

Martels prove bridge and marriage can mix

By Karen Walker



Anyone who has ever played bridge with a spouse or “significant other” knows the special challenges of juggling a bridge partnership and a personal relationship. Many couples handle both well and have long records of tournament successes. Others have only slightly better rapport than John and Myrtle Bennett.

One married couple who seems to know the secret is Chip and Jan Martel, who won the Grand National Teams, Championship Flight, at this tournament. It was the first win in this event for Jan and a record-breaking eighth GNT championship for Chip.

The Martels were married in 1982, the year of Chip’s first GNT win. The format back then included a round of zonal playoffs to determine the teams that would advance to the NABC, and the playoff happened to be the day after their wedding. The newlyweds had barely said, “I do” before they were on a plane to Los Angeles for the zonal match.

Chip and Jan began playing together in the GNT about 10 years ago and placed second in 2006. They’ve won two other national titles as partners and are the only married couple to have won both the GNT and the North American Pairs (1988). Their system is a natural two-over-one

structure with a weak 1NT opener, Flannery openings and what Chip calls “mainstream” gadgets. He says their bidding style is fairly aggressive.

Chip, who grew up in Urbana IL, is a computer science professor at the University of California Davis campus. He says it’s sometimes difficult to fit bridge into his work schedule, but the NABC dates usually match up well with university breaks, so he rarely misses a big tournament. He also plays in the team trials and a few regionals a year, plus an occasional sectional when he and regular partner Lew Stansby want to get in some extra practice.

Originally from Chicago, Jan is a retired attorney who is now chief operating officer of the United States Bridge Federation. She organizes the ACBL team trials to choose international representatives and created the USBF web site (www.usbf.org). She also sets up the vugraph broadcasts on Bridge Base Online and works as a tableside operator, entering all the bids and plays. The Martels have a long history of giving back to the game. Chip is a former coach of the U.S. Junior team and currently acts as a mentor and coach for Junior pairs who are practicing online. Besides her volunteer work for USBF, Jan is also involved with ACBL youth programs. She was in charge of the Youth Trials at this tournament and was often interrupted during the GNT event to handle details.

Chip and Jan each have multiple national championships and Chip has five world titles. They’re widely regarded as two of the nicest people in the bridge world, so it’s no surprise that they’re so compatible at the bridge table. Still, they experience the same highs and lows as other married couples who play as partners.

“Playing with a spouse can be difficult because you have so much invested in the relationship,” says Jan. “It heightens the need to be ‘perfect’, even though we all know it’s unfair to expect that from any partner.”

Chip agrees. “We really get along well away from the table, so we don’t feel as much stress as some couples might,” said Chip.

They admit that they do have disagreements about each other’s bridge decisions. “Chip is a great partner ... most of the time,” said Jan. “On the few occasions when he’s yelled at me, I know it’s because he thinks we’re doing well.”

Chip offers a good-natured rebuttal: “The part about the yelling could be a bit of an exaggeration. Between a husband and wife, just a raised eyebrow can sometimes be interpreted as a ‘yell’.”

Jan says that's why she prefers playing behind screens when Chip is her partner. "I don't want to see or even feel those little expressions from the other side of the table," she laughs.

The Martels are looking forward to more opportunities to play as partners after Chip retires in a few years. Until then, they plan to keep playing together in the Grand National Teams and rooting for each other when they enter events with other partners.

Their advice for other bridge-playing couples:

"When there are outside frictions in a relationship, a bridge argument can be the last straw," said Chip. "It's important to go into a session feeling good about each other so you can handle the strain of the inevitable disagreements and bad results."

"You have to keep reminding yourself that your partner is not just your husband, but your best friend. It sounds corny, but it's so true," says Jan.