

BACKING BLACK

International Newsletter

BRIDGE BLACKS ON FORM IN 2019



Winning NOT team Leibowitz, L to R: Peter Gill, Michael Cornell, Tony Leibowitz, Michael Whibley, Ashley Bach, Matt Brown

The Bridge Blacks are showing good form in their preparations for international duty in 2019. Over in Canberra in January, Michael Cornell, Ashley Bach, Matt Brown and Michael Whibley took out the National Open Teams title (NOT) of Australia. This grueling event over seven days stands the team in good stead for their Bermuda Bowl campaign later in the year.

Michael Ware and GeO Tislevoll were in the runner-up team at the Gold Coast Congress. They joined with Michael Cornell and Ashley Bach in the recent North Island Teams event in Tauranga and took out the title.



L to R: One half of the Bridge Blacks squad: Ashley Bach, GeO Tislevoll, Michael Cornell

The Bridge Blacks have two international outings this year. First the Asia-Pacific Bridge Federation (APBF) Championships in June, hosted this year in Singapore, followed by the Bermuda Bowl in Wuhan, China in September.

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MEET THE INTERNATIONALS – ALAN GRANT



In this edition of Backing Black we meet an ex-Bridge Black returning to the international bridge playing scene – Alan Grant. Alan played in the NZ Open team six times in the past playing with Anthony Ker. He first represented NZ in 1997 and played until 2008. He recalls being part of the NZ team that visited Tunisia for the World Championships pre-Arab Spring.

He now returns as a member of both the Mixed and Bridge Masters

(seniors) team. He goes with partner John Skipper as the reserve pair called into action for the Masters to Singapore for the APBF event in June. He then goes to Wuhan, China with Jane Lennon in the Mixed Team event. We think we might have a record on our hands for Alan - playing in two different NZ teams in the same year and the first player to have played in three teams representing his country.

Alan learned to play bridge with a group of friends at the University of Canterbury in 1974. Why? “Back then bridge was cool – the king of card games. Lots of people played it and so we thought we should have a go. We taught ourselves, and then fronted up to Christchurch Bridge Club where we were turned away as we didn’t meet their dress code.” Scruffy students looked unlikely bridge players and so they spruced themselves up for their return visit and thankfully were allowed in.

Alan didn’t play seriously for about eight years and just enjoyed playing casually describing himself as, “a slow developer on the national and international scene”. He won a few events and even got a bar of soap as a prize in those days. Upon realising he could compete at the open level he became more drawn into the competitive side of the game.

Although Alan has visited China and competed in Shanghai and Hong Kong, he has not been to Wuhan before. Alan’s favourite Chinese dish is dumplings. He has fond memories of a Michelin star dumpling restaurant in the same block as the hotel where one of the playing venues was – and thought the dumplings were just amazing.

Alan has been playing with Jane Lennon, from Christchurch for around four years. He recalls, “We happened to play in a TOPS provincial teams tournament. Things went well. We won and I thought we could form a partnership. We won the South Island Teams and quite a few other tournaments.” Alan saw lots of potential for growing their partnership and they strive to improve their performance.

He has been playing with John Skipper, also from Christchurch, for a couple of years. He plays the 2/1 system with both of his international partners.

Alan’s top tip for the club player is to make sure you enjoy what you’re doing and get over any problems you might have. If you have a bad hand or do something stupid - do yourself, your partner, and your game a favour - forget about it as soon as possible. Put it to the back of your mind. Sometimes players think what they have done will damage their chances and



those thoughts are so destructive for as long as they are still nagging away. You are using up mind space and this is bad for your performance. So maintain a positive attitude. Alan recalls in preparation for one of his earlier international events the players spoke with a sports psychologist and that was the valuable tip he gave them – if something goes wrong, (and the same applies to any sporting event), put it behind you and get it out of your head as it will damage your ability to perform moving forward. The psychologist told them to think of a dog

worrying over a bone, that is the bridge player worrying about a mistake. You want to keep chewing away at it – so if you find yourself in that situation – just picture a dog – and picture it dropping the bone. Next hand!

Alan very much appreciates the support that the internationals receive. He hopes that New Zealanders take pride in the fact that their national team is able to get to the World Champs (not every country can) and that we have the ability to put our best team forward. So it is not always the most wealthy who could afford to pay for themselves, but the best can be selected to go. He hopes that as a country and a bridge playing nation everyone wants us to put our best team forward for the competition – and that can only be helped and achieved by assistance from the whole bridge community. Although internationals may have a higher ideal than the average bridge player, we are all part of Team NZ as we all contribute.

Alan was born in Gisborne and attended Rotorua Boys High School, Canterbury University for his first degree in pure and applied mathematics (with some philosophy and English mixed in) and then did an honours degree in pure mathematics at the Victoria University of Wellington. He attended teacher training college and is a qualified Maths and English teacher.

Alan lives in Wellington, in the suburb of Northland, and Wellington Bridge Club is his home club. He works as a project portfolio assurance advisor for the Government in the Immigration division of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

Alan was keen on mountaineering when younger and loves the outdoors. Alan said his favourite vegetable is the avocado, but upon reflection decided this was a fruit, and he loves

asparagus when it is fresh and in season. Alan's star sign is Aquarius.

He is the bridge teacher at Wellington Bridge Club which he finds very rewarding, especially tutoring young people of which there are quite a few in his current Wellington class. He gives quite a lot of support and mentoring around bridge teaching and feels he has a natural empathy in that role.

Asked what does it mean to you to represent NZ? Alan responded: "It is a fantastic privilege to do that. Somewhat scary, especially in a new category. (Mixed Teams) There are unknowns ahead of us in terms of who we might face. I am under no illusions – I've played internationally before and it's really tough. It is all very exciting."



Photo: Alan Grant and Mixed Teams partner Jane Lennon

BRIDGE FERNS SHINE AT SOUTH ISLAND TEAMS



Shirley Newton and Jenny Wilkinson, stalwarts of the New Zealand Bridge Ferns, showcased their class act by taking out the title at the South Island Teams earlier this year. In a very tight finish, combining with Tony Fitzgerald and Tim Schumacher, they held their nerve to win. Shirley and Jenny are one of our longest surviving international partnerships and will be representing New Zealand in both the APBF in Singapore and the World Championships in Wuhan later this year where they compete for the Venice Cup.

MIXING IT UP – NAMING COMPETITION



The new category of Mixed Team is introduced into international competitions this year.

Can you think of a brand name for our new squad? We have:

Bridge Blacks (the Open team)

Bridge Ferns (the Women's team)

Bridge Masters (the Seniors team)

Bridge Jacks (the Youth team)

We need your help in finding a name that reflects the make-up of our Mixed Team which comprises two men and two women.

Send your ideas and suggestions to:
jane.stearns@nzbridge.co.nz

Photo: John Patterson and Kate Davies – members of the Mixed Team squad for 2019



Thank you from NZB and the Internationals for your financial contribution to the international programme. We could not manage without your support.

If you would be interested in donating to the international programme, fundraising projects, or would like more information on how you could help support our internationals overseas please contact secretary@nzbridge.co.nz