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## Forget Poker, Bridge Has Its Suitors Too

By Mike Conklin  
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Poker may be everywhere on TV, but it doesn't have a chance on the set in The Bridge Place, a Ft. Myers, Fla., club for card players.

"Never," said Val Covalciuc, who, with her husband, Rick, is co-owner. This is ground zero for dedicated bridge players, thank you, and a slight edge -- condescension? irritation? -- slips into Covalciuc's voice when poker's surging popularity is broached.

No comparison: "Checkers and chess," Val said.

The Covalciucs, like many bridge loyalists, are positive they enjoy the best use ever invented for 52 cards, a pastime that traces its origins to the 16th Century and includes players who are some of the most focused, passionate and successful people found in any activity. It's frustrating, they say, to watch Hollywood-hyped poker deal its way to the top of America's deck.

Poker fans themselves are hard-pressed to explain the sudden explosion, a movement obviously helped by the game's adaptation to the Internet and TV. ESPN has made the game a programming staple followed by a wave of merchandising, books, newspaper columns, pro tours and made-for-TV movies and series.

Some of this is familiar territory for bridge, America's best-organized and most popular card game for much of the 20th Century. In the 1920s, newspapers regularly reported on tournaments, conventions and related news. In the 1930s, radio stations had weekly bridge game advice shows. In the 1950s, Charles Goren became an icon

for the card game with a syndicated column and TV show.

"Somehow we lost a generation after that," said Linda Granell, marketing director for the American Contract Bridge League. "I'm not sure how it happened. It started in the 1960s, when young people seemed to be looking for all sorts of alternatives. This was a game their parents played."

Even at its zenith, bridge couldn't match today's staggering money in poker. Last month's World Series of Poker in Las Vegas -- once a quaint event with a \$1 million pot and starring Amarillo Slim -- featured 5,619 players paying \$10,000 apiece just to get into the game. They produced a \$52.8 million pot and the winner, an Australian, won \$7.5 million. Eight others won \$1 million or more.

"Texas hold 'em" is the poker game of choice. Players bet on two cards they're dealt, combining them for the best hand with five cards dealt on the table for everyone to see.

This is a spectator-friendly version and apparently is going to keep marketing people busy for years. This year a college world series of Texas hold 'em attracted 25,000 students, a huge leap from the 10,000 who entered in 2004.

Bridge is played with all 52 cards dealt equally among four players who make up two teams. The partners sit across the table from each other and, without seeing each other's hand, bid in code to describe how many cards -- referred to as tricks -- they think they can win as a team. As

bidding progresses, players learn more about the strength of their partner's hand. The final, highest bid is called a contract and teams win points for fulfilling their contract.

Poker, unlike bridge, relies too much on bluff rather than the ability to successfully play the cards dealt, say bridge loyalists such as Covalciuc. "If you try to bluff in our game," she said, "you run the risk of tricking your partner. I know plenty of examples when partners weren't too forgiving."

Probably the most famous occurred in 1931 in Kansas City, where a wife, Myrtle Bennett, shot and killed her husband, John Bennett, in a dispute after they badly bungled a bridge hand. The case drew national headlines. "The judge was a bridge player," Covalciuc said, "and ruled it justifiable homicide."

Bridge evolved from whist, a British pastime from the 16th Century. It was first named bridge during the Crimean War in the 19th Century, when soldiers from the United Kingdom crossed the Galata Bridge in Istanbul to play the card game in coffeehouses.

The ACBL, founded in 1937, is the largest bridge organization in the world. There are 160,000 members, and the three North American championships it sanctions annually, one of which will be in Chicago next summer, attract up to 8,000 players each.

Covalciuc, a Diamond Life Master, one notch below the highest-ranking possible in the card game, is a past president of the ACBL. The incoming president is Harriette Buckman, a suburban Lincolnwood resident.

Bridge may not have as many players as poker does these days, but this year, when the Minneapolis Star-Tribune and Chicago Tribune dropped or scaled back their syndicated bridge columns, it showed there is no shortage of passion. The papers rethought their actions after receiving a flood of protests.

And bridge players apparently are a polite bunch. Newspaper editors said they

were impressed by the many thank-yous received following reinstatement of the bridge columns.

Today, 78 percent of the ACBL membership are 55 or older. Last year's operating budget was about \$15 million and product sales were approximately \$2 million, according to its Web site. That's big money by anyone's standards until it's compared with poker's numbers, which indicate it is at least a \$2 billion industry in the U.S alone, according to PokerPulse.com, an Internet monitoring source.

Bridge's latest marketing advances - a documentary is in the works, an article is to appear in an airline magazine, an article in September's Women's Day, the game was a category on TV's Double Jeopardy -- seem also snail-like compared with poker's successful flush.

There's no shortage of Hollywood celebrities to promote poker with appearances in televised matches. Bridge's most famous showbiz devotee at one point was Omar Sharif, but Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, two of the world's most successful businessmen, also are celebrated bridge players.

Bridge also makes its own splash of sorts in Las Vegas: The Cavendish Invitational Pairs. Held in the Rio Hotel, this is an auction-style event, which means spectators wager on the competing teams. Last year's event created a \$1.4 million pot to be divided among the top finishers.

The ACBL has made Internet gains. Nearly 10 percent of the tables it sanctioned last year were online, and more than 4,000 youths participated during the last academic year in its annual School Bridge Lesson Series Program.

"Everyone says we need Jessica Simpson to play," Granell said. "Actually, we love poker because it's putting cards in people's hands, but eventually they learn bridge is the ultimate game. When they're looking for bigger challenges, they'll turn to it. There is no game more interesting, challenging or requires more skill."

