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**Bridge Pulls In the Young
Making Bids and Friends**

By Jennifer Steinhauer
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The four people at the table stared into their hands, huge vats of cappuccino steaming at their elbows. The songs of James Taylor played in the background. Nearby, a woman sat with her head buried in an anthology of tragedies. Abby Mintz looked up. "That was a very dangerous bid," she said, to no one in particular.

On a Tuesday night five years ago, Ms. Mintz and her friends would most likely have found themselves in a bar, listening to loud music and surveying the offerings for small-talk possibilities.

Now, they play bridge.

"The fact that you are using your brain in a social setting is something that I really love," said Ms. Mintz, 33, who started playing the card game two years ago. She and her three friends, who met at bridge games, get together every Tuesday night at the No Bar cafe in the East Village for coffee, Caesar salads and cards. "I would have never met these people if it weren't for bridge," she added.

While the card game is still primarily for the over-50 set, all around the country -- from college campuses to smoky cafes to screens of computers where Internet bridge is played -- people in their 20's and 30's are rethinking bridge.

Bridge lovers under 44 now make up 7 percent of the American Contract Bridge League's 200,000 members. Ten years ago, the number was closer to 3 percent, said Brent Manley, managing editor of the organization's newsletter. The average age of a member remains 57.

The number of young newcomers is not terribly significant, bridge experts concede with sadness, but they will take what they can get.

"We are definitely gaining the interest of a lot of younger people," said Jana Jackins, director of educational programs for the Bridge League, which is in Memphis. "But we've still got that stigma. These people think to themselves, 'That's what my grandmother does.' "

In the 1940's and 50's, playing bridge was a hot way to pass time in the college dormitory. But in the late 60's and in the 70's, students began rejecting the game, if for no other reason than that their parents played it. A generation of teachers was thus eliminated.

As videos and electronic games proliferated, card games were virtually left in the dust, and bridge came to be regarded as a pastime for residents of retirement communities.

It does not appear to be nostalgia that has led people in their 20's and 30's back to the bridge tables. Rather, the game fits nicely into the the modern entertainment ethos: it's inexpensive and brainy and doesn't hurt your body.

One must be smart to play, but there is no risk of humiliation over the inability to answer questions about obscure leaders from the Ottoman Empire. It offers the chance to communicate, as bridge partners must be expert at doing, and to compete in a most civilized manner. Players can gather in front of a fire with their entire family and embrace simplicity and togetherness, buzzwords of modern life.

"This is a much more sober way of interacting," said Lamia Matta, 27, a human-rights advocate who has just taken up the game. "I also thought it could help me become a more tactical person."

On college campuses, where teachers lead clubs, interest is slowly growing.

Dr. Eugene J. Kales, a professor at Michigan State University, started a bridge club three years ago with eight members. Today, he has 25 players. And it's student-budget friendly; the club won an award for being the most inexpensive student activity group on campus.

People started coming in when they realized how truly social the game is, Dr. Kales said. "With video games, you only need one person, so you're not being very social there," he continued. "With chess, you're thinking, not talking. But with bridge, you're being sociable, and you have to be nice. If you're rude and nasty, no one will ask you to play."

Although younger people try to encourage their friends to join in, they often find themselves competing with people decades older, which can also be fun. "Bridge is a good opportunity to be friendly with older people on a more equal level," said Steve Altus, 25, a graduate student at Stamford University. "They are not your boss or your parents' friends; they are people who share a love of the game."

To pull in younger people, the Bridge League has tried to stimulate early interest in the game with a lesson series started in 1989 for colleges and elementary schools around the country. Teachers give 16-hour courses as an after-school activity, or make the lessons part of a mathematics or English class. The organization also offers large student discounts for young tournament participants.

Okay Bridge, an on-line service, has also drawn more than 1,000 subscribers, many of them new players, Mr. Manley of the Bridge League said.

WHILE older people often bet when they play bridge, younger players seem less likely to. It seems intellectual victory is enough. "We don't play for money," Ms. Mintz said. "We play for our pride."

Indeed, bridge is a difficult game. It requires great patience to learn and years to master. This can be a turnoff for younger players who are accustomed to instant gratification in other leisure activities.

For this reason alone, bridge may never become hugely popular with younger players. "The game will never have the popularity it had in the 1940's," said David Scott, a professor in the Recreation and Tourism Sciences Department at Texas A & M University, who did his dissertation on bridge. "It is a game with a lot of marks against it in a fast-paced society. Younger generations have an insatiable taste for novelty."

But on the other hand, it can be mastered, unlike many sports, and doesn't require the possession of special physical features like height. "Someone who is 20 years old who is willing to take the time and apply himself can master the game," Mr. Manley said. "Not everyone who plays college basketball can hope for the N.B.A., but anyone with reasonable intelligence can aspire to world-level bridge."

Unlike squash in the 80's, it seems that few business deals are struck over bridge games. The escape it provides from other forms of intellectual life, like work, seems to be its greatest draw. "There is a whole world out there that is so crazy," said Geoffry Rees, 29, a member of the informal bridge club in the East Village. "Bridge is so great because it is intellectually challenging and yet totally meaningless."

Photos: Bridge is both sociable and cheap. (Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times) (pg. C1); Young bridge players meet for games through the Internet or in restaurants like the No Bar cafe in the East Village. (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times) (pg. C14)