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Blacks in Bridge

by
Wornie Reed

Two events in the spring of 1991 brought to mind the long battle to integrate the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL), which barely beat out the Boston Red Sox in integrating its membership. One was the closing of the famous Cavendish Bridge Club in New York City; the other was a bridge tournament that combined the efforts of ACBL and ABA (American Bridge Association) clubs in the Washington, D.C. area. The ABA is the national association of black bridge players. Both events appear to have been precipitated by a decline in the number of bridge players as the baby boomer generation ages.

The world's most illustrious bridge club—the Cavendish Club, located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan—closed its doors and went out of business on June 1, 1991. The club was founded in 1925, the same year that the modern bridge scoring system was devised by Harold S. Vanderbilt, who was a long-time member of the club. With the number of members dropping from about 750 in the 1970s to about 450 this year, the club could no longer afford to rent its three floors of a town house on East 73rd street.¹

The closing of the Cavendish Club represents yet another change in the nation's culture that is being attributed to the reigning tastes and interests of baby boomers. Although the club had numerous millionaire members, annual dues were only \$800 in 1991; and the club maintained that it admitted anyone who was reasonably well behaved and was willing to pay the annual dues. However, the many bridge luminaries of the club kept many would-be players away, since most nonexperts were not comfortable playing with the people who had written the books and developed the systems that much of the bridge world used. The club included such bridge elites as Charles Goren, Oswald Jacoby, Helen Sobel, Howard Schenken, and Samuel M. Stayman.²

Desegregating the Bridge World

Of course, not all bridge greats played at the Cavendish. For instance, although a few blacks played at the famous club—as guests of white friends who were members—none did so as members. While it is not clear that blacks would have been officially barred from club membership, it is clear that such a situation would have been quite strange since blacks were, more importantly, barred from membership in the ACBL until 1961. Few black

expert players would have countenanced being a member of a club where all of the white members were members of an association they could not join—the ACBL.

Modern bridge is considered to have begun in 1925 with the development of Vanderbilt's scoring system. The ABA was founded in 1933 for the obvious reason of having an association for black bridge players, since blacks were prohibited from joining the ACBL. The ACBL integrated in 1961, but not without the long, drawn out resistance that has been customary in American institutions.

When blacks first applied for membership in the ACBL in 1949, the ACBL board of directors put the issue before its 28,000 members who rejected black membership 59% to 41%, with members from the South voting 81.6% against.³ Nevertheless, at that time several units in northern cities integrated and a few sections began to accept black entries in certain tournaments. None, however, conferred full ACBL membership privileges; and the national organization continued to hold out against membership.

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Integration of the ACBL was principally the result of efforts by ABA members in Washington, D.C.—whose ACBL organization, the Washington Bridge League (WBL), did not accept blacks as members or players—and a few white friends in the WBL. The request for WBL membership by Washingtonian Jimmy Lee, along with that of Donald Pedro, in 1955 is seen as the starting point of the battle to integrate the WBL. Their applications were denied, with the minutes of the discussion by the WBL board referring to the letter from “the two Negro boys.”⁴ In 1956 Jimmy Lee and Lucille Miller attempted without success to enter a local WBL tournament in D.C.; and Victor Daly, then president of the Labor Department Bridge Club and a leader of the ABA, applied for membership in the WBL—and thereby the ACBL. These efforts were rebuffed, but the integrationists kept pushing.

Eventually, the integration effort became an issue for the national ACBL, whose president had carried on an anti-integration campaign amongst his board members. But after five years of telephone canvassing by WBL “integrationists,” debates, motions, and several efforts to have ABA members register for WBL events, the WBL board and then the WBL membership voted in 1961 to admit blacks, just in time for the ACBL Summer National Tournament held in Washington, D.C.⁵

Competing in the New Bridge World

The black players wasted no time making their presence felt. In the 1961 Summer Nationals a team of ABA players—Dr. Joseph Henry and Robert Friend and Leon Jones and Roscoe Alexander—finished second in the Sub-Senior Masters, and another team of four—Robert McEwan and O. B. Cassell and Henry and Friend—finished second in another event. Notably, while WBL players routinely had their triumphs reported in the *WBL Bulletin*, none of these six men were mentioned at all.⁶

In the fall of 1961 the WBL held its major tournament, the Potomac Valley Tournament, in which two ABA players—Dr. Aaron S. Russell and Victor Daly—captured the open pairs, with Henry and Friend finishing fourth. Henry and Mrs. Clyde Woolridge also took fourth place in the mixed pairs.⁷

The following year segregationists in the ACBL won a small victory when the national organization voted to allow the formation of a second ACBL unit in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., with membership drawn so that the “color line” could be maintained.⁸ This new club would have no black members. Another five years passed before the ACBL mandated that all of its clubs and tournaments be open. In the meantime, black players continued to make their presence known in the WBL and in the national ACBL. In 1962, Joe Henry, the top ABA player, led a team to a national title at the ACBL Nationals.⁹

Although Henry and his associates won a number of major events over the years, the accomplishment that they remember with the most pride was their victory in 1971 against the All-Star Precision Club touring team. The Italian Blue Team, playing their Precision Club System, had won 10 straight world titles and two Olympiads. A team including two members of the Italian Blues, Benito Garozza and Giorgio Belladonna, joined by top U.S. players Bobby Jordan and Arthur Robinson of Philadelphia and Peter Levintritt of New York City, was on a tour of the United States to publicize their system, offering \$1,000 to any team that could beat them.

Noting that no match against a black team was arranged for the tour, Victor Daly, then president emeritus of the ABA, reminded the tour coordinators that blacks played bridge also and challenged the Precision Club team to play a team from the Washington Bridgemasters Club of the ABA. A match was subsequently arranged at the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. For the local team, Roscoe Alexander, Leon Jones, and Oliver Cassell played throughout and Fred Petite and Joe Henry each played 10 deals. Some 250 persons—about equally divided between ACBL and ABA members—observed the match on the Vu-Graph screen as blow-

by-blow commentary was provided by an expert panel: Alan Truscott, *New York Times* bridge columnist; Fred Karpin, columnist and author; Mike Cappelletti; John Duncan, former D.C. commissioner; and Peter Levintritt who, with Victor Mitchell, was on the Precision Club team.¹⁰

After getting off to a slow start the Bridgemasters team won a solid victory—45 to 35 International Master Points, giving the vaunted Precision team its only defeat on its tour. Twenty years later, while the members of the Bridgemasters team realize that they had shocked the touring team, they still consider the touring team to have been poor sports since they did not pay the \$1,000 promised to any team defeating them. The Precision Club’s reasoning was that the match was not a regularly scheduled match, but rather was an added exhibition match.

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An interesting feature of the match was that the Jones-Alexander partnership for the Bridgemasters was using a new bidding system that had been developed by one of their fellow club members, John Duncan—the Duncan New Dimension System. This system requires the responder to indicate his winning tricks.¹¹ Jones and Alexander could readily use the Duncan System against the Precision team, but getting approval for its use in ACBL tournaments was another issue. It had been used only once in a major national ACBL event, the Vanderbilt Cup. In that instance a team lead by Jones and Alexander lost out to the winning team, a team headed by Peter Levintritt. The Vanderbilt Cup is probably the most prestigious tournament in the United States because the winner represents the United States in the World Championship.¹² Getting ACBL approval for the Duncan System would have been difficult even if Duncan or Jones and Alexander (probably its greatest proponents) had pushed for it, since the money in bridge is in teaching—and the systems available for teachers are somewhat controlled by the major teachers, whose systems are approved.

While the emphasis here has been on the integration of the ACBL, it should be noted that that activity did not consume much of the energy and time of most ABA members who went merrily along playing in their own local clubs and competing in their own local, regional, and national tournaments. The ABA players mentioned here and their associates came from varied professions. For example, Leon Jones and Roscoe Alexander, partners for some 55 years, are retired from the postal service. Robert Friend was a colonel in the army, Victor Daly worked for the Labor Department, and John Duncan was a

commissioner of Washington, D.C. Oliver Cassell was a contractor, Fred Batiste was in real estate, and Doris Brooks was a social worker in New York City.

Joseph Henry, D.D.S., Ph.D., Sc. D., interim dean (1990–91) of the Harvard School of Dental Medicine, and dean emeritus, Howard College of Dentistry, was the leading ABA player from 1952 to 1967, when he stopped playing national tournament bridge and began spending more time in other activities of the era. He was heavily involved, for instance, in the Howard University Mississippi Project in Mound Bayou, a project that braved a hostile white community and provided physicians, dentists, nurses, and social workers to black residents in an area that had none of these within a 30-mile radius. In 1968, Henry established a dental clinic at Resurrection City, the tent city that was established on the monument grounds in Washington, D.C., as a part of the Poor People's Campaign initiated by Martin Luther King. Henry has continued his "social" work through to today. In his message to the Harvard Dental School graduates in June of 1991 he asked them to "serve and save our society."

An interesting footnote to this discussion of blacks in bridge concerns Judge Amalya Kears, a justice on the U.S. Court of Appeals who is touted as

a potential black women nominee to the U.S. Supreme Court. Currently, Ms. Kears may be better known as an expert bridge player and author.

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