the nearest thing to a glamour boy on the big-league bridge tournament circuit, and the one they call Black Sam because black is all he ever wears as he slumps at the tables, usually silent and sometimes sardonic, functioning — as one aficionado puts it — like a computer . . .

Eric Murray, Q.C., 41; father of three, as WASP as Rosedale; pillar of several impeccably Establishment clubs; well-tailored over a glowing patina of flesh that signals health and wealth; gregarious, affable almost, except that there's usually a bite to his words; idol of the matrons as he sits ramrod straight opposite slumped and rumpled and fidgety Kehela, matching his partner's mathematical precision with the kind of play you might more readily find at the poker table . . .



An improbable partnership that has endured and matured during an almost unprecedented 11 years and lofted both men — and Canada — to eminence in the rarefied world of international tournament bridge. Bridge is a pairs game, a game in which there remains a considerable element of luck and no single Canadian, U.S., or North American championship match. Players' status depends on a passionate consensus among experts. They would say Kehela and Murray, who both long ago accumulated the 300 individual points needed to become Life Masters of the American Contract Bridge League, are at least among the world's top four partnerships.

Considered individually, there seems to be a little less doubt: Kehela, say an overwhelming number of bridge experts who would themselves like to be top dog, may be the best in the world. Murray is sure of it. Tournament organizers pay Kehela expenses to travel half-way round the world to play in their events. Of the 40 million North Americans (about four million of them Canadians) who play bridge, increasing numbers are on the youthful side of the generation gap and among them are girls who swoon at the thought of playing with Kehela. "Many to whom the game means a lot would give a great deal just to play with Sammy Kehela," says Dianna Gordon, who has played for Canada.

The passion with which some people embrace bridge is most visible in the three main levels of tournament — sectional (like the one at the Royal York), regional and national; that is, North American. All annually break player and attendance records — and yet there's no money in it: the prizes are just the winning and, perhaps, some master points. From the ladies who play politely and long at suburban bridge clubs, through to national tournaments drawing 5,000 or more contestants, the degree of dedication is awesome.

Kehela calls the tournament-bridge world "unhealthy." It is populated to a large degree by social disasters: people who, because of an indefinable aptitude for a game that is a cross between chess and poker, can find a niche in which their playing is the yardstick of acceptance, not wealth or social graces.

"There are people at bridge tournaments and clubs who would not be acceptable in other clubs or forms of competition because their manners are unacceptable," says Murray, whose manners are impeccable. Dianna Gordon, a willowy and startlingly attractive brunette who flirted with big-league bridge for a few years, says that most tournament bridge players are egomaniacs. In a milieu of affluence, aging and boredom, the fascination of bridge can become for some a raging fever. "There are many people unable to cope with normal everyday behavior who have found a place in the bridge world," says Kehela.

"One guy in the masters' pairs at the nationals . . . they call him The Whale. He must be 400, maybe 450 pounds. He must have started out fat, discovered that in bridge appearance isn't important — and let himself go.

"He is an exception, admittedly. But many people you meet in tournaments are not the best types. It's a rat race, and the people in it are single-minded, intense people, not as sociable as the average. They tend to be totally dedicated."

The dedication can be imagined even by those who play only contract bridge, the game of our living rooms. Kehela says it should be like driving: just as no husband should try teaching his wife to drive, so no man should play bridge with his wife — but the duplicate bridge played at tournaments is manifestly more demanding and more corrosive of human relationships.

Kehela says tournament bridge partnerships are "a marriage in miniature." The more voluble Murray says that "like most marriages, partnerships in bridge have troubles but usually the cement isn't strong enough to hold. The tensions of playing in a tournament that may last 10 days are hard for an outsider to conceive. The object is to avoid disasters, and of course they happen and it's easy to blame your partner for them and stay lily-white yourself. That's one of the advantages of the game."

It's an advantage neither Kehela nor Murray has taken. Their partnership has survived largely because of what Murray describes as a tacit agreement not to talk bridge hands, at least at the table at which they were played, and a minimal social contact outside the tournament circuit. They also spend much of their time cheerfully insulting one another — "Dumbo," says Eric. "Diamonds," Kehela observes pointedly, "are red and have four corners."

Other partnerships are less durable. There is one evil-tempered tournament player in Canada who had difficulty getting a partner since, on losing a session, he not only roundly abused his partner — a commonplace occurrence — but also clobbered him over the head with the aluminum duplicate board, which

contained the hand they had just played.

Even to good contract bridge players the duplicate board of tournament bridge is an unknown quantity. In the team game, in which players of the Kehela-Murray calibre are more often engaged, every competing team plays out the same 13-card hands. One pair is north-south; the other east-west. Each team has a pair playing in each position. While the north-south pair of one team may be playing a bridge hand in one room, their teammates may be defending against the same hand next door. And each hand comes from a duplicate board, or card shoe, which contains the predealt cards.

And so, unlike the living-room social players, no one man is simply playing the cards before him. He must make sure that, if he plays the cards, he is getting the most points possible out of the hand.

A social bridge player, even one who has read all the approved books, would not understand what is happening at a Kehela - Murray tournament table. Like all top players their bids — one heart; three spades; and so on — are part of an incredibly complex series of codes and conventions that, in Kehela's case, are based on the actuarial possibilities involved in the value and distribution of the cards held by himself, his partner and their opponents. The odds involved are calculated with a precision that would terrify even top-notch social bridge players.

And since the hands to be played are predetermined and played by every competitor, Kehela and Murray know they are always playing in the same game — so far as the cards are concerned — that their partners are playing, or have played. If they do not make at least as many points as the opponents of the other pair on their team next door, or do not cause their own opponents to lose more than their teammates lost in playing the same cards, then it's the team that's down, not the partner. And what *did* their partners do? They never know. All they do know is that the aggregate points gained or lost in the game they are playing will be weighed against the points made by every other partnership. If they made more points with the same cards than any other pair, they win. And then the results of the other pair on their team may cost them a place in the sun. Or win them one.

The tensions are, therefore, great. The preoccupation is with the cards to be played, not the opponents. In the North American nationals at Boston in July — one of three major North American events each year — Kehela and Murray at one point played against a team that included the nearly blind player who had been successful at the world championships a few weeks earlier. Kehela congratulated him. The man's partner snarled: "Why don't you ask him about his family? His grandchildren? Discuss the weather, why don't you? *We're only playing bridge.*"

And once Murray and his partner changed tables while heatedly debating the way they had played a hand; sat down to a new duplicate board; played one hand — and then the woman on Murray's left said: "Isn't it time you said 'Hello'?" It was his mother. He hadn't noticed her.

The tensions produce conflicts. In the U.S., many years ago, a woman whipped out a gun and shot her husband after a badly played hand. International matches — in which the world is divided into zones; North America, Europe and so on — have been disrupted by fistfights between partners, and on one occasion by a man ending a session by calmly emptying a full ashtray over his opponent's head.

Kehela's name is a household word to a large slice of North America and his income is mostly from writing about bridge, or teaching it for sums, he says, that "are higher than most people in Canada charge, but a lot less than fees in America, which can be anything from $50 to $100 a lesson." (Bridge insiders guess his income to be somewhere between $4,000 and $8,000 a year; how he gets along on so little remains a mystery.)

One leading U.S. bridge professional makes an estimated $50,000 a year, mostly from teaching — and Charles Goren became a millionaire from writing and promoting his point-count system, which was actuarially calculated by a Toronto insurance company president, William Anderson, of North American Life. For a bridge pro, the money is in the U.S. But Kehela is too lazy to promote himself as Goren has. And, having come to Canada in 1957 via India, California, Jamaica and Britain, he refuses to move south.

"I don't like Americans as a group. They're too aggressive and money-hungry for me," he says. Canada he likes because it is a compromise between Europe and America — "and I'm even growing chauvinistic; somehow I always seem to play better in the bridge Olympiad when there are *national* teams, not regional ones, and when I'm playing for Canada, not North America." Largely because Kehela and Murray have played in all three of the Olympiads, which are held every four years, Canada has done rather better in world bridge than in most sports. In 1962 Canada was fourth; in 1968, third. The bridge community is now beginning to prepare for the Olympiad of 1972, which has no connection with the athletic

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Olympics. About 40 nations will be represented. Kehela and Murray will automatically play, but others on the team will have to win a play-off tournament. They could include Percy Sheardown, aging but for years Mr. Bridge in Canada.

Kehela and Murray do not appear in tournaments as often as many top players, largely because Murray is a busy lawyer and hasn't the time. Occasionally Kehela plays with other partners. Both men might more demonstrably deserve the title "the world's best" if they played in more tournaments. Even so, Murray has won a place on the North American team for the world championship three times in six years — and since 1965, Kehela has always either played with him or been team coach. A few years ago, when the North American team was defeated by the Italian team, Kehela and Murray were voted by their peers to be the best individual partnership.

Anyway, Kehela says he is growing disenchanted with tournament bridge. One day recently he sat in his one-bedroom apartment in Toronto's Forest Hill beneath a 24-by-48-inch blowup of his idol, Humphrey Bogart, and described the big national tournament this way:

"More and more people are playing bridge — young people particularly — and among them are those who want to win at any activity. It's at the tournament that they try to do so.

"It's a hard life, because the hours are long. It's even physically exhausting, sitting playing for perhaps 10 hours a day under great tension. And the crowds make it a madhouse. There are anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 people at a national. You line up to get into the coffee shop; you line up for the john. In Chicago in 1965 they even had policemen directing traffic *inside the hotel.* Everywhere you go — elevator, barbershop, parties — people talk nothing but bridge, and bridge hands.

"Playing, the tables are crammed in so there's barely room to walk. It's smoky and noisy, with people protesting to the directors all the time over some technical infraction of the rules. You play with people who have bad habits and it's all damned uncomfortable. If I were 10 years younger it wouldn't matter, but it's started to get on my nerves. I'll play in fewer tournaments now."

Or was this disenchantment just a fit of temperament?

Later the same day Eric Murray sat in his gracious home in one of the wealthier parts of Toronto, worried about chlorinating his swimming pool and explained: "Look, right now Sammy's in a snit. The dumbo gets very moody after a tournament if we don't win everything in sight. And we've just played in the Boston national and our team lost to a team of young players. He's just overbridged."

Perhaps. He has been playing since his university days at Berkeley when he discovered the game. First he played socially; then he found he could make a few dollars a day (which he needed because he was broke) playing for a fraction of a cent a point. And then, it was an intensely competitive game at which he could excel. "Look, I was 17 and a runt, complete with acne, and I was — am — intensely competitive. But I couldn't compete in more active sports there because I was too small for football and they didn't play cricket, tennis or soccer, the games I'd grown up playing quite well in India."

Later, as a dropout, he was shunted into the family's Caribbean-based scrap-metal firm and sent to be trained in Britain. But since his apprenticeship involved hauling scrap about and he felt neither physically nor temperamentally equipped for it, he quit "and started playing bridge, which I enjoyed and was good at."

A couple of years after his arrival in Canada, he began playing with Murray who had also begun playing in university and whose then tournament partner had gone to California. Both are now slightly surprised it has lasted so long.

Murray may never have been as passionately involved in the game as his peers on the tournament circuit, though he, too, says he took up the game partly because he was too clumsy to be competitive at more customary sports. Kehela, on the other hand, was apparently once as neurotically dedicated as anyone. And both mourn the fact that they no longer enjoy social bridge. They are now too good to enjoy it, except against those good enough to challenge their skill.

Perhaps he was, as Murray had put it, "overbridged," but after that brief spurt of play at the Royal York, Kehela said: "To a certain extent, bridge has become hard work. When I was young there were many worlds to conquer and I was always improving. Well, now I've won my share and I've reached a plateau — in fact, I'll probably start slipping soon.

"Oh, there's still a thrill when we win. But it's not as important any more. It's not like the first woman — not that kind of thrill any more. Why go on? Well, what else would I do. Be a clerk in an insurance company?"

Those people who excel, whose performance when doing what they do so well can make your spine tingle with excitement . . . those people pay for their magic. □