

Escapes

Bridge Out. Way Out.

In Pa., an Old Game Makes a Bid for the Hip Set

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
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I played my king. My ace. Stifled a smile as I caught the eye of my partner. Down to three cards in the night's last hand, my heart pounded and I could feel rusty parts of my brain rising to the challenge. The moment was so exhilarating, my desire to win so fierce, I had to keep reminding myself: I was sitting at a card table on the outskirts of Amish country playing . . . bridge.

Bridge! I spent a perfectly good fall weekend learning to play a game that sounds like a library, looks like a senior center and requires absolutely no physical contact or exertion. The average age of American Contract Bridge League players is 68, and membership is holding steady even as poker has boomed.

I'm 35 but a sucker for underdogs, and I fell for the ACBL's new youth marketing campaign, www.bridgeiscool.com. ("Bridge is the coolest game you can play.")

The site features a lot of O.C.-ready kids hipping it up around the card table. It offers downloadable bridge posters, a list of bridge summer camps, a hip-hop bridge video and a blog with passages like this: "Last Friday I went to a bridge party full of young people, which was exceptional. Thirteen of us gathered in a college dorm room and just threw the cards around for a few hours."

Wow. I wanted some of that. So I signed up for "Bridge University" in York, Pa., a monthly Friday seminar that seems the closest thing in this region to bridge boot camp. After some intensive lessons, you can play genuine games Friday night and most of the day Sunday.

"You don't play *any* cards, hon?" This is how Marti Ronemus greeted me, along with a bear hug. Ronemus is an instructor with celebrity status, in the bridge world at least, who writes a column and teaches at the national championships. I didn't know the first thing about cards, but she promised to get me up to speed quickly. I already liked Ronemus, who had big, dangly earrings, with a voice and personality to match.

The Bridge Boardroom, which Ronemus started a decade ago, sits in an industrial complex two miles from downtown York, and the ACBL says it's one of the strongest clubs in the country. Ronemus shares the space with her husband, Gary, who runs a karate school on the days when there's no bridge. More than a dozen card tables were set up in the center of the room, and the perimeter was lined with boxing mitts and pads. A side table held aspirin, Tums and cough drops.

About 50 people (most at least two decades my senior) showed up for the lesson. One of them warned me, "If you don't quit this game twice a week, you're not playing enough." Ronemus pulled me aside and ran through the vocabulary of the game: majors, minors, long suits, tricks. Tricks are good.

High cards win tricks. But I realized I was over my head when Ronemus said something like, "Cue bids are not alertable because they're so freaky."

Over lunch (games and lessons come with home-cooked meals), Ronemus told me not to worry. "We created an environment where it's safe to make mistakes and then laugh about it," she said.

That night, after we'd been through the basics a few times, more players showed up for some real games. There were a few younger players among them, including Dan Merkle, 26, who had seen an ad in the paper and contacted Ronemus for lessons. He now plays several times a week.

But this beginner needed a lot of hand-holding, so Ronemus took me as her partner. As we moved through hands, I strained to remember what cards had been played and to discern what our opponents held. I was eyeing the aspirin table, but soon found myself laughing during each hand — or, as Ronemus calls them, each seven-minute adventure. "That was brilliant! I'm so impressed," she would tell me during breaks. I didn't know what I was doing right, but she made it hard not to feel good about my effort. We wrapped up at 10, having lost three rounds and tied one.

On Saturday I used York's pleasant, small-city distractions to clear my brain of diamonds and hearts. I walked from the York-



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL SLOAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



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towne Hotel to the 118-year-old Central Market, where merchants were selling baseball cards, pies, fish and crafts, and a couple of places were serving delicious, greasy, sit-down breakfast. The downtown is making a promising comeback, and I found the Left Bank restaurant good for both dinner and conversation at the bar.

On Sunday, back at the Bridge Boardroom, I was catching on. When Ronemus said, "Get your children off the street," I knew she wanted me to lure the trump cards out of our opponents' hands. I got it when she said, "Play low, partner." I realized bridge is a bit like another card game — war — but with a complicated bidding process that tells your partner about your hand and determines whether you can go for big bonus points.

By the second game, I felt confident enough to bid more aggressively, but I also started berating myself for mistakes. "I don't think I like this game anymore," I said at one point, slamming down my cards. Everyone laughed. It was my first time nearly quitting the game, so I felt like a bona fide player. But in our final round of 27 hands, I had a terrific run and employed all my math and critical thinking skills. I placed my last cards on the table, earning two more tricks, and Ronemus yelled out, "You made four!"

I beamed. And headed for the aspirin table.

ESCAPE KEYS

GETTING THERE: York, Pa., is about 90 miles from Washington. Take Interstate 95 north toward Baltimore, then I-695 west to I-83 north to York.

BRIDGE UNIVERSITY: The Bridge Boardroom (2109 Industrial Hwy., 717-755-9505, www.bridgeboardroom.com) offers Bridge U. the third Friday of every month from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Aimed at novices, it covers a different topic each session (topics get progressively more difficult throughout the year) for \$15, including lunch. More basic beginner classes, \$5, are Mondays from 6 to 8 p.m. and Wednesdays 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. Games are held every day but Saturday, for \$5, including a meal. Find other teachers and clubs at www.acbl.org.

WHERE TO STAY: The historic **Yorktowne Hotel** (48 E. Market St., 800-233-9324, www.yorktowne.com) is centrally located and walking distance from downtown restaurants. Rates start at \$109. The **Four Points Sheraton** (1650 Toronita St., 800-325-3535, www.sheratonyork.com) is a convenient chain alternative. Weekend rates start at \$105.

WHERE TO EAT: At the **Left Bank Restaurant & Bar** (120 N. George St., 717-843-8010), you can sit in fire-engine-red leather banquettes and eat some seriously good seafood in a town better known for its ice cream parlors and candy shops than its cuisine. Find good Irish fare and music next door at the **Harp & Fiddle** (110 N. George St., 717-854-4277, www.theharpandfiddle.com). **Sparky & Clark's Roasting Co. & Coffee Bar** (284 W. Market St., 717-699-1197) is the perfect place for morning papers and caffeine.

FACTORY TOURS: York calls itself the factory-tour capital of the world. The **Harley-Davidson York Factory** (1425 Eden Rd., 877-883-1450, www.harley-davidson.com) is the company's largest plant and offers free weekday tours between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m., with tickets distributed on a first-come, first-served basis. **Brown Cow at Hope Acres** (2680 Delta Rd., Brogue, 800-293-1054, www.thebrowncow.net) claims to be one of the country's first farms to introduce robotic milking. Tours (\$6 for adults, children 3 to 12 free) are offered Tuesday through Saturday and come with a scoop of farm-made ice cream. Call for times and reservations.

INFO: York County Convention & Visitors Bureau, 888-858-9675, www.yorkpa.org.