



## Bridge

# How a cheating scandal brought down the Michael Jordan of bridge

**Rich Tenorio**

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**I**srael's Lotan Fisher was once considered the greatest bridge player in the world, the card game's very own Michael Jordan. Yet in 2015 he became the focus of a cheating scandal that resulted in bans imposed by numerous bridge bodies. The story is the subject of a new documentary, *Dirty Tricks*, that gives a rare look into the exclusive world of elite-level competitive bridge.

“For me, it just sounded so quirky and strange to make a film about a bridge scandal,” the documentary's director, Daniel Sivan, tells the Guardian over Zoom. “It's not a cool sport, not a spectator sport.”

The Asian Games [recognize bridge as a sport](#) although in 2017 the [European Court of Justice ruled](#) it was not “because it lacks a significant physical element”. One thing is certain: whatever bridge is, it is high-intensity. That goes not only for its upper echelons - where wealthy individuals sponsor top teams competing for

championships across the globe - but also among the tens of thousands who play at local venues, something Sivan found to his surprise while making the film.

“I was going to all the small bridge clubs, counting on people being super nice and relaxed,” he says. “Everywhere I went, they were ruthless. People were there to win. I was talking to senior citizens who were in it for blood.”

### Dirty Tricks - Teaser



The film also seeks to capture the game beyond the scandal involving Fisher and his playing partner, Ron Schwartz, exploring the “cool” side of bridge, which was once favored in its glory days by [James Bond](#) and [Omar Sharif](#).

However, the main focus of Dirty Tricks is Fisher. The film incorporates footage of Fisher as a child star, where much like the character Beth Harmon on [the Netflix hit The Queen’s Gambit](#), he displayed an incredible knack for visualization and memory. In one video, Fisher recites a long sequence of numbers from memory. Then, prompted by his mother, Ketty, he recites the same sequence backward. Fisher exploited those skills as he grew to become one of the best players in the world, alongside Schwartz. The prizes and the money - [top players can earn seven figures](#) a year - soon rolled in.

“Some people are just naturals,” says Sivan, who interviewed both Fisher and his mother for the film. “It comes to them very easily ... He’s really good with math and can think and analyze things really fast.”

And, Sivan says, “everybody says he’s the best. Cheating or no cheating, he’s the best.” For the director, the film is “kind of a Greek tragedy that goes deeper and deeper. Can you be the best player if nobody else believes you?”

Bridge is played by competing pairs, with each person [using a 13-card hand](#). Each player is generally prohibited from communicating with the other member of their pair during play. The Fisher scandal arose after Norway's Boye Brogeland, a member of a competing pair at the prestigious Spingold tournament, accused Fisher and Schwartz of illegal communication in the quarter-finals.

Brogeland expanded on the accusations in an interview with the New Yorker in 2016. "Bridge is such a logical game," [he told the magazine](#). "When you do a lot of strange things in a very short period of time, and those strange things are successful- it just doesn't happen."

Sivan says Brogeland went back and looked at the game again. "It all started out, really, when Boye won a match against Lotan and [then] lost it with an appeal," Sivan says. "He was so frustrated, asking: 'How could it be that we lost?' Going over the boards, he saw all these illogical moves that were not settling with him. That [got] the ball rolling. He just erupted, accusing the Israeli team of cheating."

Sivan interviewed the accusers and the accused alike, from Fisher and Schwartz to Brogeland, as well as other top players and experts. Fisher and Schwartz, for their part, have always denied they cheated. "I didn't cheat, but I brought it on myself," Fisher says in the film.

"Everybody that took part in the film was really excited about telling their side," the filmmaker says. "I think the film is very fairly balanced. Both sides are given their narrative to let the audience have their own take on it and come to their own conclusion."

The film also shows the exclusive side of bridge, including footage of billionaires Warren Buffett and Bill Gates at the table. It mentions former Bear Stearns CEO Jimmy Cayne, who sponsored Fisher and Schwartz's team. As the film explains, when Fisher and Schwartz joined the team, they left their previous team, which included Brogeland, causing bad blood.

"The world of the sport is amazing," Sivan says. "You have all these sponsors that sometimes get caught in these cheating scandals because they also want to win. You also have to wonder how much did sponsors know of the cheating and how many were just oblivious, looked the other way?"

The documentary caused Sivan to reflect on the issue of cheating in sport in general.

"That's the whole thing about sports," he says. "Who makes the rules? If you're not caught, is it cheating?" And, he adds, "the big question is, where does something stop being a bluff and [become] something totally illegal?"

For Fisher and Schwartz, an unusual process led to their downfall. Brogeland invited people around the world to share tips about the scandal on a website. Eventually, a Swedish player named Per-Ola Cullin alleged that he had cracked the code used by Fisher and Schwartz, which he said involved the players placing the board in a certain way to illegally communicate with each other.

“This was basically the first time, to my knowledge, in history that a cheating scandal was outsourced,” Sivan says. “You never heard local players saying, ‘I suspect Lance Armstrong is juicing. Please, internet community, look for the proof.’ Here was the first time they used crowdfunding, beehive brain, people from all over the world breaking down codes, chasing cheaters ... It was totally self-policed.”

The news broke during months of meetings between an Israeli bridge committee and Fisher and Schwartz, and the film chronicles the subsequent denouement. Yet, Sivan says, it’s not the end of the story of cheating in bridge.

“[It’s] just the tip of the iceberg to what’s going on backstage with the biggest teams,” Sivan explains. “Now - sorry for the term - it was a pandemic in the sense that ... each week, you had more and more players caught cheating.” Indeed, some of the top players in the world [were soon accused of cheating](#), and some have compared the effect on bridge’s integrity to that of the Lance Armstrong doping scandal on professional cycling.

In terms of world championships, Sivan says: “What I find really interesting is the fact [there were] all these cheating pairs [of players], top pairs from the past 30 years. Basically, no score from the past 30 years in bridge means anything.”

“How can you know if these were really the top 10 teams?” he asks. “The saddest thing is that a lot of people lost some rounds and stopped playing. They may have been the next prodigy.”

The director looks for his film to get more people to the bridge table.

“I really hope [the film] will take this terrible, terrible reputation bridge has and show how crazy cool it is,” Sivan says. “It will make people take this cheating scandal and instead of having a negative effect on the sport, [it will] make it into a sport where people will say, ‘cool, how do you play?’ It could be fantastic. Yes, we are really full of hope that it will make bridge cool again.”

Dirty Tricks is screening at the [Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival](#), which started on 29 April and runs to 9 May.

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