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# BRIDGE Bulletin

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## Child's Play

8-year-old  
Andrew Chen  
becomes the  
youngest  
Life Master in  
ACBL history



# Eight is Enough

Andrew Chen smashes record for youngest Life Master

BY CHIP DOMBROWSKI

Andrew Chen of San Jose CA attended his first bridge lesson in September 2018, when he was 6, at Silicon Valley Youth Bridge's monthly pizza party. The following month, the party was held at a local sectional. Playing in his first real game, he and Brian Zhang, then 8, won the Newcomer Pairs. That day, Oct. 27, Andrew joined the ACBL.

Less than two years later, Andrew became the youngest Life Master ever. On May 27, just three days after turning 8, Andrew broke the record – set by Zach Garrison in 2012, shortly before Andrew was born – by more than a year.

"I am in awe," said Debbie Rosenberg, SiVY founder, in a Bridge Winners post congratulating Andrew. "I was confident you could break this

record if you wanted to, yet had no idea you were about to smash it by over a year. The secret ingredient I didn't anticipate is how good at bridge you would get in such a short time."

In between those first two pizza parties, Andrew spent a lot of time learning and playing bridge with his family – parents Steve and Sarah and brother Charlie, 10, who is in the USBF Junior program. In a house with three bridge players, it was probably inevitable that Andrew would learn. By some bridge families' standards, it would be considered quite patient waiting until he was 6.

Andrew had some inkling of the game when he first went to SiVY, but after getting his first real taste, he still wasn't sure about it. He got more interested and motivated to learn as he

played with his family. When he won his first masterpoint, he was hooked. Bridge was not a monthly event for much longer.

Starting in 2019, he began playing most weekends, in club games and in the abundant local tournaments in the Bay Area. He earned 215.62 masterpoints that year, winning the ACBL Mini-McKenney Rookie of the Year race.

At his first Youth NABC in Las Vegas, he placed fourth in the National Youth Swiss Teams with one of the youngest teams in the field – his brother Charlie, Zhang and Kayden Ge, the oldest player on the team, who was then 10.

A week later, at the San Mateo Sectional, the Chen brothers won the Art Weinstein Trophy 99er Pairs. That was when Andrew set his sights on the goal.

"Bridge got more fun because I got better," Andrew says. "When I won more things and made less mistakes, it felt good. After I got the 99er trophy, I wanted to become the youngest Life Master. I wanted to get the record."

Along with the members of his youth team, Andrew also played regularly with Brandon Ge, Olivia Schireson and other SiVY kids and several adult mentors: Will Watson, Xin Ge, Qiang Zhang, Min Bai, Serena Guo, Bo Xiao, Yanong Han and Jianming Zhang.

"It was less than a year ago when some local players starting buzzing about the possibility that Andrew could break the record for youngest Life Master," Rosenberg said. "His parents, Steve and Sarah, were cautious, not wanting to push. They wanted to be sure it was fully Andrew's decision. He obviously liked playing bridge, and nobody wished to do anything that might change that.

"Once Andrew decided to go for this,



Andrew plays at home with the family.

photo by Steve Chen

his young friends were all supportive. While they are a competitive bunch of kids, it has been wonderful to observe how enthusiastic they are about Andrew's success, even when he does better than they do!"

The 2019 Fall NABC in San Francisco gave Andrew another local opportunity to make a lot of progress. The Chen family played as a team, winning a bracket 2 knockout. Sarah learned bridge in high school in China. Steve met her in 1999. "I knew she liked bridge. I thought maybe this was something I should pick up too," he said. He learned by playing on OKbridge beginning in 2000, then reading books. Steve observed that learning bridge was easier for Andrew than it was for him. "He's got a whole family playing bridge. That's a good influence – it should be easier. He's got a lot of resources: his peers, some mentors, the Rosenbergs. He's got a good memory.

"I find that the bidding for Andrew is not as difficult as I would expect for him. Pretty soon, I found he was able to make negative inferences, like 'partner can't have this because he would have done that.' It took me longer to get to that point."

Andrew was playing with his dad in an online game when he declared 4♠ on this deal:

Dir: North ♠ 8 7 4  
 Vul: None ♥ A J 7  
 ♦ K Q 10  
 ♣ K 7 6 3

♠ Q 9	♠ 10 6 2
♥ K 5	♥ Q 8 4 3 2
♦ A J 7 4	♦ 8 6 2
♣ Q 10 8 5 4	♣ 9 2

♠ A K J 5 3
♥ 10 9 6
♦ 9 5 3
♣ A J

	West	North	East	South
		Steve		Andrew
		1♣	Pass	1♠
	2♦	Dbl <sup>(1)</sup>	Pass	4♠
	All Pass			

### (1) Three-card spade support

The lead was a low club. Andrew realized the ♥K would be a more attractive lead if West held both missing heart honors, so East must have one. But West would need to have all other missing high cards – including the ♠Q – in order to muster a two-level overcall. With the finesse known to be failing, Andrew played spades from the top and was rewarded when the queen dropped. This held his losers to a heart and a diamond, and the overtrick provided a good board.

At the table, Andrew can hold his own with adults. In an interview setting, however, he's very much an 8-year-old. He fidgets, dodges off camera and speaks mostly in one-word answers.

Even Andrew was surprised at the speed of his achievement, expecting it would take a year and a half from the time he set his sights on it in August 2019. That would have given him about six months of wiggle room before he got to be the ripe old age of 9 years, 2 months, 7 days – the age that Garrison was when he set the previous record.

The gold points were easy enough. The main obstacle was the black points – the small increments they come in, and the difficulty of fitting in club games around the taxing school schedule of a second-grader. But then came the pandemic. Schools closed and black points were of-

fered online. Andrew breezed through that requirement in April. By the time of the masterpoint updates on May 6, he needed 28.35 points, including 8.64 silver. That weekend, District 21 held its GNT qualifiers online. Playing with Charlie, Kayden and Olivia, Andrew's team was second in Flight C, losing by 1 IMP in the final but earning a spot in the 2021 Summer NABC in Providence along with 14 masterpoints. Online games over the next two weeks brought another 11.28, and on his birthday, he needed just the silver – with Silver Linings Week starting the next day. In three days, he picked up 10.32 silver points, putting him over the finish line.

So what's next for Andrew? At first, he says, his only goal is to get better at bridge. After thinking a minute, he came up with a couple more: "Win the GNT Flight C. I also want to be in the Junior training camp." ■



The Chens: (clockwise from top left): Sarah, Steve, Charlie and Andrew

photo by Ted Moon