

Community Development

ABTA names Jim Ricker Teacher of the Year

BY CHIP DOMBROWSKI



For ABTA/Master Point Press Teacher of the Year Jim Ricker of Knoxville TN, the focus of teaching bridge is on growing the game. "Teaching them is easy," Ricker said. "Keeping them is hard."

Ricker has had a lot of success in keeping them. Eight years ago, there were 3100 tables at the seven clubs that use the Knoxville Bridge Center. Last year, there were 5800. This 88% growth is the result of a successful player recruitment and development program, he says. "Every limited game in Knoxville has had 200% growth over eight years."

That's the length of time Ricker has been playing. He got dragged into bridge by his wife, Patti, who was retiring then. She wanted to find something "fun, easy and relaxing," Ricker tells people, usually to hysterical laughter. Bridge wasn't exactly those things, but

the Rickers liked it anyway.

There was a need for teachers in the area, so with just two years of playing experience, Ricker decided to start teaching bridge. He wasn't satisfied with any of the teaching materials available – he wanted to teach 2/1 from the beginning – so at the same time, he decided to write his own textbook. It was a catch-22: He needed the materials to teach the class, but he needed the teaching experience to write the book. So he did both at the same time, writing a chapter each week while preparing for that week's class.

Ricker is now a director, a club owner, a teacher, a cook and the author of three books. He doesn't market his books to players for individual reading, but to teachers for use as classroom textbooks.

When Ricker started his Wednesday 99er game, it was not expected to

be successful, he says. But he created an experience that was a draw, starting with a 30-minute lesson, serving a full meal and concluding each game with a postmortem session (no preparation required – "they come with questions"). The game has grown to 26 tables.

"They like the food, they like the game, they love the lessons," he says. "When people eat together, it becomes a community."

Ricker is a big proponent of offering multiple levels of limited games. "The ramp needs to start as low as the area can support," he says. This approach trains players to graduate to higher-level games. "When they get better, they get frustrated with the slower play in the lower sections, and they move up."

Having just one limited game doesn't work as well; the limit tends to get

An advertisement for College Bridge Online (CBO). The background shows hands typing on a keyboard. On the left is the CBO logo with "COLLEGE BRIDGE ONLINE" and "CBO" in large letters. In the center, it says "Powered by BBO bridgebase.com • Exclusive daily tournaments • Prizes Win a trip to play for scholarships in Montréal". At the bottom left, it says "Log in now and play with fellow college students." On the right, a speech bubble from a robot character says "Need practice? Free bots!". Below that, a blue circle contains the text "Join the 600+ members of the CBO Club! acbl.org/cbo".

steadily raised to accommodate players who don't want to graduate out of it. Ricker is aware that limited games have their critics, and the unwillingness of players to migrate to open games is what drives that criticism. While he concedes it's not possible to replicate his approach in very small towns, Knoxville isn't huge. It's a city of 179,000.

Another of Ricker's tips for keeping students: At the end of every lesson, he emails materials to everyone in the class. Ricker speculates that one of the reasons bridge classes shrink over the course of their run is that when someone misses a class, they don't feel like they can catch up.

About 175 of Ricker's students submitted testimonials in support of his nomination. Among them:

- ♦ "I have been a student all my life and he is the best I have ever experienced." – *Mary Davidson*
- ♦ "He has this gift of explaining things in a way that makes it easy to follow." – *Leela Menon*
- ♦ "If other bridge clubs had teachers like Jim, this game would explode with players." – *Jim Bookstaff*
- ♦ "Jim is very patient with the rookies, explains things very well, and has a great sense of humor that makes learning a fun experience. Points out on a regular basis that we all

make mistakes, and he tells stories of some of his that are hilarious. Makes it easier to laugh at your own!" – *David Wilson*

The award was chosen by an ABTA committee chaired by Richard Braundstein. Committee members are Mary Jane Orock, Joyce Penn, Tina Radding, Enid Roitman, Barbara Seagram and Kathie Walsh.

Other finalists for the award were Robert "Buck" Buchanan of Arlington TX, Bruce Greenspan of Bonita Springs FL; David Libchaber of New York; and Edward Scanlon of York PA.

Ricker had high hopes of being chosen for the award. "I wanted it really bad," he says. "It's re-energized me." ■

ABTA names award-winning books

The American Bridge Teachers' Association presented its book-of-the-year awards at its annual convention and banquet, held before the Summer NABC.

Winner of the Shirley Silverman Beginner Book of the Year is "Startup Bridge and Beyond" by Lynn Berg. This book aims to inform, encourage and help beginners help themselves.

In the intermediate category, the winner is "On the Other Hand: Bridge Cardplay Explained" by David Bird and Larry Cohen. In this unusual book, the authors present 100 pairs of deals, one described by each of them. The deals look similar – in some cases very similar – but an entirely different line of play is necessary to make each of the contracts.

The winner in the advanced category is Mike Lawrence's "Insights on Bridge: Moment in Bidding, Book 1." The first in a series that will include hundreds of mini-lessons, the material is devoted to situations and problems players will see at the table, but not in other books.

The ABTA has recognized excellence in bridge instructional writing since 1982. Members of the book awards committee are Sam Marks, Henry Meguid, Brenda Montague and Karen Walker.

Teachers attending the convention voted on the Apple Basket awards – given to useful, creative teaching tips.



First place went to Shirley Scott of Colorado Springs CO: "Wouldn't it be educational for every person at the table to bid, play and defend every hand from the perspective of all four seats?"

Second place, Kathy Rolfe of Lake Winnebago MO for "What's next?" a theme of planning ahead on bidding, declarer play and defense.

Third place, Jeff Bayone of New York: "Count winners, account for losers." Going against the traditional advice to count losers in a suit contract, Bayone advises to count winners in both suit and notrump contracts – finding where the number of tricks needed to make the contract are going to come from – while accounting for the losers.

Other news from the ABTA is that Henry Meguid from Durham NC is the organization's new president, taking over for Betty Starzec. ■