

A Whole New Deal

By Patty Tucker

Everything old *is* new again...and this time it's bridge. Yes, Bridge. The game your grandparents played 50 years ago. Today's youth are rediscovering the fascinating and complex game of bridge – and it's pulling them away from the television and video games, out of the malls and off the streets.

Atlanta Junior Bridge (AJB), a non-profit organization formed in 2006, has taught more than 1,000 children between the ages of 7 to 17 the rudiments of bridge. At the Georgia Youth Open Pairs State Championship this past December 74 players competed, with brothers (ages 10 and 7) declared the winners.

When asked why they want to play bridge, these young players tell us it's because the game is fun and that it gives them a chance to hangout and play with their friends. In today's busy world, where many parents struggle to find quality after-school care, bridge provides an opportunity for their children to meet new friends, play a game and talk -- all in a safe, controlled environment.

What's more, the game of bridge knows no geographic or socio-economic boundaries. There are no age or gender concerns. No physical or intellectual requirements. Any child can learn and enjoy it.

Bridge also helps surmount generational gaps. One of our parents recently shared how bridge has helped draw her family closer together.

She told us how, during recent trips to New Orleans, her children played bridge with their grandmother, great aunt and 97-year-old great grandmother. Conversations between her son and his great grandmother became relaxed and easy – especially when they partnered at bridge. Her daughter began reviewing the daily hands from the bridge newspaper with her great grandmother. Their grandmother is now participating in a weekly social bridge game and plans to start duplicate bridge when she retires. Her children also find themselves writing about their bridge activities to relatives in India. Despite the many cultural differences between the United States and India, stories about playing in a Swiss team game or doing well in a tournament are always easily understood – and appreciated.

In addition to transcending generational gaps, parents are also looking to bridge to help their children learn sportsmanship and to play well with others. In fact, home school groups often rely on bridge as an entertaining method of teaching, as well as a vehicle for enhancing social interaction among kids.

Along the way, children are improving their concentration, as well as their math, problem solving and logic skills.

According to a study by Dr. Christopher Shaw, a former Board Member of the ACBL Educational Foundation, students who played bridge scored higher on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills than their non-bridge playing counterparts after 20 months and again after 32 months. In addition, they scored higher in all five subject areas (reading, language, math, science, social studies). It's precisely this brain-building power that led bridge enthusiasts, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett to pledge \$1 million for use in creating a youth

bridge program to reach kids in schools nationwide. At the same time a new youth-service organization called The LEAGUE was creating a web and school-based system for empowering kids to give back to their communities. After hearing about Gates' and Buffett's interest in youth bridge, The LEAGUE reached out. A partnership was formed and the concept of the School Bridge LEAGUE was born.

Today, the School Bridge LEAGUE is up and running. A web site, "Bridge in a Box" learning kit, and lesson plans (coded to state educational standards) are helping teachers integrate the game into their existing curriculum.

The American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) funds a program, the School Bridge Lesson Program (SBLP), which has been in existence for over 18 years. It provides practical and financial assistance to bridge players teaching bridge in after-school programs. Just in the past two years over 250 SBLP teachers have taught classes in 37 states and 6 Canadian Provinces; to over 7500 students.

While Atlanta has one of the most active programs, it is by no means the only one in existence. Non-profit organizations have been formed to teach children bridge in Nebraska and Hawaii. From New Jersey to California, Ontario to Florida and points in between groups have been formed with the express goal of teaching bridge to children. More are being formed every month.

So the story comes full circle; back to Atlanta. All of these efforts have culminated in the ACBL Board of Directors approving a motion to create a Youth North American Bridge Championship, the first of its kind. The tournament will be held July 3-6 2008 in Atlanta Georgia. While this may be the first Youth NABC, it will not be the last. Washington DC is scheduled for 2009 and many of these young players are already planning on ways to raise funds to attend.

These young bridge players now have the chance to show what they can do. Together, they'll play – and, without a doubt, build a few fine bridges along the way.

Atlanta Junior Bridge www.atlantajuniorbridge.org

Youth North American Bridge Championships www.youthnabc.org

American Contract Bridge League www.acbl.org

School Bridge LEAGUE www.schoolbridgeleague.org

The LEAGUE www.leagueworldwide.org