

The New York Times

November 27, 2005 Sunday Late - Final

Section 4; Column 1; Editorial Desk; Pg. 10

Bring Bridge Back to the Table

By Sharon Osberg.

Sharon Osberg is a two-time World Champion bridge player.

POKER is all the rage. Online poker games and television poker championships have exploded in popularity. Games like Texas hold'em and five-card stud are spreading like wildfire among high school and college students. By some counts, as many as 80 million people in the United States play poker. And according to Pokerpulse.com, an independent research site, about two million people play poker online every month.

You would think that with those kinds of numbers, the card game called bridge would also be getting a lift. But think again.

According to the American Contract Bridge League, 25 million Americans over the age of 18 know how to play bridge. These people are well educated (79 percent have a college degree), affluent (the average income is \$62,000 per year), primarily white (71 percent) and older (the average age is 51). Of these 25 million adult bridge players, only 3 million play the game at least once a week. This is a huge decrease from the 1940's when 44 percent of American households had at least one active bridge player.

Bridge should be popular. It's an elegant game, full of strategy and tactics. It's part science, part math, part logic, part reason. But a huge component of bridge is also very human. This melding of the former with the latter is what sets bridge apart, not only from other card games, but also from board games like chess. While computers can now routinely beat all but a handful of chess grandmasters, they can't come close to outplaying the world's finest bridge players. Why is this? Because computers can

understand math, but they can't understand people -- at least not yet.

Bridge is a partnership game. Above all else, a successful bridge player must be a great partner. Trust, communication and patience are the essential attributes of winning at bridge. Once a strong partnership is formed, it provides a platform for individual creativity, allowing players to inject their own personalities into the game.

Take my bridge partner, for example. I play with Warren Buffett, the investor and founder of Berkshire Hathaway. No one would describe Warren as timid. Yet, when we first played bridge, we got trampled by our opponents because Warren deferred to me, and I was afraid to make mistakes. As we got to know each other, and as our partnership solidified, things changed.

The Warren Buffett you know from business is now the same Warren Buffett I know at the bridge table. And as Warren would tell you, playing bridge is like running a business. It's about hunting, chasing, nuance, deception, reward, danger, cooperation and, on a good day, victory.

Bridge used to be very popular. In 1938, three bridge books -- "Complete Contract Bridge," "Culbertson's Own New Contract Bridge" and "Five Suit Bridge" -- made this newspaper's best-seller list. In 1957, "Goren's New Complete Contract Bridge" also made the list -- for four weeks. Films like "Shadow of the Thin Man," "It's a Wonderful World" and "Sunset Boulevard" featured characters playing bridge. Matches were covered in newspapers, magazines and on the radio.

One famous game in the 1920's captivated the public's attention for months. On Sept. 29, 1929, John and Myrtle Bennett of Kansas City, Mo., invited their friends Charles and Myrna Hofman over for a game of bridge. Things were going well until several hours into the match when Mr. Bennett overbid. A domestic brawl ensued, and suddenly Mrs. Bennett walked into a bedroom, returned with a gun and shot her husband several times. Mrs. Bennett was charged with first-degree murder, but she was acquitted on the ground that the shooting was accidental. Of course, a jury of bridge players might have ruled that it was justifiable homicide.

So, why has bridge's popularity steadily declined over the last 50 years? It's probably too easy to correlate this decline with the advent of television, but it's no coincidence. Television served as a social replacement for bridge night. To compensate for increasing competition from technology, some sort of marketing by the various bridge organizations might have kept bridge visible, but until very recently, no marketing was done. As a result, bridge is rightly perceived as a game "my grandparents" play.

Bridge will never have the spectator appeal of games like poker. It's just too cerebral. Moreover, the learning curve is steep. But it's worth trying to bring back some of the glory of bridge by getting young people engaged in the game.

Progress has been made on that front. The American Contract Bridge League has recently developed a youth marketing plan focused on affiliate clubs and has launched a Web site, bridgeiscool.com, where young people can learn, play and obtain information about tournaments, clubs and special events. Warren Buffett and Microsoft's Bill Gates, another bridge enthusiast, have recently asked me to organize a bridge program for public schools. They know that the key to reviving bridge is getting children to play, and they are prepared to provide \$1 million of initial financing for the effort.

Public schools should be thrilled with this proposition. Bridge embodies cooperation, logic, problem-solving and has even been linked to higher test scores among children. Who knows, the next Warren Buffett or Bill Gates might be sitting in a classroom somewhere waiting for someone to teach them the meaning of a grand slam.

