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Sunday, September 13, 1987



The many faces of bridge ... from left, Te Kuiti doctor Ngaamo Thomson, some mental telepathy perhaps, and Auckland schoolboy Ashley Bach (13) fully engrossed in the national bridge congress at Rotorua. Photos: PHIL DOYLE

The fanatical faces of BRIDGE

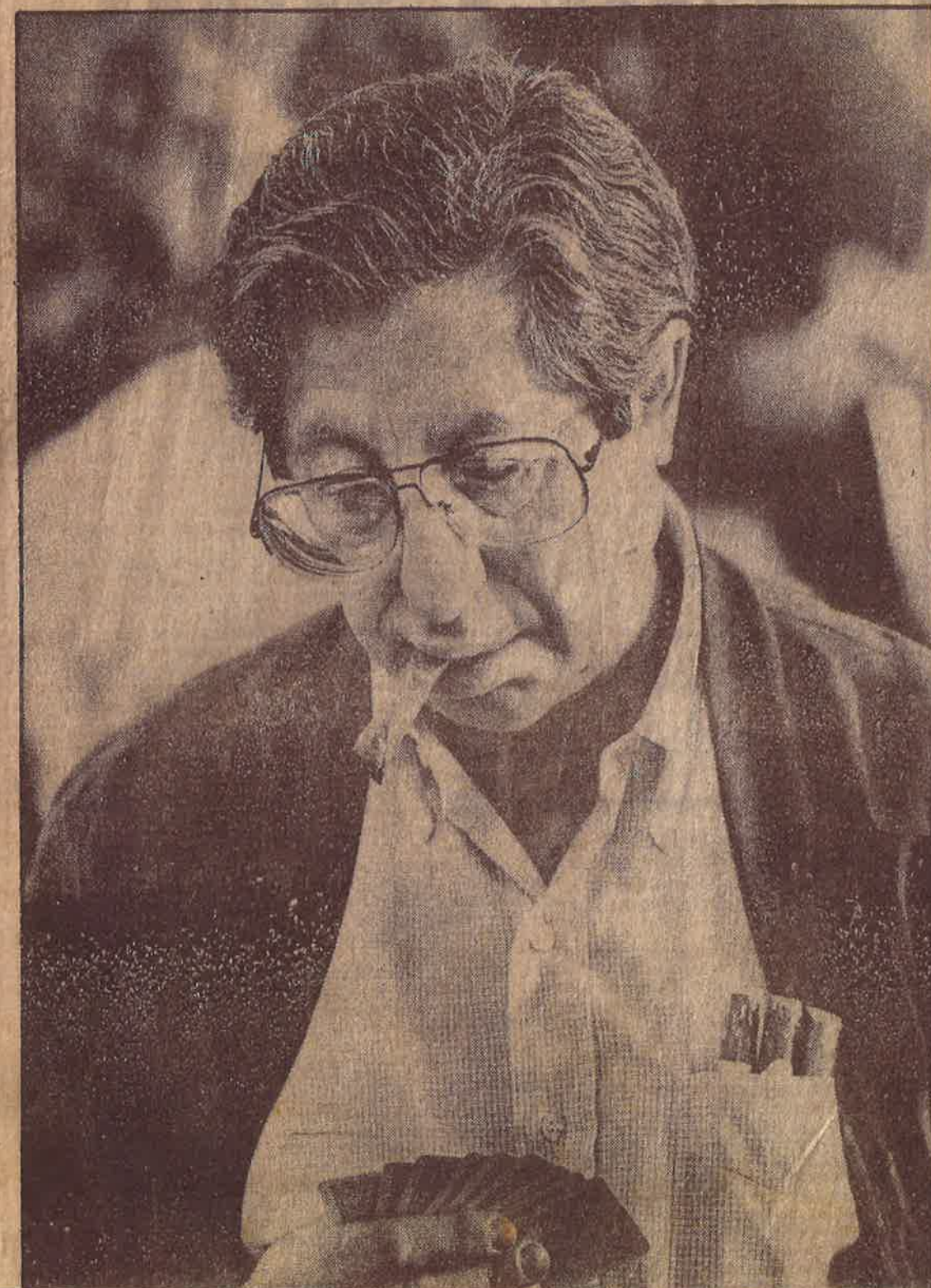
"Have you come to fix something?" asks bridge tournament secretary Mavis Carruthers suspiciously as we wander into the Rotorua hotel.

OK, so we're a bit crumpled after the drive. And maybe the photographer, his camera case resembling a toolbox, could be mistaken for a jack of all trades. But a quick glance around smoky rooms packed with bridge fanatics confirms we're not the most unlikely pair ever to front up for a hand of cards.

cards very close to the chest when you ask how they make their living.

"There's a totally separate set of standards in bridge," says one. "Education, breeding, your profession — or lack of it — all that goes out the window. You're judged solely on how well you play bridge. If anyone's called a fool it's because of what they do at the bridge table, not what they do in the outside world."

Bridge, they'll tell you, is the world's finest card game, no contest. It's said to have come out of the British Raj, spread



Five hundred bridge players, from convergent to Kerikeri, 13-year-old schoolboys to little old ladies in their late 70s, of all shapes and sizes, are indulging in their passion for nine days in the country's biggest-ever bridge congress.



Don Hayward, of Auckland, about to make a move ...

"THEY come from all walks of life," says congress manager Ken Simpson. "It's not a game for the rich and famous." Unless you're film star Omar Sharif, the world's most famous celebrity player. Unfortunately Omar couldn't make it to Rotorua this year.

It appeals to all sorts, says Simpson, and there are no race, sex, age or class barriers.

But from where we're sitting they're mainly white, middle-class, well-educated, professional types. And they're jammed like sardines into three conference rooms and overflowing across the road to a fourth.

In the largest, a room the size of a tennis court, 208 of them are playing mixed doubles. The decor is standard hotel white concrete block and loud red and purple carpet, but the preoccupied competitors are unlikely to notice.

Under the low roof the cigarette smoke is lying so thick and heavy it's a health hazard. Outside, even the pungent, sulphurous Rotorua air tastes sweet by comparison.

Bridge may not be the world's greatest spectator sport. But as the butts pile up in the ashtrays and the afternoon becomes a study in concentration, all furrowed brows and bespectacled detachment, it's clear the game is a great leveller.

Well-suited doyens of the bridge establishment, some in pearls and one or two in hats that wouldn't be out of place in a royal flush, sit side by side with scruffy long-haired off-suits (one, who looks for all the world like *The Young Ones*' resident lentil-brain Neil, turns out to be razor-sharp open pairs co-winner Peter Newell) and shift-eyed rough diamonds who play their

have come out of the British 19th century, based on the old game of whist. The modern game — contract bridge — was born in 1926 on a luxury cruise liner. It's now played all over the world, in 100 countries and perhaps by 80 million people.

It's a trick-taking game like five hundred and euchre, although much more complicated. It's played by two pairs at each table, and one of the things that sets the duplicate game (the sort they're playing here) apart from other card games is that the luck factor is eliminated because all the pairs take turns at playing the same hands. The pair with the best success rate at the end of the day wins.

All that's required, it seems, is a superior intelligence not far off genius level. You virtually need to be a Mensa candidate (IQ 148 plus) just to follow the instructions for scoring, and for changing seats every 14 minutes (the time it takes to play two hands). And that's even before you learn how to play.

"East-West move," calls a tournament director and one pair from each table leaps to its feet and moves on to the next table in a chaotic game of musical chairs. Often they'll end up at the wrong place, or with the wrong cards. Some of them are so absent-minded they don't realise when they're looking at the same hand they've just been playing with.

Judging by the expressions on their faces some players obviously use secret signs — raised eyebrows, bitten lips, sucked-in cheeks, fingers tapping the table, in ears or noses — to reveal the contents of their hands to their partners.

But modern bidding systems — a science about as simple as nuclear physics — are now so far advanced partners can tell each other not only what's in their hands and their opponents' but also what they had for breakfast — and what they hope to have for lunch — simply by saying phrases like "one hearts, one spades, two no trumps" in a particular order. Lucky the



By Peter Allison

other side didn't have these sorts of codes during the war ...

ASK what qualities you need to be a good bridge player and you'll hear words like mental dexterity, logic, analysis, memory, pressure, concentration and "spatial conception" — the ability to see where the cards are, and to think several moves ahead, as with chess.

Many of the top players here are "in computers" or management, university lecturers, school teachers or mathematicians — jobs which lend themselves to that way of thinking.

Surprisingly perhaps, New Zealand is said to have the world's highest bridge-playing population per capita — about 25,000 players. Because it's such a social game, suggests Simpson. "And because we're competitive, aggressive and like to win," says contract bridge association chairman John Evitt.

About two-thirds of Kiwi bridge players are women, but it's an unfortunate fact of life (and a perennial source of arguments with irate feminists) that men generally make better bridge players. "Simply because men are more aggressive," says Evitt, dispelling the myth that bridge is a game for little old ladies. The guns are usually aged between 35 and 50 — "with the maturity to handle the pressure but still young enough to cope with the concentration."

It looks like a four-cigar day for Erwin Otvosi, of Sydney.

And arrogant? "You have to be to win," he says, "just like in any sport. Look at the All Blacks — there's a cold arrogance about the way they take their opponents apart ..."

Evitt should know about the qualities required. As one of eight world grandmasters in the country he's one of our top players, and this afternoon he's just cleaned up the mixed pairs with his partner Helen Thomson.

As well as the cream of Kiwi talent, there's a sprinkling of Australian aces through the Rotorua pack: Jim and Norma Borin ("Mr and Mrs Australian Bridge") are a very rare thing in the game — a successful husband and wife team.

Few marriages are said to be able to stand the test of a bridge partnership, but as regular members of the Australian team for 20 years the Borins have become the top married pair in world bridge.

They run a bridge club and school in Melbourne, although Jim Borin shies away from the phrase "professional bridge player." "It has the image of a pool-room hustler," he says, "but there's virtually no rubber bridge (the sort you can make money on) played in Australia except in Sydney."

Michael Courtney is one such hustler. He makes his living — about \$700 a week — from rubber bridge at Sydney's Double Bay club, and has a reputation for being something of a knave.

Pale (all the best bridge players look

like they've just crawled out from under a rock) with curly black hair, he's not unlike John McEnroe in looks or temperament. He's said to be a brilliant player — and has been dubbed the bad boy of Australian bridge.

Courtney's been banned at some time or other from playing bridge in most of the Australian states. "Mainly for poor behaviour when drunk," he says. "I used to be a bit noisy y'know, a bit of a mess. Complained a lot, threw the occasional tantrum."

He started playing when he was 17, about the same time he started drinking and taking drugs — "anything from ground-up pharmaceuticals to deadly nightshade." Playing with a hangover was no problem, but after smoking dope, says Courtney, "I'd be sitting there looking at my cards thinking 'why am I doing this ...?'"

Now 28, Courtney admits he's mellowed considerably — "it (riotous living) was more fashionable then" — and nowadays takes nothing much worse than beer. Today he's on his best behaviour: relaxed (if a little twitchy); content to sit back and enjoy the competition — and a couple of bets on the side.

"Bridge is not a gambling game mate," says a fellow gambler discussing

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The fanatical faces of bridge

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their bet in a dark corner of the bar. "Don't print this . . ."

SIDE bets are rumoured to be worth up to \$1500 but it's not a steady earner in New Zealand. "There are a few here who don't do much except gamble," says Evitt, "but they wouldn't want their names in lights."

One highly successful player hasn't paid a cent in tax since (ironically) he stopped working for the Inland Revenue Department several years ago and started playing bridge and betting on horses seriously. He's now what could loosely be described as "a professional gambler."

Top players can also be sponsored in a sort of "rent a partner" arrangement by wealthy players wishing to improve their game. At this tournament a wealthy Sydney businessman is said to be paying for the privilege of partnering one of the country's top players.

He won't confirm or deny. "Let's just say we have a business arrangement," he says, in a thick Hungarian accent. "I think my partner is one of the 10 best in the world, although that might annoy him—he probably thinks he's the best."

But not all here are in that league. Some are like Lloyd and Arlene Purdie, and Barry and Janice Johnson, humble Kerikeri shopkeepers who are in Rotorua from a love of their game and a chance to play with "the bright boys."

They know they haven't any real chance of winning ("we came down last year and were crushed into the mud," says Arlene Purdie, "but we enjoyed it so much we're back for more"). But a surprise victory for the Purdies in one of the intermediate pairs sessions (they're later to finish 10th overall) and, for the Johnsons, a chance to fish Lake Taupo on the same trip makes the effort worthwhile.

"There's something about bridge you can't explain," says Purdie. "It's a disease, an obsession, an addiction, you just can't get enough. You can be dog-tired and bleary-eyed from playing all night, but if someone deals another hand you'll carry on playing like there's no tomorrow . . ."

This week they can play up to 26

sessions like the one they've just finished for \$20,000 in prize money spread over a dozen events. The blue riband events are the open pairs, the teams event and the inter-provincials. Then there's the rubber bridge knock-out, the mixed pairs and the individual events. But it's when you mention the "speedball" that bridge players' eyes really light up.

Speedball—the name smacks of the lethal mixture of heroin and cocaine that killed actor John Belushi. But the most dangerous substances you'll find here are along the top shelf of the bar.

Speedball in bridge is a game played at twice the normal speed, so you have just three minutes to play a hand instead of seven. It's variously described as "total chaos," "nonsense," "great fun" and it's usually a late night event for players with enough enthusiasm and stamina to take them bleary-eyed into the wee small hours.

And on their nights off? Bridge players drink, watch other games on overhead projectors yelling out "pass!", "double!" with the same enthusiasm as a Timaru crowd shouting "take the money!", "the bag!", drink some more, make bets, engage in esoteric bridge humour and detailed analysis of the day's play, talking for hours about who bid what, what they led and what they should've led; drink some more, and if they're still standing, indulge in some trivial, non-cerebral pursuit like black bitch or backgammon.

MEANWHILE about 30 staff—organisers, directors, scorers, back-room boffins—are working into the night with the precision of a military operation: punching results into six Data General computer terminals preparing complicated seating arrangements for the next day's play, dealing cards.

Pre-dealing started two weeks before the tournament. By the end of the week they'll have made up 10,000 hands from 2500 decks of cards—that's a big deal in anybody's language.

The photocopier will have pumped out more than 50,000 copies of daily results and bulletins. The players will have drunk more than \$1000 worth of tea and coffee (at wholesale price) and as for the cigarettes, well . . . any volunteers to count the butts?



Jack Whitburn, of Papatoetoe, concentrates at the national bridge congress in Rotorua.