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More kids find bridge suits them

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BY GRACIE BONDS STAPLES - THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Arjun Dhir sat at a rear table at the Alpharetta Duplicate Bridge Club, red bidding boxes at his elbows, and talked about, well, his love of bridge.

The Johns Creek High School graduate from Alpharetta has been extolling the virtues of the game, honing his social and reasoning skills and collecting trophies for at least the past five years.

He's hoping for another one — a trophy, that is — when he competes Aug. 1-11 in the North American Bridge Championships in Atlanta. Dhir, 17, will be among more than 150 youths, ages 9 to 19, vying for a win in the weeklong tournament, sponsored by the American Contract Bridge League.

The ACBL will host a seminar, "Learn Bridge in a Day," from 5:30-9 p.m. July 30 and from 1-6 p.m. Aug. 4 at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta for beginners and those who are returning to bridge after a long absence. The cost is \$20, and the seminar is open to the general public.

While bridge conjures up visions of white-haired ladies and gentlemen laboring over clubs, spades, hearts and diamonds, the game is growing in popularity among the young set, said Patty Tucker, co-founder and president of Atlanta Junior Bridge.

"The numbers have always been small nationally, but in the last five years, it's grown 20 percent," Tucker said.

"Youth (under 20) membership went from 1,000 members to 1,200 members nationally. In terms of new kids coming into the program, it's higher than that."



Arjun Dhir of Alpharetta contemplates his next move during a recent bridge game. Dhir, 17, is among a growing number of youths here and across the country who love the game and will be competing Aug. 1-11 at the North American Bridge Championships in Atlanta.



Arjun Dhir, 17, hold his winning trophy from a recent competition.

District 7 alone, which includes Georgia, North and South Carolina, eastern Tennessee and parts of Virginia, has six new youth bridge clubs.

Tucker, whose club offers free classes all over metro Atlanta, attributed the growth to studies that show playing the game improves kids' scores on standardized tests, especially science and math.

Bridge is a four-person, two-team game, Tucker said. The whole deck is dealt so that everyone has 13 cards to begin. Before you play, you bid, which means you say how many tricks you think you can win. A trick is made of four cards, one from each player. The dealer gets to play the first card, and then everyone after that must throw the same suit (for instance, all spades) if they can.

If you don't have a card in the suit led, Tucker said you can then play a trump card, which means a card in another suit that will win the trick. The trump suit is decided at the beginning of the game through a bidding process. The highest card or the trump card wins the trick.

Although he always got high math scores, Dhir said the game has definitely improved his social skills.

The once-shy teenager said he can talk to just about anyone now.

"It helped me come out of my shell," he said.

Dhir, who plans to attend Georgia State University in the fall, said he first signed up for a bridge class in the summer of 2008 when his mother insisted he attend a camp she saw advertised at their local library.

"She read that it would help with communication and math skills," Dhir recalled recently at the Alpharetta Duplicate Bridge Club. "My first reaction was 'No way, it's an old person's game.'"

Two days in, however, Dhir said he knew that wasn't the case at all.

"I started to realize it wasn't a boring old person's game," he said. "It was actually fun and was something I could see myself playing in the future."

Dhir said after the camp that his instructor invited him to join a group of kids for private lessons at her home — for free.

"I was pretty much hooked by then," he said. "I went from not playing to playing every Saturday and every tournament within a three-hour drive."

To date, he says, he's competed in some 51 tournaments, including in China, where he represented the United States last summer in the World Youth Championship.

Dhir's team, which included another Alpharetta teen named Murphy Green, placed 10th out of 25 teams.

Tucker, who helped found Atlanta's junior bridge club in 2006, said the club runs 10 to 15 free camps each summer. The camps draw about 150 kids, many of whom continue to play year-round.

While the game is competitive, Tucker said it is unlike any other sport because no one has to sit on the sidelines.

“Everybody gets to play, and because you can play at different levels, I think it gives kids a real feeling of accomplishment,” she said. “It’s almost like you’re special. It doesn’t matter how much money you have, where you live or how popular you are. Bridge players only care about whether you can play the game.”

Dhir said any kid who believes the game is for the elderly should pick up a deck of cards and give it a try.

“I promise it’s more than that,” he said. “Looks can be deceiving.”

CHAMPIONSHIPS

Want to see bridge played at its best?

The American Contract Bridge League will stage its Summer North American Bridge Championships Aug. 1-11 at the Hyatt Regency in Atlanta. The tournament includes lessons for beginners, opportunities to volunteer and watching some of the best players in the nation.

For information, see www.acbl.org.