Players’ Corner – Jean Berg

For a homesick 17-year-old freshman at UMass-Amherst back in the early 60s, the choice to join a sorority was a good one. There were the friendships, the comfort of belonging to a small group on a huge campus — and the food that was so much better than at the dining hall.

Every night as the sisters gathered in the living room to wait for dinner, someone would inevitably call out, “Fourth for bridge?” Then the cards would be shuffled and soon there’d be four sisters sitting on the floor playing bridge until the dinner bell rang.

I must have shown some interest in the game, because one night when a “fourth” couldn’t be found, one of the players asked if I played bridge.

“Well, I know how to play whist…”

“Great,” she said, quickly pulling me down to the floor. “Let me just show you how to count your points.”

And that’s how I became a part of the sorority’s before-dinner bridge group. And while I loved playing the hand, I can’t say I ever learned much about bidding.

Fast-forward to 1980, and I’m a divorced mom of two, and Al Berg, a colleague that I didn’t know that well, has asked me out to dinner. But I did know one thing about him.

“Don’t you play bridge?” I asked.

And right there, over the steak and potatoes, I got my first lesson on something called “Duplicate Bridge.”

“It takes out most of the luck,” he said, and began to explain how bridge boards worked.

By Christmas, we’d been dating about six months, and Al asked if I wanted to go to the annual holiday dinner and bridge game put on by Bill Goesch for his Cavendish Bridge Club.

“Oh, god, I can’t play bridge with THOSE people,” I said, but he assured me there were aways a couple of tables of whist players.

“You and I can play whist.”

Hah!

Bill was a pair short for his 20-table bridge game, when he spotted Al on the other side of the room getting ready to play whist.

“Al! What the heck are you doing over there? I need another pair!”

“Jean’s never played duplicate, Bill...”

“Does she know how to play bridge?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“Ah, she’ll be okay! You’re at Table 3.”

And as we crossed the room from whist to bridge, Al was hurriedly reminding me not to toss my cards into the middle of the table and which way to turn the won/lost tricks.

I was terrified for the entire game… but two hours later when the travelers were collected and scores calculated, we had come in 3rd East-West!

I was officially hooked.

The next day I asked him to teach me how to bid properly.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s deal some cards…”

It’s 45 years later and I’m still not sure I’ve learned to bid properly (and Al is often sure I haven’t!) but duplicate bridge has become our lifelong form of mutual entertainment.