

Bas Drijver – a Champion in Control

By Christina Lund Madsen

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The hallway outside the vugraph rooms is filled with Dutch and Italian players, fans and kibitzers. All are waiting for the last table to finish. They all know that the Netherlands have just beaten the odds and Italy in the semi-final of the Bermuda Bowl. But the players behind the closed door do not.

As Bas Drijver and his partner exit the room, a roar rises from the crowd, hands are slapped together, the Dutch players are hugging each other, the Italian shake their hands to congratulate them. A little to the side, his friend and opponent in the final the following day Dan Zagorin gives Bas a hug. And a kiss. And then one more hug while whispering him words of encouragement. The usually so composed Bas shakes his head with an air of disbelief and relief.

He is about to win the Bermuda Bowl at the age of 31. Years before even his own well-grown ego dared dreaming of.

"Usually I am not nervous at all when I play big matches. But the last two sets against Italy in Veldhoven, I was bouncing. Not so much at the table, but outside I was really nervous. Also the last set of the final against USA2. We were up by 70, had everything to lose and it did not go so well. It was nerve wrecking. I will never be as nervous again."

Did you like the feeling of being nervous?

"Not really, but it makes the excitement even better when you win. You are obviously that nervous if you really want to win, so if you actually do, it makes it even sweeter. Winning the Bermuda Bowl in our own country with our own supporters was my best moment ever. My first World Championship. Nothing can ever top that."

Facts about Bas Drijver:

- Born 1980 in the Netherlands
- Reigning World Champion and professional bridge player
- Lives in Capelle aan den IJssel, a suburb to Rotterdam
- Married to Femmy Boelaars, who works for the Dutch Bridge Federation. Together they have Emma, 9, and Thomas, 4
- His younger brother Bob is a Dutch World Junior Champion
- Has a law degree and was employed part time as a legal advisor for his local government from 2006- 2012
- Most remarkable results:
 - Olympic silver 2004
 - Open European Champion 2009
 - World Champion 2011

The Best of his Generation

We are sitting on the terrace of his house in an idyllic suburb to Rotterdam on one of the first days of summer. He speaks every sentence thoughtfully and well phrased and I can't help wondering what it takes to bring him out of his composure.

In his youth Bas played every game or any competition with his father and brothers and gambled with his allowance. He believes he owes his competitive nature to the many games they played. Bas' six years younger brother Bob still plays bridge at top level, but his older brother Tom decided at an early age not to pursue bridge, according to Bas because of a very modest opinion about himself, as a contrast to his younger brother.

"I used to be the best of my generation. When I was a teenager the Dutch Bridge Federation made it easy for me. They let me play a lot of hands and sent me abroad."

The Dutch Bridge Federation are renowned for its development of talented juniors, and they soon saw a better match for Bas than his older brother. At another table Sjoert Brink was sitting playing with his older brother.

A Symbiotic Partnership

Despite their different characters, Bas and Sjoert soon formed a successful partnership. However they both had other partners outside junior bridge and egos often colliding, which ultimately made them peacefully go separate ways despite their success as a pair.

"We had part of the same chemistry now as then. We always try to outsmart each other, which is why we stopped. Sjoert was actually glad when I made a mistake. Not a very healthy partnership. But we have always been very good friends. We didn't form that serious a partnership as juniors, so it wasn't a big splitup."

For a while Bas played in the open team first with Simon de Wijs, then Maarten Schollardt, while Sjoert played with Ricco van Prooijen. They even managed to win Olympic silver in 2004 as teammates.



Bas Drijver and Sjoert Brink. Photo: Jonathan Steinberg

"I thought Sjoert and I would be a better match to reach the level I wanted. Sjoert thought the same, so we started again. Now we got more serious about bridge. We got a little older. I got a bit more mature. Sjoert didn't really."

What is the strength of your partnership?

"Our attitude towards bidding. We play a little more aggressive and imaginative. Sjoert is a big innovator. We try to find the best solution in the bidding and have a lot of competitive agreements. We don't make the difference in the card playing. A lot of American players play cards very well, but the bidding is not always as good."

While talking about his partnership with Sjoert, Bas lights up. They play tennis together, make silly bets and compete about everything besides women.

"We are good friends. It makes a lot of difference. We spend so much time together. We used to always share a room. We still do that in America, but not for the rest of the tournaments."



Bas Drijver Photo: Louk Herber

When Bas attempts to describe himself, the easiest way to do so for him is to compare himself to his opposite – his partner:

How would you describe yourself as a bridge player in three words?

"Boring, technical, focused. Sjoert is outgoing and imaginative. I think that works better if you have a partner who is a little more solid. If you describe me as solid, some Americans would laugh, but I am still more solid than Sjoert is, I think most people would agree."

What does it take to be a good bridge player?

That you can concentrate for a long period. Intelligence. Imagination. That you can read people well. Table presence.

Are you good at reading people?

No, it is more Brinkie's style (his nickname for Sjoert). My main thing is that I try to avoid mistakes and make the best technical play."

In particular American players find it difficult to remember who is who despite their very different personalities. Perhaps due to their symbiotic partnership – or their very Dutch names.

Family Man

We are warmly interrupted by Bas' wife and children returning from school. His nine-year old girl and four-year old boy run to their father to hug him and sit on his lap for a while, telling him about their day.

Seeing him in his home surrounded by his family you would imagine Bas Drijver to be a reserved guy living a quiet family life with a nine-to-five desk job. If he weren't one of the world's greatest bridge players, this would be spot on.

In 2006 he got first job for the local government working as a legal advisor. At first he worked four days a week, then two days a week, and in September 2012 he finally quit.

"I liked my co-workers, but my problem was I never got into the work. I played so much bridge, had a family, so work was something on the side for me."

How has your wife handled your choice of career?

We had a good discussion before we started with Team Orange (a Dutch project to develop the best players into world class players, ed.). Then it gradually became bigger and I started making money. She loves the game. For her it is not always that easy. It is pretty hard on her when I go away for such a long time. I try when I am at home to be the man of the house, do the cleaning, washing and stuff with the children."

And how do your children cope with it?

"They are used to nothing else. They take turn sleeping next to their mommy. They always beg for presents, but I don't always bring it. My daughter likes to spend a whole day with me playing bridge, but she is not so interested in it. If you give my son cards he will rip them up."

"When I am here, you have me 24-7. I think it is a pretty good compensation for being away 15-20 weeks. We never play regionals; some of the other pros are at least 30 weeks on the road. With my family I would not do that."

Bas got married at a very young age and became a father by the age of 23.

"I have always had an old soul. I was always serious about most things. Especially compared to Sjoert. If I commit to something, I generally stay with it. It is part of my character. It is no coincidence that my first girlfriend is also my wife."

Introvert or arrogant

How would you describe yourself in three words?

"Easy-going. I don't know anybody who would describe me like that, but I still think of myself as easy-going." He smiles peculiarly.

He looks calmly to the side and leans back in the chair while considering his next words.

"Painfully honest, regardless of the feelings of others. Not my best character trait. I don't say everything out loud anymore. Some people found it really annoying. I learned a more socially acceptable behaviour. I take the feelings of other people a little more into consideration."

"Sarcastic." The last word falls without hesitation or further elaboration. Having talked to Bas for five seconds you would agree.

Through the self-confidence gained through years of success at the bridge table his reserved nature is often perceived as arrogance – and sometimes rightfully so.

"In some situations I can see myself acting very arrogant. I am really different as a person compared to when I play a tournament and speak about bridge. Sjoert, Simon and I always try to outwit and tease each other. In bridge discussions I am very strong-minded. It is either my opinion or you are absolutely out of your mind. Not a lot between. Also with Sjoert I know I shouldn't react on some things, it serves no purpose. But I have an uncontrollable urge to say something.

Outside of bridge I am a little bit more reserved or introvert. Within the bridge scene and discussions I am pretty outspoken."

Five questions for Bas Drijver

What are you good at besides bridge?

"Nothing."

Do you have any hobbies?

"I love to play tennis. I love any sport, but I am only good at bridge. It is the only sport I can play without injuring anybody else."

What is your prediction for the BB in Bali?

"This year will be a lot tougher. Two more teams are among the favourites. In the last Bermuda Bowl we only had to beat Italy. Now we also have Monaco and USA1, who by adding Levin and Weinstein are as strong as the Nickell-team (who did not qualify, ed.).

We are the 4th team for me, the outsider. We are coming pretty close to the other teams, but I would still think each of them has a better chance."

How would you rank yourself and Sjoert as a world partnership?

"We are definitely in the top 10. In random order there is Meckstroth-Rodwell, Fantoni-Nunes, Bocchi-Madala, Helgemo-Helness, Levin-Weinstein, perhaps Balicki-Zmudzinski, and us. We are between 5th and 10th in the world."

What is the main goal of your partnership?

"To win an American National."

Bridge as mirror of the soul

In an interview with Bas and Sjoert in a Dutch newspaper before the World Championship in 2011, Bas was quoted for saying that bridge is the mirror of the soul; a quote that ended as the headline of the article.

"It made me look like the boring civil servant, and Sjoert as the flamboyant Casanova he is. Sort of the same way as in bridge. So bridge is the mirror of the soul, because it shows the way you are in real life."

At this summer's Spingold Bas played 3NT in the last board of a dangerously close match against the Polish team that eventually won the tournament. For the victory he had to guess whether to take a simple finesse with AQ or play for a stiff king of diamonds sitting after him. After long thought he played to drop the king. This time it was wrong. Outside his teammates had been waiting and hoping. Long before Bas played his card they guessed that he would play for the drop.

He exited the playing room with sad eyes. "I am sorry. I didn't make it." His teammates needed not tell him it was over. It was evident by the silence. Although they all know any board could have changed the outcome, the player making the final decision always carries the biggest burden. That moment mirrored the vulnerability of Bas Drijver.

How does it make you feel thinking that you will play bridge for the rest of your life?

"Great. I would be scared if I could never play bridge again. Or if I could not be a bridge pro and I would have to work five days a week. It is not my life. Perhaps if I had not known this life, it would be possible for me, but now that I know this life, I would never want to go back to the other life."