

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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March 12, 2005 Saturday REGION EDITION

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT, Pg.B-14

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## **Winning the Trick** **Bridge League Plays Its Cards Right to Run Top-Class Championship**

**By Johnna A. Pro**

As many as 6,000 people from around the world are converging on the David L. Lawrence Convention Center this week for the American Contract Bridge League's North American Bridge Championships, an event that brings together the top players in the sport with novices just learning the intricacies of the century-old card game. But while the idea of playing bridge may conjure up images of blue-haired ladies getting together for an afternoon, make no mistake about it, this is one multimillion-dollar high-tech convention.

### **Thinking of the children**

One of the primary goals of the American Contract Bridge League is to attract and keep bridge players, a situation that for many years was difficult, in large measure because men and women in their 30s and 40s dropped off the rolls as they started their families.

That changed several years ago when avid player Donna Compton of Dallas convinced the league's governing board that day care was a necessity. Compton, 37, spent much of her childhood in hotel rooms while her mother, a champion player from Virginia, played the tour circuit.

She wanted something different for her children.

When Compton became pregnant with her daughter Morgan nine years ago, she figured there was no reason to quit playing bridge. She started a day-care center at the tournaments.

What began with her taking her own children's toys to events has grown to a full-scale day-care operation complete with cribs for babies, age-appropriate activities such as field trips for older children and an array of toys, games and puzzles. The children are treated to pizza parties, ice cream socials and even bridge lessons. The day-care center has a theme, depending on the tournament city -- in Pittsburgh it's sports.

### **Bring your wallet**

When Sadie King suggested that the league sell toddler T-shirts emblazoned with the phrase, "Bridge Kibitzer," Jim Miller, the director of sales, scoffed at the idea.

No one would buy such shirts he told King, who oversees tournament retail sales.

He readily admits he was wrong.

Bridge enthusiasts who are also grandparents can't buy enough of the shirts. Or anything else for that matter.

Players are so excited about their game, that they spend \$2 million annually on bridge-related products, items they typically purchase through direct mail. But at any given tournament, the American Contract Bridge League sets up a full-scale retail store.

Players can buy everything from tablecloths to gold jewelry. There's also a mini bookstore with 250 titles that range from texts for the novice player to tomes for the expert.

### **Bridge news**

In addition to the day-care center and retail store, the league produces a daily tabloid-sized paper with up to 20 pages and a circulation of 3,500.

"We bring our own machines, take our own pictures, write our own stories," said Paul Linxwiler, the managing editor.

He and editor Brent Manley begin work around noon on tournament days and leave at 4 a.m. when the paper is sent to the printer.

"It's not a bad day," Linxwiler said, "just weird hours."

They're usually sound asleep at 8 a.m. when the newspaper is delivered to the convention center filled with the latest news about the previous day's tournament results, stories about winners, and details about upcoming events.

### **Bridge spans cyberspace**

The American Contract Bridge League sanctions tournament play and, for the last several years, Internet games as well. Online bridge is so popular, that last year, there were 156,335 sanctioned tables in play on the Internet. Sanctioned tables are those at which players can earn points toward the various levels of expertise.

"I expect that number to double in the next year," said Jay A. Baum, the American Contract Bridge League executive director. In January alone, there were 19,035 sanctioned games online.

Baum said that because of the Internet, the interest in bridge has increased. "It drives more people to the live events," Baum said. What's more, it gives people more of an opportunity to practice. "Now we can practice any time. It's a huge benefit for people who want to improve and learn."

### **It's accessible**

Because bridge is a sport of the mind, anyone can play, regardless of physical handicaps.

At tournaments, oversized cards are available for the elderly, there are braille cards for the blind and volunteers on hand to

help anyone who may need special assistance to play.

### **Welcome to Pittsburgh**

Participants who register for the tournament each receive a loot bag filled with Pittsburgh goodies -- including Eat'n Park Smiley cookies.

Volunteers from Pittsburgh, Buffalo and Cleveland spent several hours on Thursday filling 3,500 bags with bottles of Heinz ketchup, chocolate coins, antacid tablets and restaurant guides among other things.

"I came here for the Home Show and I got stuck doing this," joked bridge player and volunteer Gail Carns of Murrysville.

Also hard at work were Peg Hoffman of Oakland and Jane Weiss of Point Breeze.

While the league oversees the tournament, its success depends on local volunteers.

Pittsburgh bridge players who helped organize the tournament got rave reviews for soliciting a record amount of sponsorship dollars, planning exciting extracurricular activities and being exceptionally organized.

"These people are a cut above," said Richard F. Beye, the chief tournament director.

The North American Bridge championship runs from 9 a.m. to midnight daily through March 20. Spectators are welcome and games are available for bridge players of all skill levels. For a complete tournament schedule, visit the American Contract Bridge League Web site at [ACBL.org](http://ACBL.org).