

The Battle of the Century

By Mark Horton

The ten-year period between 1929 and 1939 was the era of the challenge match. Easily the most famous of these was the one between Ely Culbertson and Sidney Lenz: the 'Bridge Battle of the Century' in New York in 1931. Culbertson's ideas, as described in his best-selling *Blue Book of Bridge*, were sweeping North America, but not everyone was a fan. The opposition organized themselves under the name of Bridge Headquarters and published their own Official System. In the end, nothing would do but to play a match to decide once and for all which were the superior methods. Culbertson would play principally with his wife, Josephine (who is widely regarded by bridge historians as the stronger player of the two), while Sidney Lenz and Oswald Jacoby represented the opposition.

The contest was over 150 rubbers and was played in a glare of publicity that has never been equaled for a bridge competition — nor probably ever will be. The match was front-page news all over the world and widely reported on the radio.

What follows was perhaps the most celebrated deal of the match:

Board 23
South Deals
Both Vul

	♠ A Q 10 3		
	♥ A		
	♦ A Q 9 7		
	♣ A 7 5 2		
♠ 9 8 5	♠ 6 2	N	♥ 10 3 2
♥ K 6	♥ 10 3 2	W	♦ K J 10 8 6
♦ 5 4 3 2	♦ K J 10 8 6	E	♣ Q 10 3
♣ K J 9 8	♣ Q 10 3	S	
	♠ K J 7 4		
	♥ Q J 9 8 7 5 4		
	♦ —		
	♣ 6 4		

West	North	East	South
<i>Culbertson</i>	<i>Lenz</i>	<i>Lightner</i>	<i>Jacoby</i>
			1 ♥
Pass	3 NT	Pass	4 ♥
Pass	4 NT	Pass	5 ♥
Pass	6 NT	Pass	Pass
Dbl	Pass	Pass	7 ♥
Dbl	All pass		

Having sounded a warning note or two, Jacoby should have let Lenz take his chances in 6NT, a contract that can only be defeated by a club lead. Even so, it seems odd to modern eyes to see the 4-4 spade fit completely ignored — and indeed, seven spades is a makeable contract, unlike the seven hearts settled on here.

At one point Culbertson's lead had stretched to 20,535. Although he could not maintain quite such a large gap, the final margin was still a considerable 8,980.

Lenz retired from tournament bridge within a few months of the Battle of the Century but remained a prestigious figure in the bridge world, making frequent appearances at events as honorary referee. Culbertson's star was firmly in the ascendant, however, and he went on to dominate bridge writing and teaching until the advent of Charles Goren in the 1950s. Jacoby was a member of the Four Aces team that ruled the bridge scene for several years in the mid-1930s. He was NPC of two Bermuda Bowl winning teams and won numerous North American championships, as well as making substantial contributions to bidding theory.