

The natural: Bobby Levin now at a high point in his life

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The way **Bobby Levin** sees it, providence made him a bridge player, and he may be right. Consider some of the evidence. As a boy of 12, he found himself in Southampton on Long Island one summer with weather so bad he couldn't go outside. His mother was interested in bridge and bought him a book. They started learning together. "It was like nature made me learn bridge," Levin says. At the age of 13, he won the first tournament event he ever entered -- the Men's Pairs in a tough field at a New York sectional.

Ten years later, he became the youngest player ever to win a world championship -- the 1981 Bermuda Bowl. "He is just a natural," says Jeff Wolfson, with whom Levin won the Life Master Open Pairs at the 1994 Summer NABC in San Diego.

At 41, Levin is at a high point in his life. He and wife Jill -- "the woman of my dreams" -- will celebrate their first wedding anniversary in January. A recently formed partnership with **Steve Weinstein** has rekindled Levin's hunger to be the best, and he feels content in the bosom of a host of family members who live nearby in the Orlando area.

Now somewhat of a philosopher, Levin says he can appreciate the good times so much because he can remember the low points, "and I've had lots of them." There have been 1-IMP losses in major events, a grand slam disaster in the world championships in Chile and the time in the Bermuda Bowl he went down in a cold slam that he could have claimed at trick one. Not long ago, Levin felt like sharing some of those character-building moments with a fellow player. At a regional in Daytona, one of Levin's opponents failed to take the setting trick against him, costing the opponent the event, which Levin won.

"He turned white," Levin recalls, "and it looked as if he wanted to kill himself." Levin knew just how he felt, so after the game, Levin took the fellow to the hotel bar and bought him a drink. "I told him about some of the things that I've been through," Levin says. "He hugged me after we talked because it made him feel better." Levin's mother, Sheila Kleeman, remembers when her son -- she calls him Robert -- took an interest in bridge. "He was most curious," she remembers, "and very aggressive about my teaching him what I had learned. He was relentless." It wasn't long after Levin learned the rudiments that he and his mother were going to a bridge club in New York frequented by Abe Goldstein, well known in New York bridge circles at the time. **Goldstein** quickly noticed Levin's potential and took the youngster under his wing. One day, Goldstein confided that for 20 years he had been playing in a sectional event named after him. All his partners were experts and Goldstein was at or near the bottom each year. With a twinkle in his eye, Goldstein told Levin, "Maybe if I play with an idiot like you I'll do better."

"Better" turned out to be first place. "It was like God was watching me," Levin recalls. "I played incredibly well for a bad player." For two years after that, Levin won nothing and played miserably. Still, the victory in his first tournament was enough to get him hooked. Levin recalls that the allure of bridge in those early days was the process of going from Long Island into New York to play and meeting lots of different people.

Then again, he recalls, "the more I did it the more I enjoyed the competitive aspects of bridge." Hungry for bridge knowledge, Levin would go home after each session and study the hands. Luckily, Levin remembers, "I had a talent to see what happened and learn from my mistakes. I did see the light at times."

Despite his enthusiasm, Levin never harbored a thought of great achievements in bridge, such as world

championships or a career in bridge. "I was just having fun and enjoying the mental stimulation." When Levin was 15, the family moved to Miami. Levin's parents had divorced and the family -- including Levin's brothers, Charles, Fred and Michael -- wanted a new start. Not long after arriving in Florida, Levin became a Life Master at the age of 15 years and four months, the youngest at the time to earn his gold card. Today, he is Grand Life Master with nearly 20,000 masterpoints.

Once in Miami, Levin gravitated to Will Simon's bridge club on 41st Street, where he met two players - - Billy Seamon and Russ Arnold -- who had a profound influence on his bridge career. "They taught me a lot about bridge," Levin says. "Billy was a great player -- very disciplined. He was also a great guy with a terrific sense of humor."

By the age of 17, Levin was playing professionally on teams with Arnold, sponsored by Bud Reinhold. After a year at Miami-Dade Community College, Levin entered the University of Florida in a pre-law curriculum, playing bridge professionally on weekends to earn extra money.

His first North American championship came at the 1978 Spring NABC in Houston, where he and **Mike Passell** won the Open Pairs. Levin had played most of the tournament with his good friend Ron Smith (San Francisco), but Smith told him playfully, "I'm tired of looking at you." Levin was 18 at the time.

The following year, the bridge world took notice of Levin at the Fall NABC in Cincinnati. He and Smith won the Blue Ribbon Pairs convincingly, then his team -- Reinhold, Arnold, Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell- tied for first in the Reisinger Board-a-Match Teams.

Since the Reisinger was a qualifying event for the team trials to determine ACBL's representative to the world championships, a playoff was necessary.

The two squads -- the opposition was **Ira Corn, Ira Rubin, Fred Hamilton, Bob Hamman and Bobby Wolff** -- settled in for a 12-board playoff in the wee hours of the morning. On one memorable deal, Levin jumped

into a strong club auction by **Hamman-Wolff** with a 2 Spade bid. The opening 1 Club bidder held A K Q 10 9 in spade behind Levin and, naturally, doubled. The five trump tricks were all the defenders took, however, as Levin scored it up for a win. The Reinhold team lost the playoff in Cincinnati, but the team went to Fresno CA the following spring and won the Vanderbilt Knockout Teams, qualifying for the team trials. The squad easily won the right later that year to represent the U.S. in the 1981 Bermuda Bowl in Port Chester NY. The team added John Solodar and defeated Pakistan for the championship. While the Bermuda Bowl was going on, one of the most interested observers in the New York area was Goldstein, Levin's first mentor, who was hospitalized with terminal cancer. "Every day," recalls Levin's mother, "Abe wanted to know everything that was going on." The day that the Reinhold team was crowned as Bermuda Bowl champions, Kleeman arranged for Goldstein to be taken to the host hotel. Goldstein was wheeled into the ballroom during the victory celebration. Among the players who spoke to him was **Zia Mahmood**, a member of the losing Pakistani team. Said Zia to Goldstein: "I wish you had been *my* teacher." The day after he won the Bermuda Bowl, Levin returned to the law office run by Janet Reno (now U.S. Attorney) in Miami. He was employed there as part of a work-study project. Levin recalls the pivotal moment in that part of his career: "This woman handed me a big pile of subpoenas that I was supposed to serve in Liberty City -- a really bad part of town. I said to myself, 'This isn't for me. I like the other life better.'" "Within a couple of weeks, Levin had gone to work for Reinhold, who had a fiberglass factory in Hialeah. Levin did everything from cost studies to sales, playing bridge on weekends "for real money."

Another major turning point in his life occurred during the World Bridge Championships in Biarritz, France. "It rained for 17 days," Levin recalls, "and I was sick as a dog. One day I walked into a restroom, coughing my head off, and there was **Ron Rubin**. He said, 'When are you going to come to work in the options business?' " Three months later, Levin was in Chicago, taken in by Wolfson, who offered Levin a place to stay while he got settled. Wolfson also helped Levin learn options trading. "He was like a brother to me," Levin says. "He was there for me in every possible

way.” Says Wolfson: “Bobby had the same ability as a trader that he has as a bridge player. He is very talented when it comes to games, and options trading is really just a game.” Despite his talent, Levin had difficulty at first. “I couldn’t make a trade,” Levin remembers, “because the others were too good and too fast.” In fact, the best trader at the exchange appeared to have it in for Levin. One day, Levin and the top trader were on the floor of the exchange and the man appeared to be nervous. It turned out he was waiting for his mother. When she arrived, she rushed right past her son and went straight to Levin, giving him a big hug and kiss. She then turned to her son to say, “You be nice to him or I’ll wallop you.” It turns out that the woman had met Levin at a bridge tournament. She was looking for a partner and didn’t know what to do, so she asked Levin, whose photo she had seen in *The Bridge Bulletin*. Levin had taken her by hand and led her to the partnership desk, waiting with her until she found a partner. The woman had not forgotten Levin’s kindness.

“The guy took me to lunch that day in a limousine,” Levin recalls. Levin was back in Florida after the market crashed in 1987, entering the real estate business with one of his brothers. He moved to the Orlando area in 1988 and has been here ever since. The partnership with **Peter Weichsel** began in 1985 and lasted for 13 years -- and Levin gives Weichsel considerable credit for his growth as a bridge player. “I learned a tremendous amount of bridge from him,” Levin says of Weichsel. “I can’t say I’ll ever be as good a partner as Peter is, but he helped me improve.” Levin is charged up about his new partnership with Weinstein. “Steve is a phenomenal player and partner. He has rejuvenated my hunger for the game and my desire to be the best in the world.” At this stage in his life, Levin feels that everything has come together for him. Last Jan. 31, he married longtime friend **Jill Blanchard**. “Of all my accomplishments,” he says, “marrying her has been the best thing

that has ever happened to me.” The Levins now consider themselves the parents of three children -- his son Andrew and her sons, Shane and Justin. Bridge is Levin’s business -- he plays a lot on the Internet, and goes to a handful of regionals each year and is now playing on **Richard Schwartz**’s team with Weinstein -- but he still insists that it be fun. “I want to win as much as the next guy, but bridge is the kind of game where you lose most of the time. I play a lot with **Michael Seamon**, and the reason we can play together so much is that we have fun.”