
LEARN TO PLAY BRIDGE: I DARE YOU

By Amy Faust for Willamette Week

In our household, Monday night is bridge night. Every week, my husband and I huddle around a card table with the couple next door, eating snacks from pastel heart- and spade-shaped dishes and marking up scoring pads printed in the late 1950s that we procured from estates sales because no one else wants them.



Sounds cute and retro, right? That's what I thought. When we decided to learn contract bridge, I assumed we were inadvertently following some kind of trend -- that it was part of this let's-mix-up-a-manhattan-and-swing-dance thing. But there's a crucial difference between playing bridge and, say, collecting Tiki mugs: Bridge is really, really hard.

Ask yourself these questions: Are you feeling a little too smart and sassy? Do you feel like having your ass kicked by a grandma? If so, contract bridge might be the game for you. Infuriating, humiliating and incredibly complicated, bridge will make you feel like an idiot. But it's super fun. Trust me.

Bridge is difficult to explain, but it has the high-stakes suspense of poker and the cerebral stimulation of chess. Bridge tournaments, which you can stage at home, are hysterically intense and festive, especially if you serve deviled eggs. And like all of my favorite "sports" (bocce, bowling), bridge passes the fundamental test of greatness: You can play it with a drink in your hand.

Because the four of us learned the game from my 93-year-old grandma (Mamoo, the reigning queen of the tables at Riverside Golf Club) I got to worrying that unless bridge becomes a trend, it may be headed for extinction, joining other past crazes like CB radios and paint-by-numbers in the land of forgotten hobbies.

In the interest of keeping the game alive, I thought about writing a piece that would glamorize bridge

and lure droves of young Portlanders out of the karaoke bars and into the bridge clubs. But as I discovered on a recent visit to the Ace of Clubs, this is a game that stubbornly resists glamorization. When my three cohorts and I descended into the windowless basement in Cedar Hills, we were not entering Saucebox.

What we found instead was a veritable United Nations of enthusiasts, ranging in age from 27 to 95. Virtually everyone was friendly and welcoming. Come to think of it, this wasn't unlike hanging out in a karaoke bar after all.

The only problem was that we sucked. Apparently, playing "party bridge" for two years in the comfort of our own home did not prepare us for the adrenaline-fueled, competitive nature of the "duplicate bridge" that is played at clubs. From what I gather, this more intense, do-or-die version of bridge is alive and well. It's party bridge, the kind my grandma plays at Riverside, that is dying.

But don't let this intimidate you. According to our friends at the Ace of Clubs (and Mary Hovda, manager of the Eastside Bridge Club), you can learn how to play at these clubs, then head home and play party bridge for the rest of your life.



Here's one more reason to learn bridge: After playing three times a week for 75 years, my grandma is completely mentally undiminished. When she was teaching us, she could pick up all four of our hands, memorize every card and then bark appropriate orders at each of us: "Bobby, I know you want to play your queen, but play your six instead." Forget ginkgo. This game is like brain-cell helper.

Intellectual stimulation, camaraderie, deviled eggs, I think I've made my case. So after you've taken a few lessons, please give me a call. We're sick of getting trounced by my grandma.
