

For him, bridge does the trick

Sixth-grader finds niche in world of competitive, complicated card game

By Matt Viser, Boston Globe Correspondent, 2/12/2004

NEWTON — He utters phrases like “I’ve got a two, no trump,” “It’s a splinter,” and “Get the kiddies off the street.” Each time a card is placed on the table, his droopy eyes shift and his face is impassive as he contemplates the next move.

All are actions that are expected from an accomplished bridge player. But not when that bridge player is a 12-year-old boy, who has stayed after school to teach the game to three other Brown Middle School sixth-graders, most of whom struggle to hold the 13 cards in their hands.

Adam Grossack began playing bridge with his mother when he was 8, sneaking into the Cavendish Club in Dedham for four-hour Sunday lessons offered to ages 9 to 90.

Soon, he began stealing pages from his mother’s notebook, where she had scribbled down different moves that she had learned in a community education course. Now, to punish her son, Jori Grossack doesn’t ground him or take away his allowance. She takes away bridge.

Adam has participated in about 20 tournaments, and recently he and his 60-year-old partner won the Eastern Massachusetts Bridge Association’s holiday tournament, beating out 72 other pairs. As it is at most tournaments, he was the only participant under 18.

Indeed, in a cerebral card game that many adults fail to grasp, Adam stands out. The average age of members of the American Contract Bridge League, the largest bridge organization in the world, is 66. Only 1,000 of the league’s 167,000 members are under the age of 25.

Type Adam Grossack’s name into the Google search engine, and up come several pages listing his results in previous tournaments. He competes at least once a week at local bridge clubs.

“Yeah, there are a lot of older people,” Adam said. “It was [strange] at the beginning, but now they all

know me.”

The other players call him The Kid, which evolved from an earlier nickname, The Champ, a name they called him because it was a paradox. It no longer is.

“At first, when he started playing, they saw a kid coming over and they really thought they were going to have an easy time with him,” said his mother. “And for a little while, they did.”

All of a sudden, they started realizing how good he was. If they made one mistake, he’d make them pay for it. They all quickly learned.”

There are multiple ways to play bridge, but most play in pairs and begin the game by bidding on how many hands they think they will win. During bidding, there are distinct phrases (such as “splinter” or “two, no trump”) that a player uses to tell his partner what’s in his hand. Other phrases (such as “get the kiddies off the street”) refer to exploiting the mistake of the opponent.

Adam started a bridge club at his school this year, but so far it has not garnered much interest.

“I play sports a lot during the week,” said sixth-grader Josh Cohen-Kaplan, a member of the club. “I figured [learning bridge] would be a nice way to mellow out.”

Still, the game has struggled to shake its image as something more fitting in a retirement home than the schoolhouse.

To boost the game’s popularity among young people, the American Contract Bridge League, which employs 95 people and has a \$15 million budget, has formed a marketing department and begun targeting schools by offering free teaching materials and a stipend for teachers willing to teach bridge.

“If we’re going to continue our game, given that our average age is 66, I don’t think we have a choice,” said Linda Granell, 50, the league’s



director of marketing. “I want to have people to play with when I’m 80.”

The league is trying to take advantage of Adam’s zeal for the game to attract more young players. Next month, for example, Adam will be featured in the Bridge Bulletin, the league’s monthly magazine.

“To see an active player at his age is unusual,” Granell said. “And very welcomed.”

Adam, whose favorite subject is math, is nonchalant about his talent. And while he is boisterous with his friends and shows patience in teaching them the complex card game, his discussions with a reporter are more subdued.

“It’s just very fun to play,” he said. “It’s challenging. A new problem comes up every time.”

Grossack stressed that while playing bridge is his favorite thing to do, he does have other interests. He plays baseball, basketball, and soccer, and he recently took up the guitar and trombone.

He also plays chess, watches “Survivor,” and he has a Game Cube.

“He [hasn’t] yielded to the temptation to become singularly focused on becoming a bridge superstar,” said David A. Leopold, Adam’s bridge teacher.

“Somehow he realizes that bridge is only a game, and no matter how much he loves it, is not his life.”

He added, “Teaching him has been the greatest pleasure I have experienced in over 20 years of teaching.”

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