

## Maria Erhart

In October 1969 a young Austrian women happened to drop into the *Cafe Monopol* in Vienna. In the corner three tables were occupied by very serious-looking people playing cards. It turned out to be a fateful decision as she stayed to watch them. Their game fascinated her so much, that every day for the next ten days at exactly 5:00 p.m. she went to the cafe to watch them play. On the eleventh day, they asked her to play.

So began the bridge career of one of the finest and most charismatic players in the history of the game, Maria Erhart.



Image by Louk Herber for BridgeTopics.com

Born in Vienna, she lived in Rattenberg. She did her studies at the world trade university there, started a job in merchandising, and afterwards in a leading position of marketing research. She lived in the beautiful Tyrol with Peter, a medical doctor whom she married in 1987, working as a medical assistant and looking after the commercial side of his profession. It took more than four hours to go to Vienna which restricted the opportunity for training with her teammates, but it gave her more time and opportunities to pursue her other hobbies, like being responsible for the social community affairs of her city's government, skiing, playing tennis and golf, sometimes treating Peter's piano and sometimes going to the great music festivals of Salzburg and Bayreuth.

So far as Maria's bridge development was concerned she didn't take lessons or read a book, she learned simply by watching and talking to good players. A year after learning the game she went to the tournament in Venice where she met the top Italians and got a copy of *The Blue Club*. In 1971 she met Rixi Markus and thereafter they played once or twice a year. They won the St. Moritz teams just two months before Rixi's death in 1992.

Like Rixi, she did not always treat her partners with velvet gloves, but everybody who entered into the game with her had long-lasting memories of the event and left a better player.

Just five years after her introduction to the game she made her debut in the Austrian Open team, and a year later she won a bronze medal in the European Women's teams partnering Barbara Lindinger.

In 1991, although she could command a place in the Open team, Maria decided to concentrate primarily on women's events. The European Championships that year were in Killarney and Maria focused her attention on putting together a strong Austrian women's team. The first foundations had been laid at the Olympiad three years earlier, but it was in Ireland that her work came to fruition.

Many deals from that tournament could be used to illustrate Maria's dynamic approach to the game. This one is from the match against Israel:

Dealer West. None Vul.

♠ A Q 9 6 2 ♥ K 4 2 ♦ 9 ♣ Q 9 4 2	Dealer West. None Vul. ♠ K 7 ♥ A Q J 10 5 ♦ A J 7 6 5 ♣ J <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 5px auto; text-align: center;">                     N                      W                  E                      S                 </div> ♠ 4 3 ♥ 8 3 ♦ K Q 4 3 ♣ A K 8 6 3	♠ J 10 8 5 ♥ 9 7 6 ♦ 10 8 2 ♣ 10 7 5
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West	North	East	South
Naveh	Erhart	Melech	Bamberger
1♠	2♠*	Pass	3♠*
Pass	3NT	Pass	4♣
Pass	6♦	All Pass	

In the other room, North overcalled 3♣ to show her two suiter and South jumped to 5♦.

Once her partner showed a decent hand with both minors, Maria realised that West's opening bid meant any missing high cards were likely to be well placed and she jumped to the excellent slam that gave her team 11 IMPs.

Having won the European Championships Austria travelled to Yokohama for the Venice Cup (it was there that I met Maria for the first time). In the quarter finals they played a historic match against Germany. Germany won the first set 48-45, the third 36-20, the fourth 51-33, the fifth 56-37 and the sixth 37-8. That adds up to an 85 IMP advantage, but Austria had taken a remarkable second set 105-10 to win the match by 10 IMPs.

This is one of the deals from that incredible second set:

Dealer North. N/S Vul.

♠ 9 8 6 ♥ K 10 8 4 3 ♦ Q 10 9 7 ♣ Q	♠ — ♥ 6 5 2 ♦ K J 8 2 ♣ A K J 9 8 4
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♠ A K 10 7 3 2 ♥ A ♦ 5 4 ♣ 10 6 3 2	N W     E S	♠ Q J 5 4 ♥ Q J 9 7 ♦ A 6 3 ♣ 7 5
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West	North	East	South
Bamberger	Zenkel	Erhart	von Arnim
	1♠	2♣	3♣*
Pass	3♥	Pass	4♠
Pass	Pass	4NT*	DbI
5♦	Pass	Pass	DbI
All Pass			

At the other table Austria were allowed to play in 4♠, which made in comfort.

Sabine Auken (Zenkel as she then was) cashed the ace of hearts and switched to a diamond. But when when South withheld the ace the heart ruff was lost and Austria had 15 IMPs.

Despite two extended absences from the game, one because of work commitments, the other due to illness, Maria was the driving force behind the Austrian Women's team. In a report on the 1992 Olympiad in the London Times, Albert Dormer wrote: 'Erhart could grow into the role once held by the late Rixi Markus, as the *Grande Dame* of European Bridge.'

I remember that World Championship particularly well, as I was captain of the British team that lost to Austria in the final. After three sessions GB held a comfortable lead, but then, just as they had against Germany the year before, Austria produced a match-winning set.

This deal is from the match between Austria and France:

Dealer North. Both Vul.

♠ A Q J 10 5 ♥ Q 10 5 4 ♦ — ♣ K 7 6 5	N W     E S	♠ 9 7 6 3 ♥ K 9 8 6 2 ♦ 9 ♣ A 9 2
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♠ K 2 ♥ A 3 ♦ A K J 10 8 7 5 4 3 ♣ —	♠ 8 4 ♥ J 7 ♦ Q 6 2 ♣ Q J 10 8 4 3
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West	North	East	South
Weigkricht	Delor	Fischer	Lise
	2♦*	Pass	2♥*
2♠	5♦	5♠	6♦
All Pass			

This slow approach meant there was little chance of a defensive error – a spade lead and a heart switch gave declarer no hope. At the other table Maria opened the North hand with what we might call a 'Landy Slam Try' (you bid a slam, then you try to make it) of 6♦. When East led the ace of clubs declarer was soon recording +1390.

Maria won a second world title that year, the *Generali Women's World Masters Individual*, but soon thereafter was forced to take a break as a result of illness and it was not until 1996 that she was able to return to the fray, winning the *European Mixed Pairs* with Fritz Kubak.

In 1998 Maria was on the Austrian team that won another World Championship, the *Louis Vuitton McConnell Cup* in Lille. The following year Austria took second place in the European Championships in Malta.

In 2002 she was a member of the Lavazza squad that captured the *European Mixed Teams* title in Oostende and a year later she won the *European Women's Pairs* in Menton with Jovi Smederevac.

Here is deal from that event, which shows how tough life can be for a defender:

Dealer South. E/W Vul.

♠ J 10 3 2 ♥ J 9 7 4 ♦ 4 ♣ K 10 9 4	N W     E S	♠ A K 9 4 ♥ A 3 ♦ K J 6 ♣ A Q 6 3
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♠ 8 7 5 ♥ K 8 2 ♦ Q 9 7 3 ♣ 8 7 5	♠ Q 6 ♥ Q 10 6 5 ♦ A 10 8 5 2 ♣ J 2
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West	North	East	South
Midskog	Erhart	Bertheau	Smederevac
	1♣*	Pass	Pass
Pass	1♥*	Pass	1♦*
Pass	INT	Pass	1♠*
All Pass		Pass	3NT

With North having shown a balanced 20-21 East led a diamond and declarer won with the six and continued with the king. When that held she played the jack and East took the ace. With no clue as to declarer's distribution West parted with two clubs and then threw a spade when East exited with a diamond. A club finesse gave declarer four tricks in that suit and when West discarded a second spade she had a slightly incredible +490.

Although plagued by a serious debilitating disease, Maria continued to appear at the table. This story appears by kind permission of its author, the Editor of IMP magazine, Jan van Cleeff:

**Don't spoil Maria's Brilliances**

Playing the Open Pairs of the St. Moritz Winter Festival with Maria Erhart, I was confronted with the well known Bols Tip of Brazil's Gabriel Chagas, 'Don't spoil your partners' brilliances'.

Dealer South. E/W Vul.

	♠ A Q 6		
	♥ Q J 7 2		
	♦ 10 9 8 4		
	♣ 4 3		
♠ K 5 3 2		♠ 10 4	
♥ K 8 3		♥ A 10	
♦ A 2		♦ K Q 7 6 5 3	
♣ K Q 10 7		♣ J 9 5	
	♠ J 9 8 7		
	♥ 9 6 5 4		
	♦ J		
	♣ A 8 6 2		

<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
	Jan		Maria
			Pass
INT	Pass	3NT	All Pass

3NT is in serious trouble on the lead of a heart honour or an unlikely diamond. However I kicked off with a low heart to the ten. Declarer played a club to the king and a club to the jack. Maria won the ace, paused 12 seconds and found the great switch of a surrounding ♠J.

Declarer rightfully played low on the first and second spade. Coming in with the ♠Q I returned a heart to the ace to leave this position:

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

Declarer crossed to hand in diamonds. On the penultimate club I discarded a heart, but on the last club I had to surrender and the overtrick had materialised.

Not cashing the ♠A prevented us from winning the tournament. Still, Maria's temper was not affected. Why? As a result her husband Peter, playing with Heini Berger, finished on top.

Apart from the tournaments I have already mentioned Maria had countless other successes at national level, as well as in numerous festivals, etc. (The chapter on Maria in Marc Smith's World Class is terrific.) This year, St. Moritz honoured Maria who, although handicapped by her disease, finished third in the Mixed Pairs, second in the Open Pairs and first in the Teams!

Maria Erhart was born in 1944. After a long and increasingly arduous struggle against incapacitating disease she passed away during the night of September 2nd 2011.

**This Sporting Life**

Leaving no stone unturned we bring you a round up of what's happening in the world of sports. If your favourite is not mentioned let the Daily Bulletin know!

**Horse Racing**

Unbeaten Frankel cruised to his ninth successive victory as he landed the Queen Elizabeth II Stakes on the inaugural British Champions Day at Ascot.

The three-year-old colt, trained by Sir Henry Cecil and ridden by Tom Queally, was a comfortable winner on the country's richest ever raceday.

Frankel had won all eight of his previous runs, over seven furlongs and a mile, and never looked in danger of losing the QEII, worth £1m, once he stalked his stable-mate Bullet Train. It was the fifth Group One win of his career, and his fourth of the season, after victories in the 2,000 Guineas, St James's Palace Stakes and Sussex Stakes

**Football**

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson was disappointed with the referee's decision to award the free-kick that lead to Liverpool's goal in the 1-1 draw at Anfield.

United secured a point when Javier Hernandez equalised Steven Gerrard's goal.

Ferguson says he left Wayne Rooney on the bench because of his disappointment after UEFA's decision to ban him for three games following his sending off for England against Montenegro.

**Rugby Union**

Wales' World Cup dream ended in the most heart-breaking fashion as they fell one point short after an epic effort in Auckland.

A controversial red card for skipper and key man Sam Warburton reduced Wales to 14 men for 61 minutes and seemed to have cost them the semi-final as Morgan Parra kicked three penalties for France.

A stirring, tireless second-half display somehow kept them in the game, Mike Phillips darting over for the game's only try with 23 minutes left to set up a desperate finale.

But Stephen Jones hit the post with the conversion which would have snatched the lead, and Leigh Halfpenny then came up just short with a long-range penalty at the death.

For France, beaten twice in the pool stages and seemingly on the ropes, now comes their third World Cup final in the most unlikely of circumstances.