

What it was like at my first major event

By Sabine Auken

Many-time world champion Sabine Auken, now of Denmark and formerly of Germany, recalls her first major event. It was the World Championship in Miami in 1986. American bridge players remember Sabine for her fantastic feat of becoming an ACBL Life Master in six weeks in 1989, partnered usually by Ron Andersen.

White beaches, luxury yachts, Miami Vice, Don Johnson, blue eyes -- surely that's what was on the mind of two young German girls traveling to Miami Beach in 1986.

Nothing of the sort, try again!

Aces, kings and queens, spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs and how to take as many tricks as possible come much closer to the truth. Somehow the German Bridge Federation had become convinced of our potential and, who knows, maybe there could be some hope for a future medal. Thus they subsidized a trip to Miami for Daniela von Arnim and me. So off we went to our first World Championship, full of expectations.

On the plane we met two young chaps from England, a tall skinny one and a shorter one with glasses. Do bridge players have a natural magnetism to one another? They were on their way to the championships as well, so what more obvious way to pass the time than playing bridge in the back of the plane?

Their names are Glynn Liggins and Andrew Robson. Who would have thought that years later they would be famous internationals, that Andy together with Tony Forrester would form one of Britain's premier partnerships that would dominate the tournament scene for a long time?

My first encounter with American culture was not a success. I had tried to fill in the immigration form for all visitors to the U.S. as diligently as possible, but had left the space for the address during my stay blank. Not out of stubbornness -- I simply didn't know it.

Daniela and I had agreed to share an apartment with two friends from Germany who had already been in Miami for a week's vacation. They were supposed to pick us up at the airport. What did I care where the apartment was? The immigration officer was not at all satisfied with this explanation. He almost wouldn't let me into the country. At this point I really turned stubborn -- where I was going to stay was none of his business! I was fuming. In the end he gave me permission to stay for the duration of the championships, and not a single day more.

From then on everything was plain sailing. Our friends Georg Nippgen and Jockel Bitchene took us safely to our home for the next two weeks, the Beekman Suites Hotel, 9499 Collins Avenue, Bal Harbour, Florida. There you go, Mr. Immigration officer.

As the games began we could smell the international tournament air. We kicked off with the Mixed Pairs, in which I played with a good friend from Augsburg, Andreas Pawlik, Germany's by far best-looking bridge-playing ophthalmologist.

Once, after one of my usual silly mistakes, my partner seemed a bit upset. "Don't you know whom we just played against?" he asked. "That was Eric Rodwell." I nodded knowingly, but in reality had no clue. Who was Eric Rodwell? Two weeks later Eric Rodwell and Jeff Meckstroth became the World Pairs champions.

The only other things I remember from the mixed event are the fact that we were East-West every single round and that we walked past an American lady who had painted spades, hearts, diamonds and clubs all over her fingernails. My mistakes were not very memorable and we finished nowhere. Still I enjoyed every single minute!

The next event was the Rosenblum Teams, where Dani and I were playing with our friends Hasi Gwinner and Andreas and another German pair that was famous for their unreliability. You never knew whether they would show up for a round or not. We got knocked out fairly early and landed in the never-ending Swiss. There were seemingly endless breaks between the matches, but every single one was an exciting adventure.

One round we played against a father-son combination from England. The son could not have been more than 14-15 years old and it appeared his twin brother was playing at the other table. His bridge was very impressive and he clearly was convinced that Dani and



Sabine Auken, left, and Daniela Von Arnim.

I would be easy prey. So of course we had to prove that we were not just two giggling girls exchanging boyfriend pictures. It was a matter of the highest prestige.

By the way, their last name was Hackett. Who could imagine that 15 years later we would be attending his brother's wedding with one of our teammates on the German Ladies National team in Manchester, England?

At one point our teammates became very agitated. "Next round we are going to play against Malcolm Brachman's team," they whispered excitedly. Apparently Malcolm Brachman was a well-known sponsor from Texas who had even won a world championship. We marveled that there was such a thing as bridge professionals getting paid large sums of money for playing bridge.

Time passed quickly and we thoroughly enjoyed life in the international bridge circus. There were always lots of people around and it was never boring. There was this Frenchman wandering about the lobby telling everybody that wanted to listen and also those that didn't that he is not playing against two opponents, but five. His partner and his teammates were conspiring against him all the time as well. They call him "The Cigar." The French also call him "Enfant Terrible", but his real name is Paul Chemla.

Now, years later, whenever I meet him at a tournament, the first thing he asks me is: "How are your children?" And when he visited my home in Copenhagen for dinner he told me, "If I had a family and home like yours, I would never play bridge again."

We were invited to a cocktail party on the luxury yacht of Florida millionaire Diana Holt, where we met a lot of people. There was this American guy who insisted on telling me his whole life story while he constantly jumped up and down and moved from one side to the other. This was Alan Sontag. I thought it was wonderful to meet him -- I read *The Bridge Bum* months later.

And who says there are no good-looking male bridge players? I distinctly remember a very attractive young man from a Middle Eastern country. Long walks on the beach in the moonlight, a long kiss goodbye in the lobby of my hotel. Furtive looks around -- hopefully none of my friends was around to see anything. If only there wasn't a boyfriend waiting back in Germany!

Meanwhile Dani and I were doing quite well in the Women's Pairs. We qualified for the semifinals and then the final. Only 28 pairs were playing in that and we actually finished 7th. What a thrill, we were in seventh heaven! Is it really all over now and do we really have to go back home to our everyday life? Are we ever going to have so much fun again?

Many championships have followed that first one, and every single one of them has been a new and exciting experience. I have been to many countries, gained a lot of insight into other cultures and other peoples' mentality. But most and best of all I have made a lot of friends whom I meet again and again wherever the bridge circus pitches its tents.