



Holding all the cards: At age 18, Walnut Hills High School grad is the King of Bridge

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CINCINNATI - John Altman has traveled across much of the country the past several years, playing contract bridge.

Canada, Houston, St. Louis, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Washington state are just some of the places where the Walnut Hills High School grad has participated in bridge tournaments.

Altman is only 18 years old.

In fact, bridge has been such a large part of Altman's young life that the American Contract Bridge League Educational Foundation recently named him its King of Bridge, an honor bestowed annually on the nation's top high school senior player.

"I was extremely surprised, and I'm absolutely ecstatic that I won," Altman, who became an Ohio State University freshman three weeks ago, said. "It's just been so cool starting from when I was small and having no idea that this hobby would turn into such a big part of my life."

If the top player is female, then she is the Queen of Bridge, but there's only one honoree each year, and that person receives a \$1,000 scholarship to go with the award. The American Contract Bridge League, which serves 167,000 members and 3,200 bridge clubs, has selected a King/Queen of Bridge every year since 1973.

"I've been playing cards since I could count, with my grandma," Altman, a chemical engineering major, said. His grandmother, B.J. Kolkman, saw something special in Altman's card-playing abilities and turned him on to bridge when he was 12.

"She paid for some lessons, and my dad and I learned together" at the Cincinnati Bridge Association.

It was in the cards

[Contract bridge is a highly strategic, complex game.](#) It is one of the world's most-played card games, and it is especially popular among senior citizens competing in clubs and tournaments. In bridge, two pairs of two partners play against each other, with hands taking about seven minutes and a session—or game—taking about 3 to 3½ hours.

Altman said that at tournaments, "you can play from nine o'clock in the morning 'til two a.m., if you wanted to. Every day."

So what's his tournament day like? "Nine a.m. to two a.m.," he laughed. "I'm one of the ones that plays every opportunity they give me. I'm happy to go play."

Altman, son of John and Peggy Altman, mostly plays against adults in tournaments.

"Some of them see this kid coming up and think they can take advantage of him. Usually, they think I'm a lot older than I am," he said.

Not surprisingly, Altman surprises his elders with his playing skill and often beats them.

Altman participated in the Youth North American Bridge Championships the past two summers and the World Youth Open Bridge Championships this summer. His partner this year was one of the newer players from a high school club. Even though they didn't win anything, Altman said, "We did well considering how long he's been playing, so I was happy with it."

The best of the best

The King of Bridge award recognizes a graduating high school senior's participation in the local bridge community as well as the accumulation of masterpoints, which are earned while playing well in competitions.

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"Junior players like John who are passionate about the game and enthusiastic to teach others are a critical part of keeping the game of bridge alive," said Robert Hartman, CEO of the American Contract Bridge League. "The King of Bridge is a title bestowed not just to outstanding performers, but also those who love to share the game with others. John is a representation of our hope for the future of Bridge."

Altman said that before becoming the King of Bridge, his proudest moment "was when I made the rank of Life Master in Philadelphia two years ago." A select few top players, depending on the size of a tournament, receive masterpoints. Through the years, he played well enough to collect 300 masterpoints, which gave him the rank. He now has more than 425 masterpoints.

Altman said his mentor Bill Higgins helped him reach the heights of the bridge world. The teen described Higgins "one of the best, if not the best, players in Cincinnati."

"I understood the game, but he helped me improve my game to a level where I could compete nationally."

Higgins, of Indian Hill, called Altman "extremely bright, mannerly and a real quick study. Bridge can be a passion, and he has a real passion for it," especially as the average age of bridge players increases.

An early leader

Altman became a certified director at the [Cincinnati Bridge Association](#) at 16, which is unusual for a youngster. A director must undergo extensive training and then oversees the games at a club for the day or evening. Directors act as part referee/umpire and part bouncer. They keep the game moving on time, deal with any infractions of the rules and ensure that there is no abusive or rude behavior, which can result in ejection.

So, what are the next steps for this King of the Bridge World? What else but establishing a Bridge Club at The Ohio State University in Columbus, where he is a Chemical Engineering major.

To learn more about playing bridge in Cincinnati go to the Cincinnati Bridge Association website at www.cincybridge.com or send an email to cincybridge124@gmail.com. Any middle or high schools interested in forming a bridge club should contact Mike Purcell at cincybridge124@gmail.com.