

Michelle Brunner (1953 - 2011)



One of Great Britain and England's finest players died yesterday, shortly after 16.00, following a long battle against cancer.

I had recently worked with Michelle on her entry for the new edition of the Encyclopedia of Bridge. This is what we decided upon:

Born in London. Her parents were responsible for introducing her to the game and her elder sister for painstakingly teaching her the rudiments at the tender age of 14. She spent many hours perfecting her skills in the 6th form at the Henrietta Barnett School in Hampstead Garden Suburb, London. She went to Manchester University to study Italian and continued to improve at the university bridge club with the help of John Holland, Barry Myers, Gary Hyett, Robert Ferrari, Mike Ash, Steve Eginton, Boris Ewart and other very talented individuals who also play at the top level. She left university in 1973 and after working as an agent for Thomas Cook for 17 years she became a full time professional in 1995.

Her breakthrough was in 1977 when she entered the Women's trials with Rosemary Hudson on the off-chance of gaining some valuable experience. Third place meant an England cap and that was followed by numerous international successes.

Since then she has had a glorious selection of lady partners who have all contributed to making her career both colourful and successful. Rixi Markus, Sandra Landy, Rita Oldroyd, Elaine Pencharz, Nevena Senior, Gillian Scott-Jones and her favourite, Rhona Goldenfield.

Her partnership with John Holland has lasted more than 30 years at home as well as the bridge table. They run a very successful mobile school of bridge.

Michelle penned this piece for the English Bridge Union

Born in London on 31st December 1953 you can see I am just starting my second half century. This was celebrated by a New Year's Eve party at my local bridge club followed by an amazing trip to Australia in February. Not known for

taking holidays like normal people this naturally included a week of Bridge in Surfers Paradise!

My whole life now revolves around Bridge. That might sound boring to some folk but I feel lucky that I am able to exploit my talent in such a pleasurable way. My parents were responsible for introducing me to the game and I must also thank my big sister for painstakingly teaching me the rudiments at the tender age of 14. I spent many hours perfecting my newly acquired skill in the 6th form at the Henrietta Barnett School in Hampstead Garden Suburb, London.

Scraping through my A-levels to get me a place at Manchester University in 1971 (to ostensibly study Italian) I continued to hone my skills at the university bridge club with the help of John Holland, Barry Myers, Gary Hyett, Robert Ferrari, Mike Ash, Steve Eginton, Boris Ewart and other very talented individuals who also now play the game at top level. Unfortunately my tutors were not impressed and I was booted out of college in 1973 with little to show other than the ability to count up to 13 in four suits.

Thomas Cooks took pity on me and gave me a job in their Foreign Exchange department for which I gave them 17 years service.

During that time I got lucky on the bridge scene. In 1977 I entered the Women's trials with Rosemary Hudson on the off-chance of gaining some valuable experience. We finished 3rd and we were given our first 'cap'. The rest, as they say, is history. We got a bronze medal in the Common Market ladies pairs in Ostende that same year and the Gold medal in the ladies teams with Nicola Gardener, Sandra Landy, Pat Davies and Sally Carpenter.

That same squad went on to claim the Silver medal in the European in Elsinore a few months later. In 1979 we got our revenge and landed the Gold at the European in Lausanne. My partnership with Rosie dissolved and in 1980 I had an outing with Pat Davies in the Olympiad where we won the Bronze.

Since then I have had a glorious selection of lady partners who have all contributed to make my international bridge career both colourful and successful. Sandra Landy (silver, 1988 Olympiad), Rita Oldroyd, Elaine Pencharz, Nevena Senior, Gillian Scott-Jones (gold, world championship in Brazil 1987)

I have also had the honour of playing several tournaments with the legendary Rixi Markus. However, it is my partnership with Rhona Goldenfield that has given me the most pleasure. At last, I have found a soul mate for a partner who, as only a true friend can, uncomplainingly tolerates my criticisms and bad moods. Our crowning glory was to win gold as part of the England ladies team at the 2000 European in Tenerife after which followed a bronze medal in the last European in Salsomaggiore 2002.

Earlier that year we were also lucky enough to have been 'sent' to Salt Lake City where the World Bridge Federation staged a competition to impress the International Olympic Committee. Rhona & I have also had success in several Lady Milnes and been privileged to participate in two

world championships in the last five years.

Not least, we are especially proud to have represented England on the Open team in 2002 at the Manchester Commonwealth Games. Another extraordinary highlight in my life was the invitation to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in 1992 to commemorate a number of sporting personalities in celebration of the 40th year of the Queen's reign.

As if all this were not enough for any girl I rate my bridge partnership with John Holland above all else. He has put up with me for some 30 years at home as well as the bridge table. Not only has he been instrumental in helping me to chalk up 6 Hubert Phillips and a Crockfords title we also have a couple of Portland Pairs wins to our credit. Oh, and I nearly forgot, 2 Camrose victories in 1997 and 1999 against Wales and Scotland. In 1995 I turned professional.

Now, if anyone out there would like to buy one or both of the bridge books I have written (Bridge with Brunner, Acoll bidding for Improvers, or Acoll bidding for budding experts) you will make me a truly happy bunny.

This article appeared in English Bridge, and sums up beautifully what a wonderful and courageous person Michelle was:

A day in the life of Michelle Brunner

If, at the tender age of 56, you could get up at any time of the day you fancied, go to bed whenever you felt like it, watch television during the night if you really wanted to, spend the afternoon reading or seeing a film, play duplicate or go to the theatre every evening, go on lots of holidays, meet your friends for lunch every day and be able to eat what-ever you desired, you would be forgiven for thinking you were in heaven!

Alas, retirement did come to me early but with a heavy price to pay. In 2007 I was diagnosed with breast cancer metastases after first contracting the disease in 2001. Since then my daily routine has changed dramatically and I was advised to reduce my workload and live every day to the full. That is exactly what I have done and although my days are often governed by my state of health, and the necessity to visit the doctor or hospital for regular tests and scans, I am actually having an amazing time!

As I have already intimated, much of what I do depends on how well I am feeling. Taking daily doses of chemotherapy and morphine means I occasionally struggle to get out and about but, mercifully, those days are few and far between. If I am not doing something I mentioned earlier, I am probably doing my 'wifely' chores like cooking, cleaning and shopping – all, needless to say, aided by my wonderful partner of some thirty-five years, John Holland.

Deciding which bridge tournaments to enter, discussing system with John and planning our next trip abroad (usually to play bridge!) all have a huge part in my daily schedule.

The list of places I have always longed to visit is another area that is now being broached and I relish the days when, out of the blue, John takes me on a mystery trip to some

place in England that I have not had a chance to explore before.

Complementary therapy is essential to my well-being and I will often dedicate a morning or afternoon to being pampered day into one of luxury; especially so as both Reiki and foot-massage treatments can be performed at home – although neither by John!

As if all that wasn't enough, I have recently become addicted to a hand-held computer game which flatters me daily by telling me my brain age is between 30 and 40. This activity keeps me very quiet (excellent news for John!) although I try not to let it interfere with all my other non-bridge hobbies, which also include pottering about on the piano. To be honest, if it wasn't for the fact that I can feel awful at times, I would be living a truly charmed life; but, however I am feeling, I don't allow the weather to depress me because, as I see it, the sun shines every day that I wake up.

Michelle won the **Gidwani Family Trust Defence** of the Year in successive years:

This was in the 2008 Venice Cup:

Having successfully negotiated the round robin, it was time for England to face China in the quarter-finals. We were neck and neck for the first four sets out of six, but eventually the Chinese proved too strong and we were eliminated. One of the earlier sets produced a very special play from Michelle Brunner:

QF2. Board 26. Dealer East. Both Vul.

<p>♠ J 5 ♥ K 8 4 3 ♦ A 10 7 6 3 ♣ 6 4</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; background-color: #008000; color: white; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> N W E S </div>	<p>♠ A K Q 9 8 3 ♥ A 7 ♦ — ♣ A J 7 3 2</p> <p>♠ 7 6 4 ♥ J 10 9 5 2 ♦ K J 9 8 ♣ K</p> <p>♠ 10 2 ♥ Q 6 ♦ Q 5 4 2 ♣ Q 10 9 8 5</p>	
<p>West <i>Michelle Brunner</i></p>	<p>North <i>Liu Yi Qian</i></p>	<p>East <i>Rhona Goldenfield</i></p>	<p>South <i>Wang Wenfei</i></p>
Pass	1 ♣ 1	Pass	Pass
Pass	2 ♠	Pass	1 ♦ 2
Pass	3 ♣	Pass	4 ♣
Pass	5 NT	Pass	7 ♣
All Pass			

1. Precision Club (16+)
2. Negative (0-7)

The Precision auction propelled the Chinese side to an optimistic seven-club contract. You will note that the entryless dummy more or less forces declarer into the winning line of dropping the singleton king of trumps off-side to land a rather jammy contract.

Enter Michelle, who, on seeing partner's lead of the jack of hearts covered by the queen in dummy, ducked!

Declarer, who was mightily relieved to gain a surprise entry, had no hesitation in taking advantage of it to play her percentage shot in trumps of taking the finesse! Whoops!

How was this brilliancy found? Should declarer have been fooled? Let's think about it.

One club was strong and one diamond negative. The jump to two spades was natural and forcing, showing a strong hand. Two no trump and three clubs were both natural. Over partner's natural four clubs, showing support, North jumped to five no trump, grand slam force. Whether they disagreed about the meaning of five no trump or the responses, I'm not sure, but one thing that Michelle could be certain of is that declarer had a source of running tricks in spades for this action. Therefore there would be no danger in giving declarer a cheap trick in hearts since they would soon be disposed of on spades in any case.

From Michelle's point of view, a jump to seven clubs holding only the queen in trumps left room for partner to have a trump honour and there was a significant danger that it would be singleton. With plenty of time to think about it, we can all see that it can't cost, and may gain on this layout.

However, the really impressive thing is that it had to be done smoothly and in tempo so as to give nothing away. If you duck slowly, declarer will be suspicious. Should she have been suspicious anyway?

It is unusual to lead from a king-jack-ten holding against a grand slam. If you don't want to lead a trump, then a spade into the solid suit would seem to give nothing away. On the other hand, a lead from jack-ten would be perfectly normal. Therefore, you should not expect the queen of hearts to hold the first trick. Nevertheless, it is a huge leap of logic to then deduce that West has ducked in order to persuade you to take a losing

line in trumps. This brilliancy was undoubtedly the play of the tournament.

Dealer East. Both Vul.

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

Michelle Brunner won the 2008 International Bridge Press Association Gidwani Family Trust Defence of the Year Award, for a brilliant play in Shanghai. I believe, though I stand to be corrected, that this is the first time a woman has won this. Nor can I remember the same player winning two years in succession, so I intend submitting this hand as a contender for next year's prize.

Michelle passed as dealer and South opened one no trump (12-14). North bid two clubs, Stayman, then raised South's two-spade reply to the spade game.

John Holland, West, led the jack of hearts. Declarer ducked in dummy and Michelle won with her king. What were her chances of defeating four spades, faced with that dummy? Many players would simply return a trump and hope that declarer, left to his own devices, would adopt a failing line.

But Michelle envisaged a position where her partner held the king to three spades and a doubleton club. (He could not hold more than four high-card points, given South's one no trump opener.) Even that was not enough; she also had to paint a false picture for declarer.

So – she returned the nine of clubs, which, with dummy's assets on view, surely could only have been a singleton. Dummy won, and fearing a club ruff, South continued with ace and another spade. Holland won with his king and returned a club, South playing low from dummy. Michelle Brunner captured with her king, then gave her partner the club ruff that defeated the game.



Rhona Goldenfield with Michelle