

The Kibitzer

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Clockwise from top left:

Fred Gitelman, the
genius behind BBO,
interview on page 17

Enid Roitman, 2010
Audrey Grant Award
winner, story on page 14

Hazel Wolpert, 2010
Kate Buckman Award
winner, see page 15



AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED GITELMAN

Fred Gitelman, formerly of Toronto, now residing in Las Vegas, is one of the most famous bridge personalities in the world. He is the inventor and developer of BBO (Bridge Base Online), the premier free web site that broadcasts top bridge events from around the world.

Fred has also had, at the relatively young age of 45, a fabulous playing career, with wins in the U.S. Team Trials, the IOC Grand Prix, the Cavendish Invitational, the Forbo-Krommenie Nations Cup, and silver medals in the Bermuda Bowl and World Junior Team Championship, as well as numerous CNTC and NABC wins. Most recently, he won the Jacoby Swiss Teams at the Spring Nationals in Reno.

As if this were not enough success, Fred has also been named the ACBL's Honorary Member of the Year and the International Bridge Press Association's Personality of the Year.



Fred at the 2009 US Trials

Kib: Your first taste of international success came at the World Junior Championship in 1991, where Canada came in second to the USA. At that time, did you intend to make a career of bridge?

FG: I actually have two different bridge-related careers: writing bridge software and playing bridge professionally. In 1991 I had just started working full time on writing bridge software, and I was already certain that I wanted to make it into a real career (provided that I could actually make a living doing it, which was far from certain at the time).

Playing bridge professionally has never been anything more than a part time job for me. Almost all of the professional bridge I have played over the years has been in the context of playing on sponsored teams in the big events at the NABCs. I didn't start doing that until 1997, and in 1991 I did not foresee myself ever becoming so 'serious' about competitive bridge, let alone getting paid to play on contending teams in the toughest events. I suspect that was because I am not a particularly competitive person by nature. Also, it did not occur to me that I was anywhere close to being good enough to be paid serious money to play.

Kib: In a 2002 interview, you stated that creating BBO was a bit of an accident. Tell us about this 'accident'.

FG: From 1991, when I started writing bridge software, through 2001, when the accident now known as BBO took place, my company derived all of its income from selling educational CD-ROMs for bridge. It occurred to me that we might eventually end up selling just the data files for download over the Internet (instead of CDs). This would have several advantages for both our company and our customers, but I had to learn how to write a program that would send messages over the Internet to make it possible to do this properly.

The first thing I did was create what became the "Bridge Library" on BBO. I started adding features - online bridge, chat rooms, VuGraph theatre, etc. That is how BBO was born. It took only about two months to get all the basic functionality in place, and ever since then my partners and I have been improving it - a process that I fully expect to continue 'forever'. Now, however, nine years later, the vast majority of the money we make is through the \$1 entry fees that people pay to play in tournaments on our site.

Kib: In the years since then, what have been the major changes to BBO?

FG: Our company has changed a lot. In the beginning the only people working for our company were my wife, Sheri Winestock, and myself. Now there are dozens of people from all over the world who work for us. We are now a real and highly-successful business. I certainly did not foresee this happening - my original



Fred & Sheri in Dublin, 2006

hope was to do nothing more than make enough money selling downloadable content to pay our bills.

We have brought on new business partners over the years. Uday Ivatury came on board as a volunteer programmer shortly after BBO was launched. Sheri and I liked Uday so much and were so impressed by his work that we made him a partner. In 2007 Bill Gates, Sharon Osberg, and David Smith became our business partners by investing in our company.

The number of people using BBO has grown steadily (and continues to grow). I remember how excited we were the first time 100 people were logged in at once. Nowadays over 100,000 people log in to BBO at least once in a typical day, and there are over 16,000 people logged in simultaneously at each day's peak. BBO has members from just about every country in the world. We set a new record last fall when over 23,000 were logged in at once during our vugraph broadcast of the Finals of the Bermuda Bowl.

Our software itself has changed a great deal over the years. Some

highlights include the introduction of tournaments (2003), heavy integration of robot bridge-playing software (2006), and the introduction of new client software that runs in a web browser (2008).

I am happy to say that our core mission, to create a high-quality free online bridge site where players from all over the world are welcome to play, watch, socialize, and learn, has not changed. Something else that has not changed is that I still love the work I do - I have the best possible job in the world for me.

Kib:What were your reasons for leaving Toronto for Las Vegas?

FG: By the time the late 1990s rolled around, I realized that I had the ability to compete effectively at the highest level in bridge and some of the major American sponsors were interested in having me play on their teams. Although our CD-ROM business was generating a good income for Sheri and me, the absurd sums of money that I was being offered to play at the NABCs had the potential to make a big difference to our standard of living. But in order to really make this happen, I was going to have to start living in the USA (so that I would be eligible to play with my sponsored team in the US Team Trials). The concept of doing this had further appeal since, at the time, it was an important personal goal for me to try to win a World Championship. I thought that rated to be easier if I was playing for the USA.

So my move to the USA was mostly about bridge. Sheri and I chose Las Vegas for several reasons: sunny weather, no state income taxes, we had some friends in that city, and good real estate values (this was just before prices started to inflate).

In case some of your proud Canadian readers consider me a traitor for this move, I would like them to know that I was cheering (loudly) when Canada won the hockey Gold Medal in the Vancouver Olympics! Sheri and I are very happy living in Las Vegas, but I suspect we will always consider ourselves to be Canadians.

Kib:Your Canadian team came second in the Bermuda Bowl in Beijing in 1995. Bobby Wolff has stated that Canada was the best team in the event that year, despite losing to his team in the final. Did you consider keeping that team together and trying to bring a World Championship to Canada with that team?

FG: We did try that. The same team played in the 1996 Olympiad in Rhodes. I went into that event full of hope for a Canadian Gold Medal, but for whatever reason none of our three partnerships was able to play at the same level we had achieved in Beijing. No doubt it was our NPC John Gowdy's fault (just kidding, John). Minor variations of our Beijing team performed poorly in the next few CNTCs. The magic was gone.

By 2000, I had made up my mind that I was going to try my luck playing

bridge in the USA. This was not an easy decision to make. Eric Kokish, George Mittelman, and Joey Silver were (and still are) among my closest friends. They were responsible for originally recognizing my talent and giving me a chance to play in the big leagues. They also served as my mentors - much of what I think I know about bridge now came from these three outstanding players. It was not easy for me to abandon them.

I did get a chance for one last hoorah playing for Canada when Joey and I were added to an Alberta-based team to play in the IOC Grand Prix at the 2000 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Only ten teams were invited to play in that event and, on paper at least, Canada was probably considered one of the weakest of those teams. But somehow we managed to shock everyone (including ourselves) with a strong performance to qualify out of the round robin. The shock-level kept increasing when we beat heavily-favoured teams in both the semi-final (Italy) and final (Poland) to bring the Gold Medal home for Canada.

That great moment gave me some second thoughts about the move I was about to make, but so far I have no real regrets.

One of the things I miss most about Canada is Toronto's amazing bridge community. There are a lot of very good players living in Las Vegas, but the local clubs and tournaments here are nothing like what I became accustomed to in Toronto.

Kib: How did your relationship with Bill Gates develop?

FG: One day (in 1997) I received a phone call. "This is Bill Gates' estate manager calling." My first thought was that George Mittelman was playing a joke on me. Then it occurred to me that perhaps Bill had died and I had somehow become entitled to a share of his estate. That was my own joke on me.

What this was really all about was that Bill and Warren Buffett were about to take a vacation on a private train. They were planning on playing bridge on one leg of the trip (from Bozeman, Montana to Denver) and wanted to know if I was available to be the fourth in their game. Warren already knew who I was because he had enjoyed using some of the bridge CD-ROMs that I had created - I believe he was the one who suggested me as their fourth. I knew and liked Sharon Osberg, the other player in the game, through bridge - Sharon is a top-level player. Sharon was kind enough to vouch for me personally, hence my invitation to play in their game.

The next day I received a (first class of course!) airline ticket to Bozeman, got on the train, and played bridge day and night for the next couple of days. When the train arrived in Denver, I headed home to Toronto. Apparently Bill, Warren, and Sharon found me to be a suitable fourth as this was the first of many times that this group played bridge together (at Bill's house, in some tournaments, on the Internet, and in various other random places).

I have become good friends with both Bill and Warren over the years. I must say that I am rather fortunate to have these two guys to draw on for business advice! When I started playing bridge way back in the early 1980s at Ted Horning's club in Thornhill, I doubt anyone would have imagined that it would eventually lead to me hanging out with these truly historic figures. Life sure can be strange.

Kib: What is the current status of the Fred Gitelman/Bill Gates/BBO tie-in?

FG: Bill is one of the shareholders in Bridge Base Online, Ltd. (the name of the company that runs BBO). He is an ideal business partner, always being there to offer great advice when we ask for it and occasionally when he thinks we need it, but never forcing the issue. Every few months we send Bill a cheque that represents his dividends. Of course the money BBO generates doesn't mean anything in the grand scheme of things to Bill, but I'm very glad that the investment he and Sharon and David made has so far turned out to be a very good one for everyone.

Kib: Your partnership with Brad Moss has been one of the most successful in the USA in the past decade. Tell us what each of you brings to the partnership.

FG: Brad and I are two very different people. I have a strong tendency to be quiet and not particularly sociable, while Brad is the life of the party. These traits are part of our natural bridge-

personalities as well - Brad is an extremely aggressive player who has a great will to win while I am a conservative player. We represent two very different extremes, both as people and as bridge players.

One reason I think we work well together as a partnership is that we have both been moderating influences on each other. Our bridge styles and personality types are still very different, but we have both moved somewhat toward the middle as a result of our association.

Our partnership was fortunate in that we see more or less eye-to-eye in terms of bidding theory. We have worked hard on our system, but this process wasn't that much of a struggle since we tend to agree when it comes to matters of system. We have also been fortunate to have had excellent and personable teammates over the years. Brad and I are close friends and we share many common interests other than bridge.

Kib: You and Brad recently formed a team with three other players from the 1991 World Junior Championship (Diamond-Platnick, Hampson) and another junior (Eric Greco) who came along a bit later. Tell us about this team and your hopes for it.

FG: This really is a dream team for me as it is made up of the best American and Canadian players of my generation. Besides that, my teammates are all my friends.

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Aside from a hopeless result in last year's USA Team Trials, 2009 was an excellent first year for our team. We came 2nd in the Vanderbilt, 3rd/4th in the Spingold, and 6th in the Reisinger. However, winning a World Championship is really what we are after. We will get a chance to do that later this year in Philadelphia. If that doesn't work (or even if it does!), we hope to qualify to represent the USA in the 2011 Bermuda Bowl.

Kib: In your opinion, who are currently the best pairs in world?

I think the two best pairs right now are Meckstroth-Rodwell and Balicki-Zmudzinki. Probably it is only fair to include an Italian pair in the top three, but to me there is no clearly best pair on the Italian team - any of their three

pairs is capable of being the best in the world on a given day.

Kib: Tell us about your favourite hand of all time.

You saved the toughest question for the end! No great triumphs from major tournaments really stand out, but here is something closer to home.

I played this hand in a Toronto Sectional in the early 1980s before I became a Life Master. My partner was Roz Keri (Citron). I believe something fundamental changed about my brain chemistry as a result of this hand - I had what I think psychologists would call a "Gestalt experience".

Before this hand was played I lacked the ability to visualize all four hands in my head, but after I forced myself

to figure out the end position that I reached, all of a sudden I could see the light. Really!

Dealer West. Neither Vul.

<p>♠ 10 8 6 4 ♥ 3 ♦ A 9 7 3 ♣ K Q 9 7</p> <p>♠ J 9 7 3 ♥ K 9 6 ♦ 10 6 5 2 ♣ A 10</p>	<p>♠ A 5 2 ♥ J 7 5 4 ♦ K Q ♣ J 8 4 3</p>
<p>♠ K Q ♥ A Q 10 8 2 ♦ J 8 4 ♣ 6 5 2</p>	

West	North	East	South
	Roz		Fred
Pass	Pass	Pass	1 ♥
Pass	1 ♠	Pass	2 ♥

Partner had a right to expect me to hold six hearts on this auction and today I'd either pass one spade or rebid one no trump. But what did I know, I was 18 years old. West led the two of diamonds and I ducked to East's king. He continued with the diamond queen and I won the ace. I thought if I'm ever going to win a trick with the jack, it was right now, so I led another diamond and East, hoping his partner held the jack, discarded a spade.

I tried a club to the king and a spade to the king, both winning, and led a second club. West won the ace and played a spade to East's ace. East

returned the heart four and I put in the eight, losing to the nine. West exited with his last diamond and I ruffed after East pitched a club. These cards were left:

<p>♠ 10 8 ♥ — ♦ — ♣ Q 9</p> <p>♠ J 9 ♥ K 6 ♦ — ♣ —</p>	<p>♠ — ♥ J 7 5 ♦ — ♣ J</p> <p>♠ — ♥ A Q 10 ♦ — ♣ 6</p>
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There was only one card in my hand that would allow me to take three more tricks to make my contract – that was the ace of hearts. When I played it and followed with a club, West was helpless. He discarded and I won the queen and then any card off the dummy allowed me to 'finesse' for East's jack of hearts.

This deal was the 7th in an online bridge column I wrote for about eight years, called "The Deal of the Week". If you want to see some more of my favourite hands, all 393 Deals of the Week are still available at: <http://bbi.bridgebase.com/dotw/>

Kib: Thanks, Fred.

FG: My pleasure, John, and best regards to my many bridge friends who read The Kibitzer.