

[The following interview, conducted by John Carruthers, appeared in *The DORBITZER*, a tongue-in-cheek section of the *Ontario Kibitzer*, in 1979]

**DOR:** What were the circumstances of your beginning to play bridge?

**SRK:** As you may know, I was going to school at the University of California at Berkeley . . .

**DOR:** Were you a Berkeley radical?

**SRK:** This was in the pre-radical years. In my second year, I went to the common room and saw some people playing a game that vaguely resembled Solo, which I had watched my father play when I was six or seven. I watched and became interested. There was the added stimulation that they were playing for money. If one played diligently, and well, and held cards, one could make as much as \$2 a day, which one could practically live on in 1952.

**DOR:** What were the stakes?

**SRK:** One twentieth of a cent a point.

**DOR:** What were you studying at university?

**SRK:** English and Economics, mostly English.

**DOR:** What happened then? Did you go straight to London?

**SRK:** I left California in 1955. I was in Jamaica for a few months and then I went to England and played there seriously for a couple of years. By that time, I'd become a reasonably good player.

**DOR:** Why did you start playing competitively?

**SRK:** I started playing duplicate in California because rubber bridge was not sufficiently stimulating and because one couldn't play with one's favourite partner.

**DOR:** Do you still get as much enjoyment out of the game as you did then . . .?

**SRK:** No.

**DOR:** I guess that's as unequivocal as can be. Have you ever worked for a living?

- SRK:** Yes, sporadically. I don't want to go into the nature of that work but it was all quite legal and legitimate, but it wasn't something one would want to make one's life's work.
- DOR:** Why do you live in Toronto?
- SRK:** When I first came to Canada, I intended to live in Montreal, but when I found the French influence and language somewhat oppressing, I came on to Toronto. I had intended to finish school here – I hadn't graduated from Berkeley – but then I developed terminal torpor and it became too much for me. I like Toronto I have a lot of friends here. I don't see that it has any serious disadvantages apart from the weather. There's no place else I'd rather live right now. There are some places I'd rather live if I wanted to go on holiday or retire – like the South of France.
- DOR:** There would be a certain French influence in the South of France.
- SRK:** Admittedly, but the wines can be particularly seductive.
- DOR:** What do you do when you are not playing bridge?
- SRK:** I've furthered my interest in wine, which is abetted by some of my close associates, whose knowledge of the subject is not inconsiderable. I read. I like films. Nothing monumental. Just relaxing.
- DOR:** 

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Did you have a bridge idol in your youth?
- SRK:** Yes, in my formative years I would have to say it was Terence Reese.
- DOR:** 

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Are you aware that you are in turn idolized by some of today's youth?
- SRK:** It's certainly flattering.
- DOR:** How long have you been playing with Eric Murray?
- SRK:** Twenty years – for my sins.
- DOR:** Have you ever gotten angry with him?
- SRK:** Yes.
- DOR:** At the table?
- SRK:** Not so much recently, but I did at the beginning, although I didn't really show it.
- DOR:** So your imperturbability at the table has never cracked?

- SRK:** I just felt it was never profitable to show signs of emotion at the table. Having seen how it affected other partnerships, both at the time and subsequently, it seemed to me that if one felt hostile to one's partner – one sometimes does, if he puts down a dummy completely unrelated to his bidding, for instance – you feel great hate for brief moments, great anger, but they pass – it's better in that situation to say nothing at the table, and wait for a more rational moment when everybody is calm to discuss it. Particularly so with Eric, because he's so sensitive, and I suppose I am too, so it wouldn't do to show undue emotion.
- DOR:** Is this something you learned from Reese.
- SRK:** Reese was completely imperturbable. He never showed any sign of emotion. He'd sometimes make the odd cutting remark, in a sort of humourous vein. When he played with Schapiro, they had an understanding about it, and it kept them fairly loose. I would say that most of the tournament players in England, when I played, hardly ever exchanged any words with each other at the table, which was a revelation to me when I first went there. In America, people rant and rave at each other, at least they used to; perhaps they're not as bad now, but the top tournament players in England – whether because of their British background or whatever – hardly ever said anything. Except to apologize.
- DOR:** What do you think you gained, either from Reese or from your stay in England?
- SRK:** I never really learned much from Reese. The person I really learned a great deal from was Adam Meredith. He was not what you'd call a classic bidder – he was in the auction on every hand and was infatuated with the spade suit – he bid spades all the time, whether he had them or not. He was a great card player. He had to be because of the contracts he reached. I used to watch him in the late night games at Lederer's Club.
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- DOR:** What do you feel about the methods you and Murray play. How have they helped or hindered?
- SRK:** In the first place we are the last of the Neanderthals. There's no question that our methods are antiquated. That we do as well as we do in the circumstances has not necessarily anything to do with our system, but with judgment and certain native skills. Our methods are somewhat slapdash – they were serviceable in the days when everyone was bidding by the seat of his pants, but I would have to agree that our methods are certainly not the best.
- DOR:** Have you ever considered switching to a strong club system?
- SRK:** I have, but you have to go through a great period of study together. I suppose, if we were younger, we might, but one, having played together for so long it's difficult to change, and two, we're not so desperately bad that we need to change. We could improve marginally perhaps, after a period of initiation during which time one's results would not be so good. We just don't spend as much time at the game as we used to.
- DOR:** Do you ever psych?

- SRK:** Yes, but not frequently. In fact, very, very rarely.
- DOR:** What form do your psychs take?
- SRK:** Am I to give up my edge in Ontario tournaments? Generally either an ultra-light opening bid in third position or a fake cue-bid with no control in the suit.
- DOR:** Does never having won a World Championship rankle?
- SRK:** Yes, but not as much as with Eric. I feel I'm as good as many people who have won World Championships, and in addition our timing has been bad. The few times we played, we played against the Blue Team at its peak, when they were unbeatable.
- DOR:** Do you still hope to win one?
- SRK:** I hope to, but I think our chances are receding, because we just don't play as much.
- DOR:** In 1980, for the first time since 1968, you and Eric will not be automatic selections for Canada's Olympiad team. How do you feel about that?
- SRK:** It's certainly reasonable to hold open trials. The only thing that bothers me is that I don't like to devote as much time to bridge as the trials demand. It seems to me, more and more, that you have to start off by beating all the players in your apartment building, and then all the people on your street, and so on, all the way up to provincial and national trials. I would prefer to have a National Tournament such as they have in America, a Vanderbilt or Spingold type of event. Twenty years ago I would have been delighted, but right now it's rather more time than I wish to spend.
- DOR:** Will you play in the trials? If so, with whom?
- SRK:** Probably. As they say in diplomatic circles, negotiations are at a sensitive stage.
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- DOR:** Do you think that team trials are an appropriate method of selection for Canada?
- SRK:** Definitely not. There are great distances to cover and people who are limited by economic circumstances might not necessarily be available at all times to participate in various stages of the trials. It's difficult to play on the team of your choice – especially if it crosses provincial boundaries. For these reasons I think in Canada you might be better off with a pairs trials.
- DOR:** Has a pairs trials ever been held to determine our Olympiad team?
- SRK:** It has, for the 1964 Olympiad.

- DOR:** Now that Canada will have a team in the North American Bermuda Bowl Trials, how would you assess our chances of eventually winning the Bermuda Bowl?
- SRK:** I would think they're excellent. There are a lot of good, keen young players now. While we don't have the sheer numbers to draw from that America does, we do have a fairly large number of good players coming along and it's just a matter of time.
- DOR:** Do you ever play professionally?
- SRK:** I've played a couple of times.
- DOR:** Why not more often?
- SRK:** There aren't the opportunities that there are in Canada.
- DOR:** Have you had any offers from out-of-town sponsors such as the Aces or the Precision Team?
- SRK:** When the Aces were first forming they called me up to join them, but I was not disposed to do that. I didn't want to make bridge my whole life. I've had one or two offers from American sponsors in the past; not in recent years, though.
- DOR:** What about the Precision team?
- SRK:** When CC Wei was forming his first Precision team, Dick Frey was in charge of rounding up a team for him. He approached me about forming a partnership with Victor Mitchell, but I declined. As I say, I didn't want to give bridge such prominence in my life, and in any case I didn't want to start forming new partnerships in the afternoon of my bridge existence. I was perfectly happy playing with Eric.
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- DOR:** Would accepting either of those offers have meant the end of your partnership with Murray?
- SRK:** Yes, there is no question of that.
- DOR:** What caused the breakup between you and Murray and Hamman-Wolff?
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- SRK:** Well, I think it's fair to say that they split with us. We first started playing with them in the North American Trials of 1973. They needed a third pair to play with them and Goldman-Blumenthal. They asked us to join the team (the Aces). I'd taken a hiatus from bridge for about a year and wasn't particularly keen to start playing again, but I finally agreed.
- DOR:** Was Murray in favour of it?

**SRK:** Oh yes. Eric almost always wants to play. Bridge is a form of relaxation for him, whereas since I play almost every day it's not imperative that I spend all my free time playing bridge. In any event, we did play, we played well, and won, and we got along quite well. Then we lost the World Championship (again), although this time it was very close – going into the final session we were about a dozen IMPs behind. Our subsequent results together were not, I thought, as good as they might have been, considering the amount of talent there was on the team. Neither pair was at its best. Then, finally, we lost some event by 1 IMP in the quarterfinals and the next thing I knew they'd latched onto somebody else.

**DOR:** That would have been the Vanderbilt in Pasadena in 1977.

**SRK:** It could have been. We lost to somebody called Rainwater. I regret it because I like them both very well and they were good teammates. There were never any recriminations and they were always very sympathetic. But the law of natural selection applies to bridge as well.

**DOR:** There was a situation a few years back when you and Murray were replaced on the North American team by Kaplan and Kay . . .

**SRK:** That's not what happened. It was the year that America was to have two teams, the Defenders and the Trials winners. It was to be in Taiwan. We had qualified to play in the Trials with Rapee-Lazard and Kaplan-Kay. There were four teams in the Trials and we lost our semifinal match to Mathe's team, and then Mathe went on to win by beating Ira Rubin's team. Mathe was a four-man team with, I think, Krauss, Walsh, and Swanson. At that time, Mathe, Eric, and I got along reasonably well, and after we lost Mathe said, "It's okay, don't worry about a thing, we're going to win and pick you and Eric." They were, however, definitely underdogs to the Rubin team and had to come from behind to win by a narrow margin. I was very happy, both for them, and also selfishly. I picked up the New York Times the following day and saw that Kaplan-Kay had been added. So we weren't replaced, we just were not selected. I think that Mathe just had a change of heart. Kaplan was on the scene. They had a team meeting and in the general warmth that follows close upon the heels of a dramatic victory, they chose Kaplan-Kay.

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**DOR:** How did you like the New Orleans World Championship in 1978?

**SRK:** I thought it was very enjoyable even though we did not do well in the Pairs. It was very well run. The perpetual Swiss Teams (Rosenblum Cup) is a good idea. The only thing I objected to was that some of the early matches were 16 boards. You had to win one of two very short matches to continue in the Knockout and you could be at the mercy of luck (although we had a good run). ut I guess with such a large number of teams it was inevitable. These days anybody can win a 16-board match.

**DOR:** What did you think of the Summer Nationals here in Toronto?

**SRK:** I thought that (as I thought in 1964 when they were last here) it was the best Summer Nationals ever. The size of it was an indication that everybody else

thought so too. However, it certainly would have been more enjoyable had we done better in the Spingold.

**DOR:** What's your favourite tournament?

**SRK:** My favourites are the European tournaments, without a doubt. I would say that the old Monte Carlo tournament the way it used to be set up a few years ago was my favourite tournament, both in terms of playing conditions and Monte Carlo itself. The Hotel de Paris, where we stayed, was magnificent, and also the fact we were invited guests of the tournament made it pleasant. But it is no longer set up the same way, so right now the tournament I look forward to the most is Deauville, which is held in July. That's where they have the Tournament of Champions for four invited teams, who play on Vugraph in the evenings.

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**DOR:** You did not go to the Sunday Times Invitational in London this year. Why not?

**SRK:** The Sunday Times is an expensive tournament. They pay nothing toward your expenses. It's a prestigious tournament, but one doesn't always wish to spend upwards of a thousand dollars for a weekend's bridge. I went the previous year because I had other compelling motives, namely that my parents, who I had not seen in some time, live in London. It's certainly a desirable tournament to play in, though.

**DOR:** How does bridge in Toronto compare with bridge in other cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, London?

**SRK:** Well, I think that since there are many more bridge players in those other cities it follows that there are more good players there. But, apart from those examples you've chosen, I don't think there are many cities that come to mind which have such a large nucleus of fairly good players as does Toronto. I don't think we necessarily have as many first-class players as say, maybe Rome, but for players just below that first-class level, I think that Toronto is a very strong bridge city.

**DOR:** What do you think can be done to improve the standard both in Toronto and in Canada?

**SRK:** Are you thinking in terms of what the players can do, or what the governing bodies can do?

**DOR:** Both.

**SRK:** Well, from a governing body's point of view I think they have to make it easier for Canadians to compete against each other in important events. At the moment it's just not possible for the reason that we mentioned earlier. I think that the idea that Canadians can now compete in the Bermuda Bowl is a big shot in the arm. I think that will encourage players to form serious partnerships and practice more because there's an important prize suddenly available. As for the players themselves, it's all very well to consider yourself a pretty good card player in Toronto, but if you don't go up and play with the big boys in the major American

tournaments and get your feet wet in the Vanderbilt and Spingold, your experience (which is very important) is limited. You'll be experienced against strong competition, you'll be exposed to other methods of play. I think that's critical. You have to play in the big knockout events and you have to have a partner with whom you're sympathetic and play a system that suits your personalities and intellectual capacities. A great deal of work is involved and some sacrifice. One has to go and play in the strongest possible competition. It's all very well to go out and win the odd Regional Swiss Teams, but it's not the same.

**DOR:** What about the top players such as you and Eric. What can you do?

**SRK:** When I was in London there used to be certain events similar to Pro-Ams, where established players played with budding neophytes in a tournament. These were encouraged by the County, which is equivalent to the province or unit here, and gave the up-and-coming players a chance, and some experience. We don't have that here. In London itself, at Lederer's, they had something called the Coffee House, where once again, prospective good players (I was one of the young players then) would play with experts such as Reese and Meredith about once every two weeks. The format was eight people per table, four playing and four kibitzing. Each kibitzer had a bell, and when, in his opinion, the player he was watching made an error, he rang the bell. If it was conceded to be an error by everyone, then the bell ringer replaced his player. If it was not determined to be an error, then he'd pay a small fine, half-a-crown or something. This provided young players with experience and broadened their horizons.

Here in Toronto I think the IMP League has been a help. I do feel strongly, though, that it's not the men who need help, but the women. They did very well in Monte Carlo, but nevertheless, I don't think we have a great number of good women players in Canada.

**DOR:** How do North American tournaments compare with European ones?

**SRK:** Not favourably. The American tournaments are more intense, by virtue of the nature of the competition. First of all, the team event is important because it qualifies you to play in the Trials. You play two sessions a day for ten days and you're whacked out by the end of the tournament, a nervous wreck. The European tournaments are smaller and are usually held in resort areas, they play only one session per day, and you can lead a normal life as well as play bridge. I suppose when you are young, these privations are not so compelling, but as you get on, and the bridge itself is no longer quite so important, then they become more important. If I stopped going to the Nationals it wouldn't bother me in the least.

**DOR:** What about the ethics of the players? Do you think that they differ at all between North America and Europe?

**SRK:** I don't think so any more. I think the ethical standards are pretty high generally. Certainly there's the odd bad penny wherever you go, but by and large the ethics are excellent.

**DOR:** Who do you think is currently the best player in the world?



**SRK:** Murray.

**DOR:** And the best partnership?

**SRK:** I really don't have any strong opinions on that. If you'd asked me a few years ago I'd have said Forquet and Garozzo, or later on, Belladonna and Garozzo, but right now I really can't really think of any pair I'd consider to be the best in the world. There are lots of good pairs – Garozzo and whoever he plays with, Chagas and Assumpcao, perhaps one of the Swedish pairs, Soloway and Goldman. It's just too tough to name one pair.

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**DOR:** What do you feel is your most significant accomplishment at bridge?

**SRK:** I've survived twenty years of playing with Murray and retained my sanity! I think the things of which I'm proudest, in my tournament career in any event, are the performances Canada had from 1960 until 1972. In those years we had two thirds and a fourth. We lost to a strong British team in 1964 by one deal, and to a strong American team by about 15 IMPs. Realistically, to finish third or fourth was sensational. During that time I played in three Bermuda Bowls, but never with the same intensity or desire, or will to win. I somehow always felt that playing in the Olympiad for Canada and finishing third meant more than finishing second in the Bermuda Bowl.

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**DOR:** Would you consider yourself a chauvinist?

**SRK:** Unfortunately, I think there are traces of chauvinism, which I find curious because I have lived in many countries. Yes, I think I feel rather strongly about Canadian performances.

**DOR:** Do you have a favourite or unfavourite hand you'd like to share with us?

**SRK:** I certainly have an unfavourite hand. One that used to haunt me for years. It was in a Bermuda Bowl. I went down in a laydown four-heart contract where they made five in the other room. We were on Bridge-O-Rama against Belladonna and Avarelli and as we came down in the lift, as we walked out, the first thing Mathe said was, "How could you go down in four hearts?" He was waiting there with a cigar in his mouth. Didn't say anything about the disasters they had had. I think that's probably my least favourite hand, but I'm over that now.

I can't think of a favourite hand. The good ones don't stick very much in my mind. Very seldom can you do anything completely brilliant on your own without the opponents having tipped you off in the bidding or perhaps in the play. That's not my forte. My game is not based on doing brilliant things, it's based primarily on avoiding error.

**DOR:** There was an article in one of the weekend magazines where Murray was quoted as saying that you play chess and he plays poker at bridge.

**SRK:** That's a slight exaggeration but there's a kernel of truth in it.

**DOR:** Thank you for your time.

**SRK:** Thank you.

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