

Benito Garozzo: still driven by a passion for the game

Two of the players mentioned in this story - Benito Garozzo and Billy Eisenberg - celebrated birthdays in Maastricht on Tuesday. Garozzo, winner of 13 World Championships, is competing in the World Transnational Mixed Teams. The article, written by Brent Manley, was first published in the ACBL Bridge Bulletin in 1994.

Less than two weeks before the start of the 1961 Bermuda Bowl, the defending world champions from Italy – the vaunted Blue Team – had a problem. Guglielmo Siniscalco, Pietro Forquet's regular partner and a member of the world championship team from 1959, could not go to Buenos Aires for the Bermuda Bowl.

Siniscalco's replacement? A 33-year-old Fiat salesman from Naples, a player described in one report as "an unknown in international bridge circles." Was the Blue Team finally vulnerable?

There might have been even more serious doubts if it had been known that the new recruit - one Benito Garozzo - had been forced to learn the Neapolitan Club system in 10 days. Although experienced as a bridge player, Garozzo recalls, "I had never played any conventions before."

Far from being a liability, Garozzo helped the Italians to a runaway victory as they vanquished the USA, Argentina and France by an average margin of 123 IMPs in three 144-board matches. Eight more world championships – six Bermuda Bowls and two World Team Olympiads – followed for the Italians before they retired from competition after the 1969 Championships. Garozzo was a part of each team.

In all, he won 13 world titles – four of them after the Blue Team "unretired" in 1972.

Today Garozzo enjoys a relatively quiet life in Palm Beach FL – he became a USA citizen in January 1994 – but he had lost none of his drive to compete and, according to those who know him, little of the skill that made him such a formidable player in his prime. In the heyday of the Blue Team, Garozzo was considered by many to be the best player in the world.

"He's still a very fine player," says Billy Eisenberg, Garozzo's regular partner for many years, "and he's one of the truly great theoreticians in the game."

"For me," says Zia, the globe-hopping internationalist, "Benito is one of the gods of bridge. What he and the Blue Team did is legendary and I love him for what he stands for - plus, he's a great guy."

Bob Hamman, who sits atop the World Bridge Federation player rankings, was impressed by Garozzo's performance in the computerized individual PAMP Par Contest during the 1990 world championships in Geneva, Switzerland. Garozzo, then 63, bested a star-studded field by a wide margin. Hamman, who was second, has been chafing for a rematch ever since.

"His performance," says Hamman, "was remarkable."

A few months after Geneva, Garozzo and Eisenberg were first in the Cap Gemini Pandata World Top Tournament in the Hague, Netherlands – perhaps the strongest pair tournament in



Benito celebrates his birthday at the table!

the world.

As recently as last spring, Garozzo, Eisenberg and their teammates were in the thick of the Vanderbilt Knockout Teams, finishing in a tie for third.

While many players with his record might be content to rest on their laurels and relive past glories, Garozzo is still ready to fight. There's no rocking chair in his future.

"I miss the high competition," he says modestly, "and I think I can still do it. I would like to play a big event, but it is difficult to get a team together."

Garozzo has come a long way from the day when, at 16, he picked up a

Culbertson book on bridge and left another card game - the Italian favorite tresette – behind forever.

Born in Naples, Garozzo lived much of his early life in Cairo, Egypt, where his father did engineering work. In 1943, Garozzo was sent to a state college in Italy to begin his education. While visiting his sister in Naples, Garozzo found himself stranded in the city – World War II activity made it impossible for him to return to college.

While he was in Naples, Garozzo, his brother-in-law and a couple of friends decided to learn bridge for a change of pace. "We got a 1933 Culbertson book," Garozzo recalls, "but none of us knew English. We were playing a kind of bridge no one would understand."

A games aficionado from his youth, Garozzo took to bridge right away. "I have always loved cards," Garozzo says, "and I saw bridge as the most interesting card game. It is the most complete game you can find. I still love it."

Garozzo went back and forth between Italy and Egypt a couple of times before returning to Naples for good in 1954. By then he had met some of the rising stars of Italian bridge - Forquet, Siniscalco and Eugenio Chiaradia (inventor of the Neapolitan Club), among others. Garozzo impressed them with his expertise, mostly in rubber bridge games.

When he wasn't working with his brother in the road construction business, Garozzo played more and more bridge. Drafted by the Italian army in 1956, Garozzo was fortunate to be stationed in Rome - he played bridge every day during his 18-month stint.

He worked as an accountant for a year after his discharge and went back to the road construction business before starting the job with the Fiat representative, handling some of the company's accounting. That lasted until he opened a jewelry store in 1964, a business now operated by his son, Fulvio. He also has a daughter, Silvana.

In his formative years, Garozzo's skill as a player far exceeded

his expertise in bidding. "I was a wild bidder," he says. "I had a lot of flair in card play but I was not a good technician in the bidding."

Garozzo's panache was evident on this deal from the 1976 World Team Olympiad. He was playing with Arturo Franco against Austria.

Dealer South. N/S Vul.

♠ 10 6 5 2 ♥ J 9 ♦ 8 3 ♣ 7 6 5 3 2	♠ K Q J 8 ♥ 10 5 4 3 ♦ Q 6 ♣ Q 9 4 <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: 5px auto; display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> N W E S </div> ♠ 4 3 ♥ A Q 8 7 2 ♦ A K 9 ♣ A K J	♠ A 9 7 ♥ K 6 ♦ J 10 7 5 4 2 ♣ 10 8	
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West	North	East	South
Garozzo		Franco	2♣
Pass	2♠	Pass	3♥
Pass	4♥	Pass	4NT
Pass	5♣	Pass	5♦
Pass	6♥	All Pass	

Every North-South pair in the field – 23 in all – bid to 6♥. After any normal lead, declarer's best hope for the contract is the ♥K onside doubleton. Thus the contract was made at every table – except the one where Garozzo was on lead.

Garozzo selected for his opening lead the ♥9! Declarer covered with the 10 and Franco played the king, which he would certainly do from the holding of K-J-6. Taken in, South went to dummy with a diamond and played a low heart to his 8 and Garozzo's jack.

The unbreakable contract had been broken. Garozzo's inspired lead had produced a 17 - IMP pickup for the Blue Team. After playing in the 1961 Bermuda Bowl, Garozzo set about improving the Neapolitan Club. "It was quite a simple system," he says, "and not so good. I improved it."

Garozzo is still very much involved in bidding theory, recently devising a new Precision system just for his favorite partner, Lea duPont. Garozzo jokes that "Lea is on strike. She refuses to learn a new system."

"Of course I'll learn it," said duPont, who met Garozzo at a bridge game in the Seventies. They have been together since 1977 and have had success at high levels as partners, winning the North American Swiss Teams in 1984 after placing second in the event in 1982. They were second in the Mixed Pairs (1893) and the Open Swiss Teams (1993). They also won several European tournaments while they were living in Italy.

In the Seventies, Garozzo was commissioned by the Volmac company in Europe to train the men's and women's teams in the Netherlands. As part of that effort, he developed a new Precision system.

From 1961 to 1975, Garozzo and the Blue Team played in 10 Bermuda Bowls and three Olympiads – and won them all. The streak ended in Monte Carlo in 1976, when they were defeated twice, first in the Bermuda Bowl by the USA and then in the

Olympiad by Brazil. They were second in both events.

A member of the USA team which defeated Italy in the Bermuda Bowl final was Eisenberg, now one of Garozzo's closest friends. The two live 20 minutes apart – Eisenberg lives in Boca Raton – and they get together frequently. Eisenberg and Garozzo were born on September 5, 10 years apart.

"Benito is a very, very novel person," Eisenberg says. "He has an orientation in bridge that no one else in America has."

Garozzo knew America well before he

moved to the USA in 1985. He visited the USA regularly to attend jewelry shows and played lots of bridge, including a tour with the Omar Sharif Bridge Circus in the sixties. In 1988, he requested and received a green card to work as a bridge pro, allowing him to stay permanently. His sponsor was the late Sam Stayman, an old bridge adversary but a friend away from the table. "Without Sam Stayman," Garozzo says, "I wouldn't be an American."

He still returns to Italy regularly to give seminars on bridge and to coach the Italian Junior bridge team.

Although proud of his achievements in bridge, Garozzo knows his game has changed. "I used to be very quick in dummy play and defense, but now I've lost some quickness. Now I analyze the hands more carefully before making a decision."

Has Garozzo slipped? Not likely, says Zia: "In many ways, Benito still has the best mind in bridge."

Nowadays, bridge is just one of Garozzo's passions - golf and the horse races are two others. "I play golf almost every day," he says, "and I go to the races when I have no bridge game."

Zia, who has also discovered a passion for golf, likes to kid Garozzo about his game on the links. "Benito is a great bridge player but he has a hopeless golf swing."

Taking the jest in stride, Garozzo points out that he and Zia made a bet at the 1990 Fall NABC in San Francisco that Zia couldn't lower his golf handicap to 12 in one year. "We played the next year," says Garozzo, whose handicap was 23 (it's now 20), "and I beat him. He has a good swing, but the ball doesn't go straight."

Garozzo has observed many changes in bridge during the four decades he has played seriously. Not all of the changes are for the better, he says. "The new style is to take too many chances to destroy the opponents' bidding," he says. "And players of the new generation don't work enough together on constructive bidding."

In the twilight of his bridge career, Garozzo would like nothing better than to represent the USA in international competition, although he conceded it's unlikely. Looking forward, not back, he's still working to improve his game, especially the bidding. Would he play for America in the Bermuda Bowl? In a heartbeat, he says, "That would be fun."



Billy Eisenberg