



The Modern Game of ♥ HEARTS ♥

by Joe Andrews

Hearts, a true classic among card games, evolved from a game called Reversé (or Reversis) that was played in Europe from the 16th through the 19th centuries. In Reversé, the goal was to avoid capturing tricks that contained certain high cards—most importantly, the jack of hearts and the four aces. Around 1850, Reversé gave way to a simple form of Hearts, which went on to become one of the most popular card games in the United States, surpassed only by Euchre and Poker. Hearts was a favorite game on Mississippi riverboats after the Civil War. In the early 1900s, Bridge became the rage, and interest in Hearts, Euchre, and Whist (the forerunner of Bridge) started to wane.

Card game experts Albert H. Morehead and Geoffrey Mott-Smith, quoting a discussion of Hearts in *Culbertson's Hoyle* (Greystone Press, New York, 1950), declared that the game of Hearts was "simple as to rules, but difficult as Whist to play well," adding that "this austere game has been greatly popularized during the past fifty years by the addition of certain features that add to the variety." Those features included the addition of a big penalty card (the queen of spades) and the option of Shooting the Moon (one player's capturing all the points in the same hand). Other modifications followed, including the passing of cards, the required lead of the deuce of clubs, and the

jack of diamonds variation. The game of Hearts has made a nice comeback in recent years, thanks to the Internet and the public's renewed interest in live events. These events include the Grand Prix Series, which is sponsored by the U.S. Playing Card Company, manufacturer of the familiar Bicycle card decks.

BASIC ELEMENTS

Hearts is a very easy game to learn. Although there are three-handed, five-handed, and partnership variations, the best game is the four-handed version, with each person playing individually ("cut-throat"). A regular pack of 52 cards is used, and the cards of each suit rank from ace (high) down to deuce. There is no trump, and the joker is not used. Each player receives 13 cards and is required to pass any three undesired cards of choice in a prescribed rotation. The idea behind the pass is to give each player the opportunity to improve his hand. A player must complete the pass before looking at the cards passed to him. Some circles of players also have a no-pass ("hold") hand on every fourth deal; for example, on four successive deals, each player will pass cards to the player on his left, to the player on his right, to the player sitting across, and then to no one.

The opening lead is made by the player holding the deuce of

clubs. Everyone else, taking turns in clockwise order, must follow suit. A player who is void in the suit led may discard any card; however, a standard rule prohibits the discarding of the spade queen or a heart on the first trick of the hand. The heart suit may not be led until a heart (or, under some versions of the rules, the queen of spades) has been discarded previously, unless, of course, the player has only hearts left to lead.

THE OBJECT OF THE GAME

The goal in Hearts, as in golf, is to achieve the lowest score. The idea is to avoid capturing tricks containing point cards, which are the 13 hearts (worth 1 point each) and the queen of spades (worth 13 points). The game ends when someone at the table accumulates 100 points, at which time the player with the lowest score wins.

Most beginners employ a "duck and dump" approach to the game. As a player improves, he learns to aim for the player with the low score and to play defensively.

If any player manages to win all of the hearts and the spade queen during the same hand, he is credited with "Shooting the Moon." Instead of scoring 26 points, this lucky chap now has the option of *subtracting* 26 points from his score or adding 26 points to each of his opponents' scores. Many Moons are made because players refuse to pass a low or middle heart, or will

not take a trick worth four points! There is also a variation (known as Omnibus Hearts) featuring the jack of diamonds as a bonus card that scores -10 points for the person who takes it during the play of each hand.

DUPLICATE HEARTS

Duplicate Hearts™ was created by me during the heyday of the New England Hearts Players' Association in the '70s. Several Duplicate-style games were conducted throughout the New England area. Unlike the standard fresh-deal game, Duplicate Hearts—modeled after Duplicate Bridge—allows for a comparison of the same hands played at different tables. This is

accomplished by the use of special trays ("boards"), each of which contains four hands—one for each compass direction. A board has a traveling scoresheet on which the results of the multiple plays of the same hand are recorded. After each hand is played, its cards are restored to their original places in the board. (Players play their cards in front of themselves, keeping them separate from the other players' cards, during the play of the hand.) There is a prescribed movement for the players and the boards. At the end of the session, the scores are "match-pointed" as in bridge: Scores of players who held the same hand are compared; a player earns 1 point for each player whose result he bettered, and half a

point for each player whose result he tied. Thus, the holder of a bad hand can earn a top score for a board by playing that hand better than the other individuals who held it.

Consistency and good judgment during the course of the Duplicate event will yield a solid result. Duplicate is best played without the pass, because otherwise the hands would be altered. This variation is far and away the ultimate test of Hearts skill, as it eliminates the luck of the deal.

ILLUSTRATIVE HANDS

Below and on the next page are two interesting and entertaining hands excerpted from my book *The Complete Win at Hearts*.

ILLUSTRATIVE HAND: SLOW TORTURE

North

♠ 6
♥ J 10 8 7 3 2
♦ 9 8 5 3
♣ K J

West

♠ A K 10 9 7 4
♥ Q
♦ J 4 2
♣ A 7 4

East

♠ —
♥ A 9 6 5 4
♦ K 7 6
♣ 8 6 5 3 2

South

♠ Q J 8 5 3 2
♥ K
♦ A Q 10
♣ Q 10 9

(After pass left; cards that were passed are underlined.)

In a tournament, South was dealt the king and queen of hearts doubleton, and he was reluctant to pass both of these cards. So he kept the king and passed the heart queen, the ace of clubs, and the jack of diamonds to West. He was surprised to receive the ace, queen, and ten of diamonds (from East), as he had expected to get another heart. He had great spade length, which is very desirable, but his diamonds and club holdings were dangerous. Yet he appeared unconcerned, so as not to tip off opponents about his problems.

West snapped up the opening two of clubs lead with his ace, North depositing the king and South the ten-spot. West, the proud holder of a six-card spade suit, led his spade ten with "smoke" (driving out the spade queen) aspirations. East shed his king of diamonds. South had mixed feelings; he ducked by playing his five. Undeterred, West continued the big push with his spade nine. North heaved his club jack, and East dumped his ace of hearts, hoggishly. South won with the jack and returned his diamond ten, which went to West's

jack. (East's and North's diamond plays were immaterial.) The spade position was now clear and West disliked underleading his big Kahunas. Thus, he exited via his four of diamonds, losing to the queen. South cashed his club queen, and then his nine-spot, extracting West's low clubs and a high heart and a diamond from North. South laid down his ace of diamonds, drawing West's deuce, and then concealed a wry smile. The picture was complete. West had begun life with six spades, three diamonds, three clubs, and one heart—the queen that had been passed to him. Accordingly, South laid down his heart king, scooping up West's lone queen. Now South led his spade eight and West rose with his king. (It would have done West no good to duck.)

Poor West! He struggled helplessly, like a fish on a hook, but he finally had to lead his ace of spades, catching Her Royal Majesty and scoring a total of 20 points. This deal is a great demonstration of the value of counting. One of player called this exquisite maneuver "walking the plank."

HEARTS AND THE INTERNET

Any player who has access to the Internet can compete against other (human) players while sitting at home in front of a computer. There are many fine online sites. MSN Games (www.zone.msn.com) is one of the leading online game sites, having been around for almost 10 years. It is well-designed, easy to navigate, and has a terrific Hearts area. There are lots of rooms

for players of all abilities and a very good ratings system. Whether you enjoy casual, friendly play or the competition of a tournament, this is the place for you. A group of very dedicated hosts maintains order and keeps things moving.

For serious players, this year's National Hearts Championship will take place in Chicago from September 17–19. For more information, visit the Grand Prix Web site, www.grandprix tournaments.com.

Other links of interest to Hearts players are the comprehensive card game site www.pagat.com, which gives detailed rules for many Hearts variations (www.pagat.com/reverse/hearts.html); and, for the historically minded, David Parlett's Reversis page, www.davidparlett.co.uk/histocs/reversis.html. ■

Joe Andrews is the author of *The Complete Win at Hearts* (Copyright 2000 by The U.S. Playing Card Company)

ILLUSTRATIVE HAND: THE GRAND SQUASH

North

♠ 7
♥ 9 8 5 4
♦ 10 6 4
♣ J 10 7 2

West

♠ A 4
♥ A K Q J 6 3
♦ K Q 10
♣ A 6

East

♠ K 6 5 3
♥ 10 7
♦ 5 2
♣ K Q 9 8 3

South

♠ Q J 10 9 8 2
♥ 2
♦ A 8 7 3
♣ 5 4

(After pass left; cards that were passed are underlined.)

This beautiful hand was played in the final round of the 1978 National Open Tournament. The squash play in Hearts is very rare; I have only seen three examples of it during the past 20 years. The maneuver is attributable to the peculiar qualities of the queen of spades. Although she is a member of the spade suit, her 13-point value gives her a heart-like identity. Once in a great while, we see this dual personality manifested in a true squeeze capacity—with some subtle differences from the Bridge maneuver.

The late Jack Soderlund of Tewksbury, Massachusetts, the first Hearts Life Master, executed this brilliant play. Jack, playing West here, was surprised to find that no low heart had been passed to him by the experienced South, who had good reason to keep his dry deuce (potentially a very useful exit card). Jack kept his ace of spades, hoping to catch the spade queen and then run his solid hearts for the Moon. It was a good plan with a great probability for success, barring an outrageous distribution of the heart suit. Little did he know that his prosaic approach to the hand would be met with some very determined resistance by the South player.

The deuce of clubs lead went to the king, as West ducked. Afraid to open a spade, East led his safe five of diamonds, which was ducked to North's jack. The seven of spades shift drew a low spot by East and South's ten, and once again West played low. South cleared his clubs with the four, going to West's ace. West led his queen of diamonds, and this time South properly played low. (Had South risen with the ace, West could have laid down his hand and claimed all the rest of the tricks.) Fearing a heart pitch on the king of diamonds, West cashed his ace of spades. North shed a high heart, but South defended brilliantly and held back his queen. Frustrated, but undeterred, West surmised that the ace of diamonds was in South's hand, and

probably the queen of spades as well. If so, the rest would be easy.

So West ran his five top Hearts, leaving this position after the eleventh trick:

North (Irrelevant)

West

♠ —
♥ 3
♦ K
♣ —

East (Irrelevant)

South

♠ Q
♥ —
♦ A
♣ —

When West led his three of hearts, he utterly squashed South. The spade discard would have been an instant surrender, so South shed his ace of diamonds, hoping that West did not hold the now established king. When the diamond king made his appearance, it was lights out! South rose to offer congratulations, and the kibitzers applauded. This is an example of the only pure squash play in Hearts. Its execution is part of the thrill of the game. This play works differently from the squeeze play in Bridge, in which you must have a partner who holds a quick entry near the end of the hand.