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Younger Players Trying Their Hand at Bridge Table

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On a recent January night in New York, the Manhattan Bridge Club on West 57th Street was bustling. And while a lot of people with gray hair were shuffling cards and shuffling about greeting friends, in a back room, behind a glass wall, four tables of laughing Georgetown University alumni were taking their first bridge lesson. At one table no one was older than 25.

In the main room, Carolyn Bush, 28, waited for her partner, Andrea Alban-Davies, also 28, to show up. They've played regularly since September. Two tables away was Daniel Wilderman, 27, playing with his father, Barry, as part of a yearlong bridge tournament.

Daniel Wilderman said he learned the game from his father 16 or 17 years ago. "Dad claims he wouldn't give me dinner if I didn't play," Wilderman said. From across the table, his father grinned. "He's right," the elder Wilderman said. "And all the little old ladies loved him at the club."

Though bridge in the United States is still largely played by older Americans -- the average age of an American Contract Bridge League member is 68 -- many younger people enjoy it too. In November 2005, Jenny Ryman of Sweden and her Canadian fiance, Gavin Wolport, both in their early 20s, became the youngest winners ever of the Blue Ribbon Championship, which many consider the toughest pairs competition in North America.

"For us, it was history-making," Linda Granell, director of marketing for the

ACBL, said from her office in Tennessee. "They were playing against the top players in the world."

And though devotees concede that bridge is still a retiree's game, younger players who take it up are enthusiastic, delighted by the game's challenges, deceptions and elegance.

Bush was attracted to bridge because it provided her with a new social network.

"I had recently formed a book club, and I was trying to do things with friends that didn't involve just going out to dinner," she said. "I got bored with that."

Aside from her weekly games with Alban-Davies, the recent Columbia University Business School grad also plays regularly with several classmates who hired Manhattan Bridge Club owner Jeff Bayone to teach them the game at home.

Evan Markowitz, 38, who has been playing since 1991 to kick what he said was a problematic poker habit, is taken with the game's complexity: Each of the four players works with a partner to strategize, outwit the opposing side and bid to capture as many hands as he or she can. "I think it's the purest card game there is," he said. "It's a civilized form of war."

For him, the game is about mathematics, percentages and psychology. "It's the most mentally intense card game," he said. Now on the board of directors of the Greater New York Bridge Association, he and his twin brother, Jared, play together

regularly. They beat the Wildermans during that Monday night tournament by one point.

According to the ACBL, 2.5 million tables of live bridge are played annually and 200,000 are played online. But the advent of online play has not affected bridge the way it has poker. There has been no dramatic resurgence in the game's popularity, and most of the games are not played for money, but for "master points" awarded in sanctioned games.

Though many players praise online bridge for improving the game's accessibility, not everyone likes it. Jonathan Bittner, president of the Yale Bridge Club, said the quality of online games is definitely second-rate.

"No one I know would rather play online," he said, because the social aspect of the game is critical. Bittner, a junior who started the club his freshman year, said he now has nearly 40 members. He plays or teaches most nights during the week, and last year his team won the North American College Bridge Team Championship.

The best chess computers in the world trounce live opponents, but the best bridge computers don't come close, he said. "When it comes to deceptive play, computers are not clever enough to fool someone," he said. "That's cool. I don't want to be replaced by a computer."

The ACBL is trying to attract young people. In September it started a Web site called bridgeiscool.com targeted to what it calls juniors (players younger than 26). It also sponsors an array of junior games, including the college championships. The league works with several organizations such as the YMCA, Girls Inc. and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics to increase interest, Granell said.

Clubs at Yale, MIT, Harvard, Stanford, Austin College and the University of Michigan are very active around the country. The Atlanta Duplicate Bridge Center now offers junior bridge games through the newly formed non-profit Atlanta Junior Bridge and at Hazel's Bridge Club, owned by Gavin Wolpert's mother, Hazel. Juniors aren't charged membership fees and they play at discounted rates.

Last fall, bridge enthusiasts Bill Gates and Warren Buffett donated \$1 million to introduce bridge to the nation's schools. Sharon Osberg, Buffett's online partner and the program manager for the Youth Bridge League, said she had firm plans with schools in Atlanta; Omaha; Houston; and Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. "Bridge teaches kids lots of tools they need in life, like partnership, concentration and problem-solving," she said. "It's social skills."

