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Overbidders Anonymous

It’s a card game of strategy, communication and probability, one in which you and your partner subtly plot to control the table through skill, counting and a little bit of luck.

“It’s got something for everyone,” said Andrew Rowberg, a UC Santa Barbara materials science graduate student and a self-professed ‘numbers guy.’ You can be riding high one moment but a single slip, one misread of your partner’s intentions, can bring that momentum to a halt. Or, you can be struggling to stay afloat and find in your hands an opportunity to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. This is bridge.

Rowberg and his team found themselves in just this dramatic scenario as finalists in the 2020 Online Collegiate Bridge Championships. Competition this year took place entirely online. Playing out in a mashup of cold war thriller and sports underdog movie, Overbidders Anonymous, the UC Santa Barbara bridge team Rowberg founded in 2018, went into the knockout rounds riding the momentum of half-expected victories.

“I had hoped, but wasn’t exactly expecting us to win because I knew there were a lot of strong teams out there,” Rowberg said. “Schools like University of Chicago, Georgia Tech, really strong bridge programs. And I knew it would take a lot going our way. But I also was pretty confident in our team.”

He was right to be confident. Teammates Hanwen Tian, Danning Lu, Nicholas Adamski, David Mc Carthy, Ian Banta, Aaron Maharry and Michael Zheng got themselves into a groove in the preliminary rounds, taking advantage of luck and keeping their cool when the stakes got high.

The camaraderie was especially important for the team this year, amidst a global pandemic. Quarantines and lockdowns meant the American Contract Bridge League's (ACBL) in-person games, including the College Bridge Bowl in Montreal, had been canceled, leaving loyal fans of the card game in the lurch.

"I was really disappointed," Rowberg said of the cancellation. His fledgling team, still in its infancy by the standards of the long and venerable tradition of collegiate bridge, was looking forward to again matching wits with other college teams for bragging rights and scholarship prizes. The members had been honing their skills in regular games at the local Santa Barbara Bridge Center.

Not to be deterred, the collegiate bridge community, with ACBL's blessing, pivoted to the web via a combination of the Bridge Base Online platform and the Twitch game streaming service, and the Online Collegiate Bridge Championships was born.

"It went off without a hitch," said Rowberg, who assisted with the online conversion. Every school that would have gone to the in-person tournament participated in the online games, he added.

So maybe they weren't facing off across tables at a tournament in Canada, but the play was just as intense. For their part, Overbidders Anonymous closed out the group phase of the tournament by sweeping past Cal Tech, and then went on to beat Northwestern University's team (Rowberg's alma mater). That was followed by a thrilling come-from-behind win over Georgia Tech in a semifinal match that both worried Rowberg's team and gave them hope.

"Georgia Tech has one of the oldest and most established bridge programs in the country," he said. "Beating them, that's when it really started to hit me that we could win this thing."

But bridge is a fickle mistress. A true mastery of this highly sophisticated game takes years, and the intellectual stimulation is a large part of what keeps players coming back. That, and the social aspect: Bridge is a partnership game and requires fluency in the complex language of bidding, with bid names such as "Two Hearts"

and “Three No-Trump” made to convey information about things such as the strength of your hand and what suits you prefer.

Based on their team name, you can probably guess that UCSB’s players favor an ‘aggressive’ use of their bidding cards.

Psychology also plays a role. “You have to know when to push your partner or when to let your partner off the hook,” he said. “Everyone makes mistakes.”

That reminder came in handy during the team’s final match against Claremont Colleges’ bridge team.

“We had a big lead after the first segment, but in the second segment we actually blew all of it,” said Rowberg, who counted himself responsible.

“That was tough for me,” he said. “It was very hard over the next couple of days to focus and regroup.”

Ultimately, however, UCSB’s Overbidders heaved themselves over the psychological hump and went on to make “a very impressive showing” in the final segment, giving themselves just enough points to win and to claim the title of national collegiate bridge champions.

“It was really exciting for us,” he said.

Rowberg looks forward to the day isolation and quarantines end and the the team can get together and celebrate properly — with cookies (as his fellow bridge players can attest, he’s got some serious baking skills).

“I also like to give motivational speeches and I didn’t get to do that very much,” he said. “But I hope we can have a party once everything gets back to normal.”

Not ones to rest on their laurels, Rowberg and team are back at it, conducting casual games over Zoom and BridgeBase.com, and working to grow their championship bridge team for next year’s competition. Rowberg is coming to the end of his doctoral studies, and he’s hoping to keep the program going and growing beyond his time at UCSB.

“There are people ready to take over,” he said. They may have some work on their hands — the popularity of online bridge has experienced a surge as people all over

the world try out the game in efforts to alleviate lockdown boredom and stress. Bridge, it turns out, is a game for our times.

“We’re really in a special position in that we can play bridge online and we can still have somewhat of a social aspect,” Rowberg said. “It’s something that even new students can pick up if they want to right now.”

For more information or to join UCSB’s bridge club, contact ucsbbridge@gmail.com.

About UC Santa Barbara

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