



Interview with Dan Korbel



Kib: It's been a fabulous year for you...how would you rank your highlights and where does winning the Richmond fit in on that list?

DK: The biggest highlight was definitely winning my first NABC championship at the Denver nationals. The Mitchell Open BAM was a real roller coaster, as we were three full boards behind the leaders and had a few bad boards in the final evening session. But when we played against the leading team, we had definitely won both boards at our table, so we knew we had a chance. It was a really exciting moment. The biggest lowlight(?) was losing in the Spingold in the summer by one phantom IMP. For those who don't know the story, we had beaten the Jimmy Cayne team (who went on to -- temporarily -- win the Spingold) in the round of 8 by 1 IMP. Unfortunately, during an appeal process, Lotan Fisher and Ron Schwartz successfully argued to gain 2 IMPs back, and we ended up losing by 1 IMP. It turns out there was a mis-scored board and the match was actually ending in a tie, but we found this out too late to do anything about it. Ultimately, this harrowing loss led to my teammate, Boye Brogeland, realizing that Fisher-Schwartz were up to something

and triggered the catching of some very big name cheaters in bridge, so I guess a lot of good came of it, but it was very hard to take at the time.

I have always wanted to win the Richmond trophy, and I could see that I had a good shot at winning this year, so I went for it. It was a fun year and winning the Richmond trophy is an honour and a highlight.

Kib: Do you see yourself moving to the US to play fulltime someday?

DK: It's definitely on my radar. Unfortunately the professional opportunities are so much greater in the US, that it is hard to be a successful bridge professional and live in Canada.

Kib: If you and one of your partners (Darren Wolpert or Huub Bertens) could have any other two pairs who are currently playing competitively on your 6-person team to save the world from alien invaders in an all-world bridge match, who would be on your team?

DK: There are so many fabulous bridge players out there that this question is impossible to answer. The individual

player who has always played the best against me is Bobby Levin.

Kib: How is your partnership coming along with Huub and can we expect to see you two playing together on the Richie Schwartz team this year?

2015 Richmond Trophy Leaderboard

- 1) 2372* Daniel Korbel, Hamilton
- 2) 1868 Shan Huang, Toronto
- 3) 1617 Jonathan Steinberg, Toronto
- 4) 1399 David Sabourin, Ottawa
- 5) 1106 Richard Chan, Markham
- 6) 1007 Dan Jacob, Vancouver
- 7) 874 Cameron Doner, Surrey
- 8) 833 Hannah Moon, Prince Albert
- 9) 730 Nicolas L'Ecuyer, Montreal
- 10) 694 Susan Peters, Vancouver
- 11) 693 Keith Heckley, Hamilton
- 12) 676 Martin Hunter, Mississauga
- 13) 671 Ken Scholes, Bellevue
- 14) 667 Andrew Firko, Oakville
- 15) 645 Ray Jotcham, Scarborough
- 16) 643 Heather Peckett, Nepean
- 17) 625 Joseph Sauro, North Bay
- 18) 574 David Baker, Kitchener

*New record

DK: Huub and I will not be playing together in the next cycle; we both have different professional engagements. I will be staying on the Richie Schwartz team though and am excited at the prospect.

In terms of playing with Huub, it has been a fabulous experience for me. I agreed to play mostly Huub's system, which is quite a lot different from the Canadian

approach to bidding. I remember the first regional we played together at in June, I was so topsy-turvy I'm sure that Huub was regretting that I would be his partner for the next year! But after some practice with the system our partnership started developing and we have become surprisingly effective. Huub is a complete natural at bridge; he always knows the whole hand and knows what cards to play on defense and declaring. It's a real treat to watch.

Kib: I remember one of your first sectionals. We played on a team together in Brampton—Don Brock brought you out. It was evident then that you take to the game in a natural way. What part of the game do you think you had to work the hardest at—that is, was there a facet of the game that did not come naturally? If so, how did you overcome that 'weakness'?

DK: Haha, yes, I remember that Sectional like it was yesterday! That was not my first Sectional, but it was my first ever Flight A victory. I remember how exciting that was! Thanks for bringing that up. Back then I of course had no

idea that bridge would take me as far as it has.

There are two types of players: naturals and thinkers. I am definitely a "natural" player. Neither way is better than the other; it's more a factor of how one's brain approaches the game. For example, when I think about bridge my brain automatically eliminates a number of

possibilities that it deems irrelevant, whereas from my understanding a thinker will explore many more possibilities to arrive at their conclusion. Frequent Richmond Trophy winner Shan Huang is a good example of a thinker.

The part of the game that is hardest for me is giving partner leeway. If partner has made a weird bid or a wrong play, instead of allowing for it I might bury him for it. This is something I have been working on recently. Playing Precision with some of my partners has helped since in Precision you never have a good hand for your bidding, unless you open 1♣, so I have become accustomed to letting partners off the hook.

Kib: Do you think newer players can overcome their weaknesses with hard work or does there need to be an innate sense of the game in order for someone to achieve success?

DK: It is really helpful to have that unquantifiable ability known as “card

sense,” but I really believe that a good work ethic and learning the game the right way is enough to achieve success. The most important thing is to have the right attitude to the game: it’s OK to make mistakes (EVERYONE does, even superstar players) but it’s extremely important to have the mindset of wanting to learn and improve, rather than the mindset of rationalizing your actions and being critical of partner’s mistakes.

When I was new to bridge, I read every bridge book I could get my hands on. This was extremely helpful to me when I was learning the game: the constant drills and exposure to situations and concepts was a good substitute for experience.

Learning to count is one of the most important things you can do if you want to improve. An expert player is always counting: counting tricks, counting trumps, counting high card points, and especially counting the opponents’ distributions. For example, an expert



Huub Bertens and Dan Korbel celebrating their victory in the Mitchell Open BAM in Denver

visualizes declarer's hand—he asks himself, Is declarer 5-4-3-1 or 5-4-2-2? The reason good players seem to take all their tricks on defense is that they pay attention to the cards played and the distributions around the table, and know what to do with that information. It's not magic, but it is hard work. The good news is that I can tell you that once you learn to do it, the game becomes easier and more natural, until it's just part of the way you play the game. And bridge becomes even more fun when you make great plays because you are counting.

It's very helpful to find a good teacher or teachers; one way is if your local area has a mentor program, or if you have the disposable income, hiring a professional is effective. Or even just finding a better player you trust and asking their advice on situations you find difficult. Just be careful that you are asking the right people for advice; it can be detrimental to learn bad habits or bad bidding ideas.

Kib: Does one need to be brilliant at bridge in order to succeed?

Bridge isn't about the hands where you do something brilliant; they are few and far between, and in fact I will often go an entire tournament without doing anything that I am particularly proud of. It's a matter of fact that bridge is won in the trenches. Winning bridge is about counting the points so you get your K-J guesses right more of the time, or counting the distributions so you know when or and when not to make a switch, or making the best bid every time.

Kib: Thanks, Dan, and all the best in 2016.

Q: How does Dan Korbel win 13 IMPS? By being a good bidder. Watch him bid to a beautiful 7 Diamond contract with John Carruthers. This deal is from a Regional Swiss a few years ago. JC was West, Dan East.

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

JC	Dan
1♣	1♠
2♣	2♦
3♦	4♦
4♥	4NT
5♣	5♥
7♣	7♦
All Pass	

Dan's 4♦ bid set diamonds as trumps; he was confident JC would trust that this bid is forcing so JC bid 4♥ to show a control (ace, king, singleton or void). 4NT was Roman Keycard Blackwood. 5♣ showed one keycard with diamonds as trump. Dan then bid 5♥ to ask about the queen of diamonds. JC knew that Dan implied they held all five keycards, as it went past the safety level of 5 Diamonds. Thus, 5♥ was a grand slam try. JC accepted and bid 7♣ to emphasize his great clubs. Dan corrected to 7♦.

And that's the way you do it.