

## Billionaires and trump of a different ilk

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MOUNT PLEASANT — Bill Gates is worth \$50 billion.

Warren Buffett just pledged \$31 billion to charity.

And Ross Werner? He had \$1 in his pocket Tuesday.

But that won't stop the three from enjoying lunch together Saturday.

That's right. Werner and 11 of his middle school pals will be hanging this weekend with the two richest men in the world. Never mind the gap in ages and economic strata; they've been bridged ... by bridge.

"I don't think it's going to be a big deal," said Werner, 13, during a practice round Tuesday at Jerry's Restaurant. "It's just going to be meeting two more people."

Yeah, just two more people — who can buy small countries.

The Mount Pleasant dozen are signed up for a bridge tournament in Council Bluffs.

They learned the brain-straining game in an upstart school program funded by Gates and Buffett, both bridge addicts.

Buffett has been called the Oracle of Omaha, after his Nebraska hometown. So, it was only natural for him to bring his best billionaire buddy to the Nebraska Regional Bridge Tournament — held in Iowa — to compete and to encourage the youngsters.

"Meeting Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, that doesn't register with the kids," said Steve Rod, a middle school band teacher and bridge buff who will travel with the group. "It registers with the parents."

The tournament — at least the youth component of it — is a Saturday-only affair. There will be two other teams, one from Omaha and one from Atlanta.

Bridge is a four-person game played with a standard deck of 52 cards. Partners signal back and forth during bidding to communicate what they have in their hands and decide on the "trump" suit.

Buffett and Gates like bridge's potential to teach mathematics and logic. They also hope it breaks the hold of Texas Hold 'Em poker in America's schools.

If that sounds super-uncool, don't be fooled. The duo still has some hipness left. According to USA Today, Gates, 50, plays on-line bridge under the pseudonym "Challengr." Buffett, 75, goes by "T-Bone."

"Bill and Warren want to expose youngsters to this wonderful game, giving them a chance to have fun, compete and grow," said Sharon Osberg, a world champion player coordinating the youth program. "It would be wonderful to watch a whole new generation of bridge players become fascinated with the game."

Rod has no trouble understanding why two such brilliant men got swept away by bridge. The game offers the mental challenge of chess, he said, with an added component — cooperation. Bridge players work together. Chess players work alone.

"The kids who will do well are the ones who can stay focused," Rod said.

Stay focused and remember the rules. After taking most of the summer off, the Mount Pleasant players had just four practices to refresh their skills. Hopefully, that will be enough.

"I want to win," Werner said. "But I don't think it's going to happen."

In truth, they all want to win. The idea of kicking some card-shuffling tail from across the Missouri River and Hot-lanta sounds pretty darn good.

And what about meeting their billionaire benefactors? Makenzie Kauffman, a 13-year-old in a T-shirt that read, "When the going gets tough, the tough go blonde," had this to say: "Who needs to know a famous person, when you're going to be famous yourself."

She was kidding. But who knows? With these kids, she just might be right.