



Real Men Play Bridge

The private passion of America's high rollers.

By Rebecca Dana

When a machete-wielding intruder recently accosted Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer in his Caribbean vacation home, absconding with \$1,000, reports of the incident glossed over one significant detail. In the moments—possibly the hours—leading up to this rude invasion, Breyer and his wife were playing bridge.

To the layperson, this may connote nothing more than the apparent fact of an elderly Jewish gentleman playing a game popular in Boca Raton (and other sunny places where grandparents congregate). But to a knowing few, Breyer's choice of game signals uncommon discernment. Bridge is not just a pastime for retirees, it is a fashionable hobby for the power elite.

"There's something sexy about the game," says Jill Meyers, a 17-time national champion and six-time world champion. "Everybody thinks it's a bunch of old people eating watercress

sandwiches, but it's actually a great game for very intelligent, competitive people. I think they lose themselves in it." Meyers, an attorney, has a music business in Los Angeles and runs licensing for NBC's *The Voice*.

Bridge, for the uninitiated, is a four-person trick game—like hearts, only infinitely more complicated, and played in pairs. Warren Buffett has described it as "such a sensational game that I wouldn't mind being in jail if I had three cellmates who were decent players and who were willing to keep the game going 24 hours a day." To excel, one needs not just strong math and spatial-relations skills but also creativity, stamina, and a cutthroat streak. Eager members of the 1 percent can also purchase an edge, hiring expensive coaches and world-class players to partner with them.

All of which, players say, makes it tantalizing for creative and competitive individuals

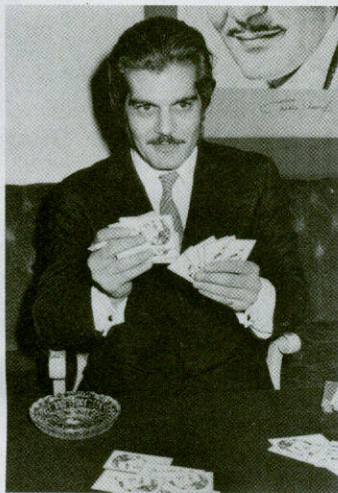
who have already reached the peak of their fields. Leave backgammon to Bob Dylan, Scrabble to Sharon Stone, and chess to Ben Affleck. For a certain set, there's only bridge.

Designer Isaac Mizrahi serves homemade mac and cheese and Mrs. Paul's fish sticks at his Sunday-afternoon bridge parties in New York. While on tour, the band Radiohead plays raucous rounds. Four members of the Toronto Blue Jays have a regular locker-room game. Actor Omar Sharif was so successful a player that he built a bridge empire, writing a column on the game for the *Chicago Tribune* and launching the traveling Omar Sharif Bridge Circus.

But the most fearsome enthusiasts come from Wall Street. Former Bear Stearns chief Jimmy Cayne is a national champion. Nick Nickell, head of the private-equity firm Kelso & Co., is a legend on the American Contract Bridge League circuit. Back in the innocent pre-bailout era, Nickell and Cayne joined former CBS executive Laurence Tisch and then-Bear Stearns chairman Alan Greenberg in a "Corporate America vs. Congress" match, pitting them against Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, Kentucky Rep. Jim Bunning, and others. (Corporate America, as always, won.)

And then there's Bill Gates, who has competed online under the nerdonym "Chalengr." In 2005, Gates and bridge pal Buffett, who has played as "T-Bone," gave \$1 million to fund bridge education in schools. The grants help encourage kids like 9-year-old Zach Garrison of Spring, Texas, who on Feb. 1 became the youngest person ever to be a life master, the highest level of achievement in the game. Gates, who keeps a low profile at bridge tournaments, wasn't such a prodigy.

"Bill is not what you'd call an expert," says Brent Manley, a gold life master. But it's not all about winning. "When he first started showing up at our tournaments, people were wanting to take photographs. Now, if you didn't know what he looked like, you'd think he was just any other bridge player." **NW**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ILLUSTRATION BY KATHRYN RATHKE; STUART WILSON—GETTY IMAGES; TRISH GANT—DORLING KINDERSLEY—GETTY IMAGES; MARC ANDREW DELEY—FILMMAGIC; CENTRAL PRESS—GETTY IMAGES

CELEBS AT PLAY

BRIDGE

The card game claims Omar Sharif, Jimmy Cayne, and Radiohead's Thom Yorke among its devotees.



SCRABBLE

Sharon Stone loves it. As do Madonna and art dealer Charles Saatchi.

BACKGAMMON

Charlize Theron, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Bob Dylan are among the many celebrities who play 'gammon in their downtime.



GO

The ancient Chinese board game ensnared Rod Stewart, Paul Giamatti, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

CHESS

Howard Stern, Sting, and Ben Affleck are said to be enthusiastic chess men.

