

Shi's all that



She is a winner: In her first seven years as a bridge player, she has earned **seven NABC titles, a World Gold medal** and most recently, the team title in the invitational women's Beijing Jua Yan Cup, where she and partner Pam Granovetter also picked up the prize for best defense. Her serene calm at the table belies an aggressive competitiveness. At the age of 29, her bridge future is limitless.

Steve Robinson, a world champion and one of her mentors says, "There are some who are meant to play bridge well and Sylvia Shi is one of them." Beginning bridge Shi took up the game at the beginning of 2011 to have something to do when a long-term relationship ended. She had graduated from Johns Hopkins University and was living in Baltimore and attending graduate school. She was also finding a market for her artwork; she creates Japanese animation. "I was trying to decide between learning to fly a plane or bridge," she says. "I wanted to feel like I was accomplishing something in addition to filling up my time. In the end, I chose bridge because it has a lower initial monetary cost." Bridge wouldn't have been on her radar at all except that a friend of hers in high school played the game.

She remembers her first game vividly. "The first session I played in was an open club game, and it was unbelievably stressful. I was very concerned that things would happen and I wouldn't know what to do or what the bids meant." Shi says they were playing Jacoby transfers and both times the convention came up, she forgot it. "We had a 55% game, which was fourth in our direction, but it would have been a 58% game if I had just cashed an ace at some point in a deal. So I guess what made me want to play again was the thought of being able to do better next time."

Intermediate bridge

Shi grew her game in the Baltimore/Washington DC area, a fertile area for learning players. She played at the Laurel Bridge Club in Laurel MD, which she describes as having some of the strongest club games in the country. "Also, a lot of top players – like Robinson – play for fun in the DC/Virginia sectionals, which I now realize is very unusual. Usually professional-level players don't play unless they are playing with a sponsor." The Grand National Teams

and North American Pairs events in District 6 are very popular and large events, she adds, “and that really gets you playing a serious and fun event early on in your career.”

Shi points out that another advantage to beginning her bridge education in the DC area was that there were a lot of people around her age. She names Noble Shore, Mike Gill, Rob Brady and Steven Drodge, who were all young Flight A players when she was starting. “It’s really a lot more fun to hang out and discuss bridge with people your age,” she says. Shi attributes her meteoric rise in the game to a number of factors. First, she says she learned “the right way” – and she credits her good bridge education to a number of early partners including Bill Peters, John Miller and John Adams. “For the first year and change of my bridge life, I played count signals rather than attitude. I think that most new players learn attitude carding, and then learning count is a real struggle. But if you just play count, you’d better start counting the hands out fast or you’re not going to do very well or have as much fun.

“Secondly, I played a lot of bridge. I played basically whenever I could, sometimes two sessions a day. With my main partner we would play open games, but with my other partner we would just play 299er games. I think it was all useful. Playing in a weaker field teaches you how to win and how to play the psychological part of bridge.

“Third,” she continues, “I guess I was really noticeable as a young Asian female who played a lot of bridge and was doing quite well at the clubs and sectionals. This meant that there were some Flight A players who wanted to play with me before I was even close to their level.” Shi singles out fiancée Daniel Korbel with taking her from a Flight A player to a world champion who’s playing professionally. “He taught me a lot of good habits.”

Shi and Korbel recently moved to Las Vegas. “I was a little doubtful, but I really liked the dining scene, and now that we have moved, I found that I love the weather,” she says. “I do miss the DC area for the bridge. I really like to just play bridge for fun, which is a lot easier in the DC area. But we have a lot of bridge friends in Las Vegas and come GNT time, hopefully we will be able to put together a good team.”

Advanced bridge

Shi says that understanding bridge came pretty easily to her. She sees every hand as a logic problem, and she developed a standard thought process that she applies to the play of most hands. Shi’s golden rule of bridge is, “Do what makes you happy, because it will probably make the opponents unhappy.”

Most often the rule applies to bidding, and she says the word “pass” with some distaste. “My bidding is often ... the polite word would be creative, but I think that’s giving me too much credit. Of course I enjoy hands where I make a good play, but my favorite hands are when I’m playing with Daniel and whatever happened causes an amusing response from him.” Here’s one Shi and Korbel played against Robinson and Peter Boyd (spots approximate):

Dir: East ♠ K 5 3
 Vul: None ♥ A 3
 ♦ Q 10 8 4 3
 ♣ J 5 3

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

West	North	East	South
<i>Boyd</i>	<i>Korbel</i>	<i>Robinson</i>	<i>Shi</i>
		2♦(1)	Pass
2♠	Pass	3♣(3)	Pass
4♥	Pass	Pass	4♠
Pass	Pass	Dbl	All Pass

- (1) Multi.
- (2) Pass or correct (good hand for hearts).
- (3) Hearts and a good hand.

Sylvia describes the action: “Stevie opened 2♦ multi on my right and I had no convenient bid, so I passed. Peter bid 2♠, pass or correct, and Daniel passed. Stevie now bid 3♣, an artificial bid showing hearts and a good hand. Again, I had no convenient bid, and I wasn’t sure if partner might take double here as lead directing, so I passed. Now Peter thought briefly and 4♥ with an air of resignation, and it went two passes to me. “Having already passed twice, I wasn’t sure what double would be. But I knew the opponents were on a 10-card heart fit because of the way Peter bid 4♥: I was sure he was doing it because he had some values and four trumps and it was IMPs. On top of that, he bid 2♠, which meant that he had two or fewer spades, and the 2♥ opener, of course, does not usually have spades. We might have at least a nine-card fit in spades that we never found. Partner was marked with some values, so with the right hand, we might even be making 4♠. After extremely long thought, I bid 4♠.

“Here I am backing into the auction at the four level, and Daniel has three-card support and a 10 count and the pre-empter doubled me! Daniel thought about redoubling, but then he has never seen this auction before, so he used good judgment and passed. They led a heart, and it was a disappointing dummy for me, actually. Anyway, I thought I have to set up diamonds, so I won and played a diamond as Stevie showed out. They got two diamond ruffs, plus the ♣A K of clubs and the ♦A of diamonds. But then it was easy to draw trumps, so I was minus 300.

“This was the first board of a Swiss match and Daniel was annoyed the whole time because he thought I had gone down in a cold contract. We ended up winning 3 IMPs against 4♥ when our teammates were plus 420.” World class Korbel calls Shi a natural-born winner. “One of

the reasons it is exciting for me to play with Sylvia is that she has an uncanny ability to bring her A game when it counts,” he says. “Whereas a lot of people get nervous under pressure, Sylvia is one of those rare types who is able to focus harder under pressure.” Korbelt offers this example from the first time

they played together – “before anybody knew who she was.” Sanya in 2014, they sat against two world champions in the mixed pairs:

Dir: South	♠ K Q J 6 5		
Vul: Both	♥ J		
	♦ A J 2		
	♣ 10 7 5 4		
♠ 9 4 3 2		♠ A 10 8 7	
♥ 9 4 3		♥ A 10 8 5 2	
♦ Q 7 6		♦ K 5 4	
♣ Q 6 2		♣ J	
	♠ —		
	♥ K Q 7 6		
	♦ 10 9 8 3		
	♣ A K 9 8 3		

West	North	East	South
<i>Korbelt</i>		<i>Shi</i>	1♦
Pass	1♠	Pass	2♣
Pass	3♣	Pass	5♣
All Pass			

All Pass Korbelt led a heart. “Obviously, a diamond would have allowed an easy set,” he says. Sylvia won the ♥A and returned a trump. “Declarer ruffed a heart to dummy and led ♠K, and Sylvia ducked so smoothly I thought I had the ♠A! I was very impressed when declarer ruffed this trick, decided I had the ♠A, and eventually mistimed the play to go down.”

Korbelt says, “To be able to duck that spade in such easy tempo in a major event when it wasn’t a certainty declarer was void showed me a strong self-confidence at the bridge table that I believe is 50 percent of her success. The other 50 percent, of course, is her ability.”

Beth Palmer, Shi’s partner-in-gold at the 2016 World Championships, says, “Sylvia is a very calm player and partner. She is very easy to play with. She has great bidding judgment and technique and her slam bidding is especially strong.” A nobody no more Shi’s first NABC was the Spring 2011 tournament in Louisville KY. She and her partner played in the Educational Foundation 299er game and came in first in their strat. “I still have that trophy,” she boasts. They played the Lebharr IMP Pairs and did not qualify, and a Gold Rush pairs event and didn’t do well in that either. Then on the last day, they scratched in another 299er game. “Despite not doing great, we got about 8 points – which was a ton for me back then –

and it put me within reach of the Mini McKenney race, which I then decided to try to win.” Shi went on to take the Mini-McKenney Rookie race with 482 points – more than double that of her closest competitor. While all her wins are meaningful – “and I love them like I would love my children, if I had any” – she says the most exciting one was the IMP Pairs, her first NABC title. “We came out of like 20th place to win in the final session, and it was really close. And it was totally unexpected for everyone else, I think, because we were nobodies.” She looks back. “Until you win a championship, you have no idea if you will ever win one. Then once you win one, it’s like it’s a lot easier.”