



A Thanksgiving spades game with Rob Bell's family.

ROBERT BELL/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

This Thanksgiving tradition involves a good bit of arguing



Robert Bell

Rochester Democrat
and Chronicle
USA TODAY NETWORK

For me, Thanksgiving isn't just about the turkey or the pies—it's about the card game. Spades, to be specific.

I've always loved card games, but my grandmother introduced me to the world of friendly competition. When I was five, she taught me how to play rummy. I still remember her slow, patient guidance as I struggled to understand the rules, but I was determined to beat her.

Those early games weren't just about learning how to play — they were about learning math, strategy and the thrill of victory. Over time, though, another card game took the spotlight at family gatherings: spades.

Spades is a game built on teamwork, trust and strategy. Played with four players in two partnerships, each team works together to win "books" and to win the number of books they bid on at the start of each round. The spade suit is the trump suit, which always beats any other card in the game.

The beauty of spades lies in the communication and synchronization between teammates. You don't just rely on your hand; you must trust that your partner will come through when the time is right. The unspoken signals, the subtle plays and the moments when you both nail the strategy make the game so exhilarating.

Spades has long been a staple of African-American family gatherings, where the stakes can feel high even without money. The pride of winning — or the sting of losing — often feels more intense than any monetary wager.

People get serious about spades. It's not uncommon for younger players to be hesitant about learning the game, as the pressure to perform can be intimidating. But that's part of the beauty of it: it's a game that requires patience, understanding, and respect. If you're lucky enough to have a patient partner or mentor, the game becomes an avenue for connection and learning, just like my grandmother did for me all those years ago.

Ultimately, the appeal of spades isn't about the rules or the winning. It's about being in the moment with your family, unplugged from technology, social media, or Wi-Fi.

It's one of the last remaining traditions where people gather to face off, laugh, argue over mistakes and bond together. That's the essence of Thanksgiving, after all: being present with those you love, sharing time and creating memories, all without the distractions of modern life. And for me, nothing makes that happen better than a good, intense game of spades.

Robert Bell is community news and outreach editor for the Democrat and Chronicle. He has produced multimedia projects and comprehensive journalism that has won awards at the state and national level. Reach him at RLBell@gannett.com.