

Life of A Bridge Sectional (Ripon)

In 2005 two of my friends said that they would like to hold a Wisconsin Upper Michigan Bridge Association (WUMBA) sectional in Ripon. I told them I thought they were nuts, but I was outvoted. We had one big advantage in that one of these two gentleman owned the banquet hall where we would be playing, as well as the “host” hotel located directly across the parking lot from the playing site.

But there were disadvantages as well. The banquet hall hosted so many wedding receptions that we were forced to schedule the tournament in January. The snowbirds were gone, and we were always at the mercy of the weather. We settled on the weekend before the Super Bowl, so we wouldn't be competing with the NFL Conference Championship Games, which put us two weeks before the Valentine's Day Sectional in Milwaukee.

We started in January of 2006 with 92 tables over seven sessions. We were able to grow it over time, and consistently were between 165 and 182 tables. One year we topped 200 tables. The tournament was held in January of 2020, shortly before the covid shutdown occurred. Growth came from the many amenities we provided, with a grand prize drawing for a free room for one night at the following year's tournament.

We did not hold a tournament in either 2021 or 2022. We resumed in February of 2023 (moved back one week because of the NFL's 17-game schedule) and were back down to 2006 levels --- 105 tables. In addition, the banquet hall was sold to a church, which is converting it into its place of worship. I once played in a tournament held in the hallway of an elementary school, and another time on the deck around the hotel's swimming pool. You can imagine how pleased the hotel guests were with that. We decided not to lower what we offered, so we are through holding a face-to-face sectional in Ripon.

But over the years there were many great stories. One year in our planning session the hotel manager told us that the bridge tournament was a great event. The bridge players checked-in by noon on Friday and checked out after breakfast on Sunday. And there was never any damage to the rooms. Some guests at wedding receptions tended to drink too much, and there could be some damage done to the rooms. Probably better that than them driving, however. In fact, one year a guest did a backflip off the bar. I told the hotel manager not to worry. There wasn't a bridge player who could climb up on the bar, even if he or she wanted to.

I always used my neighbor's children and Rotary inbound exchange students as caddies. The youth exchange students cannot work, but they can do jobs, babysitting being a prime example, for cash. One year Ripon Rotary was hosting a young lady from France,

and she was desperate for cash. Unfortunately, another Rotary club in the district was holding a “Rotary Weekend” for all the exchange students that weekend and she wouldn’t be able to work. No caddying --- no cash. She asked me if I could pay her even though she couldn’t work. I pointed out that I wouldn’t be much of a businessman if I paid somebody for not working.

Fast forward a few months and I happened to be sitting at the same table as she was at the weekly Rotary meeting and mentioned that I was playing bridge that weekend. “I thought you said there were no more bridge tournaments!” I told her that this tournament was in Appleton, and I had nothing to do with running it. “Will can I work?” You have to love her tenacity. Also, the players went out of their way to introduce themselves and talk to the exchange students. And there was one player from the Twin Cities area who had been a Rotary outbound exchange student back in her school days.

One year the Rotary Exchange Student wasn’t available, and I was using two of my neighbor’s children, an experienced veteran breaking in her younger brother. The young lady was considering attending UW Whitewater for business, so I introduced her to one of the players, a math professor at UW Whitewater. He must have done a good job selling the UW Whitewater College of Business, as she is now a senior there. Of course, one of this player’s teammates asked, what about the math department? I don’t believe the math department received such glowing reviews.

In a match past the midpoint of play, boards had been exchanged at all the tables, I called both caddies to our table, and showed our trainee how to turn the dummy, while his sister took pictures. I backed away from the table as I didn’t want to be looking over his shoulder. I heard my partner call for “A small diamond”, and then immediately corrected it to “The three of diamonds.” Our trainee wasn’t certain which diamond to play.

After the event when our trainee’s father was looking at the pictures, he asked, “What was it like playing bridge?” The response was that it was confusing.

I have been attempting to play this game for 57-odd years, and I cannot disagree with that assessment.