

The Birth of the Blues

By Mark Horton

On August 4th, 1956, Italy defeated France to become Champions of Europe, marking the birth of the legendary Blue Team, which was to give Italy a matchless series of successes in world competition spanning twenty years. The six players at the time were Walter Avarelli, Giorgio Belladonna, Eugenio Chiaradia, Massimo d'Alelio, Pietro Forquet and Guglielmo Siniscalco; several of them were to remain key members of the Squadra Azzurra for the next quarter-century. The French team, too, included players who were household names for the next twenty years or so: Henri Svarc, Pierre Jais, Roger Trezel and Pierre Ghestem. On a side note, this was the first tournament where penalties were introduced for slow play.

The format used for the 1956 championship was a simple one: a round robin. There were no playoffs. When Italy met France in the last round of the event, they had twelve wins and two defeats. France, still undefeated, had conceded four draws. Another draw would give Italy the title.

At half time, Italy led by 7 points. This dramatic deal introduced the second half of the match:

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

In the Open Room North passed as dealer and France bid slam, making six spades. This certainly looked like a good result: seven spades would have been an excellent contract, but it would have gone down with the bad trump break. However, the French pair could not have expected their score to be quite as good as it turned out to be.

This is how the editor of the *Daily Bulletin* described events at the other table:

West	North	East	South
<i>Siniscalco</i>	<i>Jais</i>	<i>Forquet</i>	<i>Trezel</i>
	1 ♥	4 ♠	Pass
4 NT	Pass	6 ♦!	Pass
6 ♠	Pass	7 ♠	Dbl
7 NT	Pass	Pass	Dbl
All pass			

'When South doubled the bid of seven spades it gave East a chance to guess the position of the trumps. However, West retreated and when the French made six tricks in hearts to collect a penalty of 1100, I thought the Italians would collapse and there were still thirteen boards to play. Here Forquet did himself honor; he did not say a word, but continued to play calmly for the rest of the match. This excellent test of character allowed Siniscalco to recover his equanimity.'

What should one make of South's double of seven spades? Did he need the extra fifty points?

Italy went on to draw the match 42-42 and take the title. In the next 23 years, the Blue Team and its successors would be gold or silver medalists in Europe in every year but two, collecting an incredible sixteen world titles (only losing the world championship final three times). It is a record unlikely ever to be matched.