

# Maritha Earns Platinum

Maritha Pottenger recently surpassed the 10,000 master point milestone, thus becoming a Platinum Life Master. Larry Sherman (LS) recently took the opportunity to solicit Maritha's (MP) feedback on a number of mostly bridge related questions.

LS: Where were you born and raised?

MP: I was born in Arizona, but moved to California with my mom for my last year of high school.

LS: Tell us about your initiation into the game of bridge, and more specifically duplicate.

MP: My mom taught us bridge when I was about 11 years old. Although there are less than six years between the four of us, my youngest brother was too young to play. However, I was re-introduced to bridge in college, including duplicate, and loved it. I had a lot of time for bridge and working part time at the library.

LS: If I am not mistaken, you pursued an academic career that culminated with a degree from Berkeley. Are you willing to speak about your academic pursuits and career and your decision to walk away from that?

MP: I met Mark Itabashi at UC Berkeley. I went on to graduate school in the Los Angeles area and got my master's degree in clinical psychology. I was ready for a change, and decided not to pursue a doctorate. My oldest brother, Rique, was at UCLA getting his Master's, and then working in the L.A. Area, so we got to play lots of bridge throughout the 1970's and 1980's. We traveled to tournaments as well as playing in club games. I moved to San Diego to work for a small publishing company in 1983. Rique joined me a year later and we bought a house together a few years after that. Rique was my favorite bridge partner, very solid in bidding, very easygoing. Since we had the same last name on our convention cards, people would periodically comment how well we got along for a married couple. We would laugh and say, "That's because we are not married!"

LS: Who were your earliest influences and mentors in the game?

MP: My favorite bridge author is Eddie Kantar. He has a fabulous sense of humor. For many years, Eddie would also answer emails if a partner and I had an issue (usually bidding) that we wanted a "higher authority" to solve. I was lucky in meeting Lynne O'Neil early in my San Diego years, who served as a mentor and introduced me to partners.

LS: Are there carryovers from the world of academia that have benefited you in bridge?

MP: I retired from the publishing company (for whom I wrote about 10 books during my 17 year tenure) around 2000 when we sold out to a bigger firm. I was responsible for organizing the Educational programs at Southern California regionals for about 10 years at San Diego, Riverside, Orange County (until Marjorie Michelin took it over) and Palm Springs most of the time. One of my innovations was an "Ask an Expert" table where novice/intermediate players could come after a session and get answers to their

questions about bidding, play, defense, etc. (I'd bludgeon bridge pros into serving at the table as well as giving mini lessons between sessions). That was something I had wanted at tournaments when I was first learning bridge.

**LS:** Do you enjoy teaching students?

**MP:** I love teaching. Teaching really helped my bridge game. I had to clarify principles that were not clear when explaining them to other people; definitely a great way to improve my own bridge logic and inferences. I had been an occasional guest lecturer on cruises in the 1980's. Around 2000, Lynne O'Neil asked me to do cruises with her on which I would teach bridge and she would direct. So, I've been on Princess, Holland America, Royal Caribbean, and Celebrity cruises quite a few times.

Around 2012, Marc Matz, my life partner, and I signed up with an agent who handles the premium lines: Regent, Silver Seas, Oceania, and Cunard. Until Covid19, we did almost two cruises a year and enjoyed them immensely. I would teach and Marc would direct. I always got rave reviews because my teaching of bridge involves me setting up example hands for the students to bid and play (usually multiple copies of the same 4 hands for one lesson). The best way to learn—and retain—bridge concepts is to actually bid and play (and then I discuss possible improvements afterward). Students really appreciate this method.

**LS:** What made you decide to become a professional bridge player?

**MP:** Even though I had met Mark Itabashi and saw him regularly at tournaments, I never considered “bridge pro” as a career until a lady asked me how much I would charge to play with her (around 2000). Gee, getting paid to play a game I love, no brainer!

**LS:** Do you have any goals in mind in bridge?

**MP:** I am most proud of the work that Ray Sachs, one of my oldest students, and I have done to support his medical missions to provide life-altering surgeries for children (and a few adults) in poorer countries. The bridge community in San Diego (and now further afield, including Arizona) has been very generous in supporting Esperanca, the charity which backs Ray's medical missions—raising between \$150,000 and \$200,000 in about 10 years. Ken Monzingo, one of the ACBL Presidents, also helped to get a charity grant from ACBL for Esperanca, and a District 22 contribution.

**LS:** How has the pandemic affected your business? Is online bridge more suitable as a teaching medium?

**MP:** With Covid19's arrival, I had to move to online teaching, but it has worked out fine. I can export my sample hands to BBO and load them onto Teaching Tables there. I am gradually learning some of the programming for hand generation on BBO as well, and have mastered the simple basics of Zoom. I am teaching quite a few people, from groups of eight together to individual students. I also continue to do playing lessons online, in which I play with a student and review the hands afterwards so s/he can see where to improve.

I am playing online less than I used to play face-to-face (face to face was every day, literally). I play two regular games per week with Kent Hartman and one with Ken Monzingo. I play casual bridge online with Pat Sullivan, Pam Nuccio, Ruth Ng, Patrick Chen, and Kent Hartman. I play occasional speedball games with clients and occasional robot games.

Robot games are useful to find material for my *Teaching Points* on the days I don't play with a human partner. I write a bridge "newsletter" that I email to people who subscribe. In it, I choose two (or more) interesting hands, with pictures of the hand and a detailed analyses of interesting points in regard to bidding, play, defense, or any combination of those. The first couple of years, I was literally writing a Teaching Points analysis every day. Now, I may skip one or even two days in a week.

**LS:** What is your outlook for a return to face to face bridge in San Diego, considering the safety requirements ACBL has recommended and the fact that most San Diego duplicate clubs are smaller operations? The largest club in San Diego, Adventures in Bridge, closed down a few years ago. In the meantime a number of satellite clubs stepped in to fill the vacuum created. Do you have a vision of how these clubs can offer the bridge public a safe place to play? Do you foresee a combination of bridge being played at clubs in San Diego and online bridge being offered by San Diego clubs?

**MP:** I believe that every individual will have to decide on their own. It is a very personal issue as to what protocols would make us feel safe in a face-to-face setting. I also realize that some people love the ease of online bridge with no travel time (and playing in pajamas!). Some even prefer the shorter games. Others mourn the social interactions of face-to-face bridge and can hardly wait for the opportunity to participate again.

**LS:** Does reaching the Platinum Life Master milestone, celebrating the earning of 10,000 master points, hold any significance to you?

**MP:** Yes and no. Goals are useful because they often help keep us motivated, and I am no exception. I recognize that the goals set by the ACBL are arbitrary numbers, but there is still satisfaction in reaching various milestones. I am fortunate to have played a lot of bridge with a lots of excellent partners to reach this point. Ironically, my best result at a Nationals (4<sup>th</sup> in women's pairs) was with a pick-up partner, Prudence Saunders, the first time we played together.

**LS:** What are your other interests?

**MP:** I write a monthly column for the District 22 newsletter, *Connections*. Both my parents wrote prolifically, so I blame the authoring instinct on DNA. I have over 200 handouts (mostly just one page) on various bridge topics (bidding/declarer play/defense/quizzes/ and overviews or summaries) from my various classes. They are available (by email) to anyone who wants them, any time. I also wrote one (very short) book on bridge: *The Bridge Detective* which was a gift for the I/N players at the Las Vegas and San Diego Nationals: an homage to Sue Grafton with "*A is for Avoidance*."

Other than bridge, I love reading, and playing Boggle (a word game). Marc and I live with my youngest brother, and one older brother lives in Jamul, but is at our place for

family dinner twice a week. So, the four of us have a Boggle game twice a week. I am a fierce competitor. My youngest brother, who keeps all sorts of OCD records tells me that I have won the majority of the Boggle games over the last however many years we have been playing. However, he has just purchased a bigger Boggle, so more combinations are available, and my older brother tells me he has been studying oddball words, so things may change.

**LS:** Where do you see yourself two years from now?

**MP:** Marc and I hope to return to cruising soon. If so, I will cut back on my teaching schedule, but I will continue to play as much as I can. Bridge is the ideal game—because you can never learn it all. Each hand has something instructional to offer. Each partner offers another point of view. Psychological principles operate at the bridge table as they do throughout life. **Bridge is endlessly fascinating and I adore it!**

*Author's Note: MP and LS were at Berkeley at the same time and she never invited me to play lol.*