

"WHEN THERE'S BIG MONEY IN IT, BRIDGE WILL BE REALLY COOL!"
SAYS TEAM USA'S JOE "BOO" GRUE. "IT WILL BE ALL PIMPED OUT!"



A Bridge Too Far

As an aging card game makes its Olympic debut in 2002, young champs go for the gold.

IPANEMA BEACH, RIO: SHIVERING GLOBES OF SUN-STROKED BRAZILIAN FLESH IN BATHING SUITS THAT DISAPPEAR BEFORE THEY BEGIN; an apron-wearing maniac carving charred pork onto my plate. Eyes yo-yo wide with lust, I drain another caipirinha. Meat in my belly, lime and sugar on my tongue, I've flipped my rodizio dowl to yellow (meat at a measured pace) down from green (murderous meat onslaught), but not to full-stop red. Not red just yet, boys. The grinning waiters watch as I shuffle a deck of cards, trying to remember the rules of the game my mom taught me as a kid on hot Nantucket summer nights—because we are down here in Rio to play some *World-Class Junior Bridge!* ¶ That's right—bridge, the card game. One deck, four players, two teams, nothing wild. Bridge—the only place where trumps, tricks, and dummies come together outside Atlantic City. Now you remember. Great Aunt Mildred and her support-hosed cronies hogging the kitchen on Saturday afternoons and telling you to shut the hell up and stop eating the goddamn coffee cake. Used to be socially essential. Forty million players in the United States and Canada in the mid-sixties. Now there are 10 million, with the largest



concentration in retirement communities. Great Aunt Mildred is over at Shady Meadows with a quick-drip catheter, a living will, and half a deck in play. Bridge is a discipline in decline.

But wait just a card snap. A phoenix is rising from this fragile pile, and it is called junior bridge. The Old Guard may be geriatric, but they are organized. They're not going to let their glorious pastime die out. Which is why the Paris-based World Bridge Federation (WBF) formed a Youth Committee in 1985. The plan: Entice a world of fat, stupid, and lazy adolescents to lay aside their Game Boys, shut off the 500 television channels, and learn to play a complicated, old lady's card game. Thanks to these efforts—after-school programs, college scholarships, free camps in exotic locations (this summer, it was in Insko, Poland)—bridge is enjoying a mini youthquake. This follows the startling news that bridge may soon become an Olympic sport. It will debut as a demo event at the Winter Games in Salt Lake City in 2002, with the hope of maturing into an official sport at Torino, Italy, in 2006. Still, the question lingers like pipe smoke from the Eisenhower administration: Will it ever really be cool to play bridge again?

GADZOOKS! WE ARE AT THE 8TH WORLD Youth Bridge Team Championship at the Mangaratiba Hotel Portobello Resort & Safari, 90 minutes as the taxi flies from Rio. We're here to watch eighteen teams battle for the gold in a round-robin that will last nine days. Already, there is



tension in the air. The Pakistani team has canceled; Denmark is fielding a white-skinned Rastafarian whose filthy dreadlocks may or may not result in penalties and an outbreak of head lice. The most volatile factor, however, is hormonal: Out of 100 participants, only three are female. The rest are men in their teens and early twenties. A pungent olfactory stew of pimple balm, body odor, and potato-chip breath rises up from the inaugural proceedings.

Then there are the supercilious Europeans. They've got the weight of history on their shoulders (bridge can be traced back to sixteenth-century England), and it makes them churlish. The Euros have won six of seven Youth Championships to date; consensus favors the Netherlands taking the gold. But the U.S. kids are ascending, garnering sixth in Bali in 1995, fifth two years later in Ontario, and second place in Fort Lauderdale in 1999.

"Euro, *schmeuro*," cackles Kent Mignocchi, one of Team USA's most experienced players. "We

are every bit as mentally tough as they are. I just loooove being the underdog."

KENT MIGNOCCHI WAS GIVING A CARD lesson to the estrogen-patch crowd at the Honors Bridge Club in Manhattan when he got the call: His country needed him in Rio. Mignocchi, 22, is a jack of clubs—the only mustacheless jack in the deck, the one with the haunted gaze and the pouty, effeminate mouth. Mignocchi, who

"THE BRIDGE GOD WAS PLEASED BY THE WAY WE PLAYED TODAY," BOASTS ONE BEPIMPLED YOUNG CARDSHARP.

JOKERS WILD: WHILE TEAM USA SKIFF-CHASE IN THE RIO SUN, some ADULT PLAYERS are LOATH TO see BRIDGE turn INTO a GLOBE-TROTTING remake OF PORKY'S WITH CARDS.

learned the game from his grandmother when he was 11, dropped out of Occidental College last year to start a professional career, tutoring the Maude Birnbaums and Midge Taylors of New York City and pulling down about \$800 a week. Decent coin, but the real money would come when some rich fanatic heard about his chops and hired him to join their team in a major tournament. Then he could start earning up to six figures, maybe write a book. Playing in Rio wouldn't hurt his rep among the big spenders, especially if Team USA nabs the gold.

But after four days and nine rounds, the American team has dropped to the middle of the pack. Canada is undefeated, with Denmark and Israel close behind. The Americans suffered a brutal loss to the Netherlands, made all the more galling by the fact that one of the Dutch players was some freak wearing a wide-brimmed, red satin Merlin hat with soccer-ball appliques.

"We're getting spanked," admits John "Kranko" Kranyak, 17, a chain-smoking, acne-cheeked lover-boy from suburban Cleveland who's the Casanova of the junior circuit. But at Portobello Motel 6 and Petting Zoo, the only conquest worth having is an attractive Austrian groupie here in Rio for an internship. Word is that she's been friendly with a lot of the players; some of the coaches, too. Unfortunately for the aspiring U.S. Lotharios, bridge groupies tend to go for the winners—she's currently hanging all over a victorious Canadian ace. Meanwhile, Kranko's laying a rap on a pretty 17-year-old player from Uruguay.

N TOURNAMENT BRIDGE, THE LUCK OF THE deal is eliminated by machine. The absence of chance is an important theme among serious players: Unlike hearts or poker, high-level bridge is a contest of skill and mental rigor. "If luck or bluffing were factors, I'd be even better." This from Joe "Joe Boo" Grue—a 20-year-old pear-shaped card-sharp from Minneapolis. "You mean you'd cheat," says Kranko. "Bluffing isn't cheating, asshole," Boo fires back. "It's misinformation."

Blue-eyed and double chinned, Boo bets on anything and eats everything. He left community college last year and probably won't be going back. He plans to move to New York after Rio to live with Mignocchi and go pro. He says some Bear Stearns bigwigs have seen him play; there's talk of a job.

Game-day atmosphere is like the administration of a standardized test. It's the SAT all day long, nine days straight. The players sit at tables bisected by four-foot plywood barriers. You can't see, hear, or speak—questions must be written. All this is to avoid "coffee-housing"—cheating. Tournament bridge is rife with communication via cough, yawn, footsie, etc. Last March, the American Contract Bridge League suspended veteran player John Blubaugh for cheating in a national tournament. Blubaugh is suing the ACBL for \$3 million.

Seventeen-year-old Brad Campbell sees a bright side to Team USA's mediocre performance thus far in the tournament: "Fucking Rio fucking de Janiero, baaaahy! Sheeeeeeeehaaat, yes!" If they don't finish in the top four, they can blow off the last three days and indulge in some unfettered adolescent Ipanema madness. Campbell is the wild cowboy of Team USA, all glands and nocturnal emission bursting out of Smyrna, Georgia, like a mother lode of sebum out of an overripe chin zit.

Campbell was a bit bummed when he read the fine print on the tourney flyer and learned that the Portobello Resort & Safari was a hike outside Rio. Then he remembered last April's junior bridge event in Den Bosch, Holland. But that long hike hadn't stopped Campbell & Co. from traveling some distance to go crazy in Amsterdam's red-light district—the peak of which involved a banana and a Dutch prostitute dressed like Carmen Miranda.

War stories like this irk some adult bridgeheads, who are loath to see their beloved game devolve into a globe-trotting remake of *Porky's* with cards. "That is a short-sighted view," counters Bob Rosen, the U.S. team's non-playing captain, a sixtyish glatt-kosher Omar Sharif who's been coaching the Americans for the past six years. "Where would the NBA be if it didn't invest in recruiting? Same thing for bridge—the kids are a little wild, but what rookies aren't? They're fine

boys, and they represent the future."

Joe Boo cackles at the scandals that he and his teammates have stepped into over the years—strip clubs in Toronto, beer bong in Anaheim, groupie groping just about everywhere they go. "Guess what Bob said our motto for the tournament had to be?"

"Eye of the tiger?" I suggest.

"Nope," Joe Boo chuckles, his tiny eyes shining with glee. "Keep your Johnson in your pants."

THIS GAME ATTRACTS A LOT OF GEEKS," snarks Brad Campbell.

Cards and more cards. It goes on for hours and hours. I fall asleep. I wake up. The kids are still playing. Then, on the sixth day, Team USA takes its Johnson out of its collective pants and shakes it like a voodoo doll. By 6 P.M., they've vaulted to the top of the pack, landing like an anvil on Egypt and sinking

"EURO, SCHMEURO," SAYS THE USA'S KENT MIGNOCCHI ABOUT THE CONTINENTAL COMPETITION. "WE'RE AS TOUGH AS THEY ARE."



GAME BOY: KENT MIGNOCCHI, A PROFESSIONAL BRIDGE ACE, SHOWS OFF THE SKILLS THAT PAY THE BILLS.

the Viking ship of those wily Norwegians. Meanwhile, Canada has crumbled, losing all three of the day's matches and dropping to third. Several more groupies have arrived; they're starting to shoot Campbell and Kranko sexually charged glances across the lobby. So much for the geek thing.

On the seventh day, Team USA has widened its lead, dropping China and skunking Canada. "The bridge god is a benevolent force that is neither male nor female," says Joel Woodridge, 22, the team's spiritual lodestar. "The bridge god was pleased by the way we played today."

A philosophical hipster with Poindexter glasses and a pierced ear, Woodridge is drinking his eighth Coke of the day at 11 P.M. Having played in the past three championships, he was one of the youngest men to ever compete. At 15, he wowed even the most seasoned fanatics; some predicted he could be the best in the world. It hasn't worked out

exactly like that. He's thinking about returning to college to become a teacher. But first he wants to make one last obeisance to the bridge god.

It seems that the god has answered his prayers. The next day, a local headline reads: NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE TO MEET IN THE FINAL. I suspect a misprint or maybe wishful thinking on the part of the vanquished Europeans, but then I discover that Israel, which has just dunked Denmark, is considered part of Europe for inexplicable tournament purposes. The "real" Europeans are crestfallen; the Canadians have been reduced to raping the breakfast buffet.

The final is a grueling 96 deals divided into six sessions. The Israelis are more seasoned (two of the team's six players are 26, just barely scraping by the junior age limit). Nonetheless, the United States takes the first three sessions, almost doubling Israel's score. During the fourth and fifth segment,

Israel battles its way back. In the final session, however, the Yanks blow their opponents away, winning the session 71 to 8—the first U.S. junior bridge team to bring home the gold in a decade. Shazam.

The following afternoon, I find Boo devouring a "Don Juan" pizza ordered in from a nearby Italian joint. He's hungover after the champagne and cigars and caipirinha-drenched trophy ceremony.

"Junior bridge is great," he says through mouthfuls of stringy cheese, "and it would be cool to play in the Olympics—but it's money that fires people up." Young Master Boo is not alone in his thinking: Many bridgeheads believe that only Mammon can ensure a serious revival. Currently, there is just one big-money bridge tournament: the Cavendish, held every year in Vegas. Larry King—ex-husband of Billy Jean and the man credited with developing women's tennis into a multi-million-dollar sport—is promoting a new professional competition called the Superbridge Tour. He expects it will offer \$10 million in annual prize money by 2005. This makes Boo hungry.

Now the pizza is gone. Soon the buses will arrive to take the kids to the airport. "When there's big money in it, bridge will really be cool," Boo says, burping meditatively. He stares through the Portobello's Swiss-chalet windows at the blue waters of Mangaratiba Bay.

"It'll be great at the tournaments," he says. "Gold chains, a big wad of cash in my pocket, all the girls loving up on me everywhere I go—I'll be all pimped out." ■