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Playing Bridge helps students score in math

■ Sullivan Middle School's after-school program teaches complex game

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BONSAI — Since Sullivan Middle School sixth-grader Whitney Pracht began learning to play bridge, her math skills have improved to the extent that she is now earning As and Bs instead of a C grade.

She is making new friends and learning a new card game.

Eighth-grader Nikki Nevarez already enjoys playing games like Crazy 8s, blackjack and poker but decided to learn another one. She especially enjoys the strategy involved in bridge.

Whitney and Nikki are among the approximately

one dozen students who gather once a week after school to learn to play bridge, a game that dates back to the British game of whist first played in the 16th century, according to information on the Web site for the American Contract Bridge League.

And it is not just a game for older people. Its devotees include Microsoft founder Bill Gates and tennis star Martina Navratilova. The late cartoonist Charles Schultz, known for the Peanuts comic strip, also was an avid player.

Teaching a new generation of players is instructor and Encinitas resident Mark Freundel. Assisting him is parent volunteer and duplicate bridge player Debra Cameron, whose sixth-grade daughter, Paulina, is learning to play.

"We want to get some young blood into bridge,"

Cameron said. "It's a terrific game. However, bridge is not an easy game to learn. A lot of adults spend their lifetime trying. It's pretty complicated, but these kids really want to learn."

The American Contract Bridge League has shown its support by providing instruction books, T-shirts and a small stipend for the instructor. The league's Oceanside-Vista-Fallbrook Unit 531 donated supplies.

For the game, players use a standard 52-card deck and cards are dealt equally among a table of four players, all of whom use a coded language to make bids. Players team up with the person across from them.

The game teaches various lessons including logic, math, partnership and cooperation skills, planning and deduction, Freundel said.

Unlike professional sports like football, baseball and basketball, there is little money in bridge, although a few players do earn prize money. Instead, dedicated players strive for milestones such as grand life master and diamond

life master — a goal they reach by earning points. It's something that can take years to achieve.

"It's really for the prestige," Freundel said.

Once someone learns the game, it's a skill that's portable.

"You can go anywhere in the world, and it doesn't matter if you don't know anyone," Cameron said. "You can walk into a club and they'll find you a partner. It doesn't even matter if you don't speak the language because bridge has a language of its own. It also keeps your mind active."

Sixth-grader Conner Harrison decided to learn after seeing his parents play.

"I like the game; it's challenging and requires thinking," he said.

Jake Byerlee, another sixth-grader, finds the game fun.

"All my friends are here, and I love to play cards, so I figure why not do this," he said.

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