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Bridge To The World

Gold Medal Champion

Exeter Woman Competes Internationally

By Erik Hawkins

EXETER – Karen “Kate” McCallum never set out to become a professional bridge player. Now at 69, however, she travels the world participating in what her husband Alex calls the “somewhat subterranean” card sport that many may not realize is such a way of life for some. In doing so, she recently won a gold medal at the European Bridge Championship in Norway as part of the winning U.S./Dutch team that beat China in the Women’s Teams finals.

In addition, McCallum has won six world championship golds in the past 25 years, but her prowess as a bridge player started to evolve much earlier when she first took up the game on a whim in a “baptism of fire” in her early twenties. “It’s been kind of an evolution. We don’t all necessarily set out for our careers,” she said last week. “... It’s an extremely difficult game. It’s intricate and sort of multi-layered. No matter how good you get, you’re always learning.”

McCallum said that bridge, a game played with partners, requires problem solving, partnership and visualization skills not unlike those used in chess.

McCallum’s travels in the bridge world have taken her to Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Mexico, England, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, Tenerife and Turkey, in addition to Norway. “I get to see how bridge is played around the world ... English is the language of bridge, like it’s the language of business,” she said.

“The partnership brings a whole other aspect to the game; getting the best out of your partner in a high-level competition,” she said, adding that there are over 100 qualities that go into making a good bridge player. “I’m very good at bidding and partnership. I’m not as good at the actual card-playing, but I can beat those who are because of my skills in bidding and partnership.”

McCallum expanded her bridge activities further in recent years to include coaching and teaching closer to home, conducting classes in Exeter and other locations in New England. "The game of bridge continues to fascinate many people, despite the stiff competition it gets in this technology age," McCallum said. "But I can understand why. Bridge is a never-ending and all-consuming challenge."

"Teaching bridge is much easier than doing it. It's kind of like teaching someone the ABC's, and then it's exciting when they get it and use it," she said.

McCallum's husband Alex readily admits that he remains a sub-par bridge player, but he does travel to some of the championships abroad with his wife, where, as a financial journalist, he will work on his laptop and man the table where Kate's handmade jewelry is sold. As for both his profession and his wife's, McCallum said, "My subject at Oxford was travel, so it is all part and parcel!"

As for the tangible rewards of a life as a bridge champion? In Norway, McCallum, along with the other players, received a huge smoked trout.

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