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NOVEMBER 2016

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Bergen-Cohen TOGETHER AGAIN



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Features

11 **The Long Game**

Fleisher team survives Spingold slugfest.

16 **Reunited**

Bergen and Cohen back in action.

20 **#TopSecret**

Fake news columnist Cocheme spills the gossip.

25 **Keeping Transfers**

A system for handling notrump interference.

27 **Untangling the Web**

New series on navigating the ACBL website.

31 **Summer Sizzle**

Hampton Parks & Rec makes bridge hot.

11



Summer North American Bridge Championships

Washington DC ★ July 21-31, 2016

16



They're Back

Bergen-Cohen reunite for the Orlando NABC

BY SUE MUNDAY

Twenty-five years after their last NABC win, Larry Cohen and Marty Bergen are returning to their once-familiar seats across the table from each other. The kibitzer buzz has it that fans are making travel arrangements to Orlando just to be tableside for the pair's comeback appearance.

Between 1983 and 1991, Bergen and Cohen were one of *the* most formidable pairs to face. During that time, they won eight North American titles and chalked up a half dozen second-place showings.

Pressure

The Bergen-Cohen key to success was a super-aggressive edge, backed by excellent decision-making and card play. Their hallmark was lighter-than-air preempts, which they Alerted.

"What we were doing 30 years ago is much more common today," Larry says. "Back then, auctions were kinder and gentler: You could have a 1♥-2♥ auction and play it there. People didn't get into your face competing for the partscore."

The Law of Total Tricks guided their competitive bidding structure. Marty was an advocate of Jean Rene Vernes's Law long before it became fashionable, and the entire Bergen raise system was built on it. Larry's 1992 "To Bid or Not to Bid" brought the Law into mainstream usage.

Bergen-Cohen also brought a certain physical presence to the table. Marty describes their persona: "There was Larry, who's shy as opposed to me ..." Marty backtracks to emphasize, "Well, shy as opposed to most everyone ... And then there was me. I wore all black on championship Sunday and carried a big stein of water to the table. I

weighed a lot more in those days." To amp up, Bergen would put on his headphones and listen to "Pressure" by Billy Joel before the game.

Coming Up

Eleven years separate Bergen and Cohen, who are both Florida transplants from New York. Cohen moved in 1996 "mostly for the golf," and Bergen relocated in 1998.

"Marty was already famous when I was a teenager," says Larry. "When I was 16, I kibitized him at a local sectional. At the end of the event, we chatted and became friends."

As they got to know each other, "it was obvious to me that Larry was a player," Marty says.

In 1982, five years after they met, the two started playing together. "We had good success right away," Larry says.

Each had two North American Championships under his belt when, at the 1983 Fall NABC in Bal Harbour FL, they won the Life Master Men's Pairs (now the Nail Life Master Pairs).

They then won the next NABC event in that same tournament – the three-day Blue Ribbon Pairs – setting a record as the first pair ever to win both the Life Master Men's Pairs and the Blue Ribbon Pairs in the same year. Larry set a record of his own as he became the first player to win the Blue Ribbon Pairs twice (he previously won it in 1981).

In the Bal Harbour Daily Bulletin, Larry credited their astounding results to the close friendship he and Marty shared. "We're good friends away from the table, and we never argue. We might talk about sex or sports at the bridge table – but never bridge!"

This deal from the Blue Ribbon shows their aggressive style and defensive prowess.





Dlr: North ♠ Q 6
 Vul: N-S ♥ Q J 4 3
 ♦ Q 6 3
 ♣ A 10 9 2

♠ K J 8 5 3
 ♥ 9 7 6 2
 ♦ A 7
 ♣ 6 5

♠ 10 9 2
 ♥ A K 10 8
 ♦ 10 5 2
 ♣ J 7 4

♠ A 7 4
 ♥ 5
 ♦ K J 9 8 4
 ♣ K Q 8 3

West	North	East	South
<i>Cohen</i>		<i>Bergen</i>	
	Pass	Pass	1 ♦
2 ♠	Dbl	3 ♥	Pass
3 ♠	Pass	Pass	4 ♣
All Pass			

Bergen's 3 ♥ was a fit bid, showing spade support while suggesting a heart lead if they ended up on defense.

The opponents competed to 4 ♣ and Cohen obediently led a heart. Dummy's queen lost to the king. Bergen returned the ♠ 10, ducked by declarer to the king. Cohen led another heart to the 10, ruffed by declarer. South was able to draw two rounds of trumps with the king and queen, but he couldn't draw the last trump because the defense would then be able to cash two heart tricks. So he led a spade to the queen and followed with a diamond. Cohen ducked. Now declarer made a subtle but fatal mistake: He cashed the ♠ A, throwing a heart from dummy. When he then led a second diamond, Cohen won with the ace and led a spade, promoting Bergen's trump jack. The

plus they scored was the only East-West plus, and they racked up 25 matchpoints.

Cruel Summer

Bergen-Cohen took their winning streak into 1984, picking up their first NABC team title as members of George Rosenkranz's squad, who ran away with the Men's Board-a-Match Teams at the Spring tournament in San Antonio TX, finishing four boards ahead of the field. Their teammates were Eddie Wold, Eric Rodwell and Jeff Meckstroth.

That summer in Washington DC, the Rosenkranz team continued its winning ways, and Marty and Larry picked up their first major team title, the Spingold. As memorable as winning it was, however, the championship took a distant back seat to bigger tournament happenings.

"We played a tough West Coast team one evening," Marty recalls. "Around midnight, after comparing scores, we learned we had won by the smallest of margins. It was then that we heard the kind of terrible news that puts everything in perspective."

Edith Rosenkranz, their sponsor's wife, had been abducted at gunpoint while walking a friend to her car in the garage.

"The following day was like nothing I could ever have imagined," Marty says. "There were reporters everywhere, as well as swarms of photographers." The members of the Rosenkranz team were questioned by the FBI. "No bridge players were discussing slams or leads," Marty says. "They were speculating about guns, ransoms and motives."

Two days later came the news that Edith had been rescued and was safe and unharmed, and that the kidnappers had been apprehended.

George Rosenkranz and Wold did not play again that week. The tournament did not stop, however, and Meckstroth, Rodwell, Bergen and Cohen went on to claim the trophy.

"When we saw Mrs. Rosenkranz on Monday, she was amazingly com-

Bergen and Cohen Bring it Home

Reisinger Board-a-Match Teams (1985, 1991)

Kaplan Blue Ribbon Pairs (1983, 1988)

von Zedtwitz Life Master Pairs (1988)

Mitchell Open Board-a-Match Teams (1984)

Spingold Master Knockout Teams (1984)

Nail Life Master Pairs (1983)



Team captain George Rosenkranz got the chemistry right!
Jeff Meckstroth, Eric Rodwell, Larry Cohen, Marty Bergen, Eddie Wold and Rosenkranz

posed,” Marty says. “Incredibly, she was more concerned with the outcome of our matches than her own nightmare!”

Hungry Like the Wolf

“Here is a deal I will never forget,” says Cohen of this board from the 1985 North American team selection. “I suspect that our opponents haven’t forgotten it either. On my right was Lew Stansby and on my left was Chip Martel, world champions both.”

Dlr: East	♠ Q 6 5		
Vul: N-S	♥ K Q J 9 4 3		
	♦ J 8 3		
	♣ J		
♠ A 4 3		♠ J 10 8 7 2	
♥ A		♥ 8 7 6 5 2	
♦ A K 5 4 2		♦ Q 6	
♣ A 9 6 5		♣ 7	
	♠ K 9		
	♥ 10		
	♦ 10 9 7		
	♣ K Q 10 8 4 3 2		

West	North	East	South
Cohen	Martel	Bergen	Stansby
2♥	Pass	2♦	Pass
Pass(!)	3♥	2♠	Pass
Dbl	Pass	Pass	Pass
Dbl	All Pass	Pass	4♣

Syndicated bridge columnist Alfred Sheinwold picks up the action.

“The most deceptive bid may be a pass,” he wrote in “The Magnificent Trap,” which appeared in his Aug. 30, 1985, syndicated column:

East and West were Marty Bergen and Larry Cohen, youthful New York experts, who have distinguished themselves in recent years by bold bidding and skillful play.

Bergen’s opening bid was described to his opponents as a sort of weak two-bid in spades. Cohen bid 2♥ to say, ‘Tell me more, partner.’ When Bergen then bid only 2♠ (meaning ‘My hand isn’t weak; it’s decrepit!’), Cohen passed casually, as though he had only a mediocre hand.

Wields the Axe

The opponents naturally dashed into the auction, with Cohen after them, chopping their heads off.

Cohen started with four high cards in the side suits and then led a diamond for East to ruff. East returned a heart and South couldn’t shut out the ♣9.

Bergen could have scored 420 points if Cohen had raised to 4♠, but this was chicken feed compared to the penalty of 1100 points at 4♣ doubled.

Cohen says that the story has a happy ending – for the other team. “Let the

record show that even though we won this battle, the end result of our match was that we lost the war by a miserable 5 IMPs. If only Marty had been dealt more decrepit hands!”

Separate Ways

Contrast Bergen, who is known for his convention inventions, and Cohen, who calls himself a 2 or a 3 on a scale of 1 to 10. Cohen says the disparity eventually led to the split in their partnership.

“Marty wanted to add science every session, and I’d have to say, ‘No, I’m not going to remember that.’”

Bergen says that much of “21 Rules of Being a Good Partner” – chapter three in his blockbuster “Points Schmoints” – derives from playing with Cohen.

“Even though Larry is 11 years younger, he is my big brother in many respects.”

Says Cohen, “I was very fortunate to have long-term regular bridge partners who I learned from. Marty helped me immensely in understanding competitive bidding decisions. I believe he’s the best in the game when it comes to competitive bidding knowledge.”

(Just Like) Starting Over

Bergen, who retired from professional play in 1993 to focus on teaching and writing, is returning to active competition, and the Orlando championships will be his first NABC in nearly two decades.

Cohen hastily refutes any notion that he’s coming out of retirement, even though his calendar would seem to indicate otherwise. He is booked to play two team events with Bergen and the Blue Ribbon Pairs with Steve Weinstein at the Fall NABC.

In preparation for their reunion, Bergen says, “We are compromising on 20 pages of our old notes.”

Kibitzers in November may see a kinder, gentler-looking Bergen-Cohen, but in or out of retirement, these guys play all out. “And,” warns Bergen, “I will have some black shirts packed.” ■