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on the lighter side

At last: crossing the finish line

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Devoted bridge player Don Sondergeld has fulfilled his own prediction. At the end of his article "Actuaries and the rule of 11" (*The Actuary*, October 1997), he said he expected "to become an ACBL (American Contract Bridge League) Life Master soon." In a foursome with his wife, Mary, in March 1998, Don crossed the finish line when they won the final gold points he needed.

Don and Mary were getting ready to end a ski vacation in Lake Tahoe

when Don said to her, "The nationals are being held in Reno." With all the black, silver, and red points he needed and only 0.15 point of gold away from his goal, Don persuaded Mary to enter the competition. "We played with two ladies from British Columbia," Don said, and the foursome was good enough to win the two matches needed to enter the gold-medal round. Their success in that play gave Don the final gold.

An avid bridge player in college, Don dropped out of serious competition for most of his professional life, then began playing again when he retired in 1991. "I discovered there were many excellent Life Masters and some not as good," he said. "I thought, 'It's not so hard. I can do that.'" He entered his first national tournament in November 1996. Gaining the title was a relief. "I was glad it was over, because I knew it would happen. It was just a matter of when."

Reflecting on the highs and lows of bridge, Don started with the lows. "There are times when you do foolish things and don't get as many points as you know you should have. You think, 'How could I be so stupid?'"

But he had two recent highs to mention as well. The first occurred about two weeks after winning the Life Master title. Don, a "B" player, played with a stronger "B" player (participants and levels of play are ranked A, B, and C based on their master points) in competition, and they took first place in the A strata and first for the entire competition. A few days later, Don approached a high-level B player and persuaded him to be his partner. They played in an event that only A players usually enter. Among 62 pairs of players, some of them champions from Britain, France, and other countries, "We came in eighth," Don said. The pair's success was only slightly more exciting to Don than persuading the top-flight player to become his partner. "When he asked what pairs I wanted to play against, I said, 'I want to fly with the eagles.' I guess he was impressed with my boldness."

The Life Master title ends Don's pursuit, but it's just the beginning of more dedication to the game. "Every bridge hand is different," he said, "and it's really fun to play with good players." **Don Sondergeld can be reached by e-mail at dsonder@worldnet.att.net.**

Seeking a finish line to cross?

Don Sondergeld says bridge helps exercise the mind and so should be popular with actuaries. He notes that at one time, the leader in accumulated master points was the actuary Oswald Jacoby (1902-1984), considered by many the best all-around card player in the world. He was a bridge columnist, and he won 43 national bridge championships. Might another actuary step up to fill his shoes?

The American Contract Bridge League (ACBL), headquartered in Memphis, Tenn., sponsors tournaments in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda. Today, the ACBL has about 165,000 members. Almost 40% of them, 64,000, are Life Masters, and about 60% of ACBL members are women.

To become a Life Master, a player must accumulate 300 points: 25 gold, 25 red or gold, 50 silver, and the remainder any of those or black.

Gold and red points are awarded at three national and 150 regional ACBL tournaments annually, silver at about 1,000 sectional ACBL tournaments. Black points are awarded at local games held by the 3,400 bridge clubs associated with ACBL.

"Local clubs offer bridge games, partners, and lessons," Don said. "There are also many good books on the game. Whether you are nearing retirement or not, you can find bridge interesting and enjoyable."