

Chance partnership blossoms

Daniela von Arnim and Sabine Auken NABC Denver n° 10

Looking back, if there had been another young girl at the bridge camp, Sabine Auken and Daniela von Arnim might never have become partners.

It was 20 years ago in Germany, at a practice for junior players in Wiesbaden. “We were the only two girls there,” says Auken, “so they put us together.”

Two decades later, they are among the top pairs in the world – and still going strong.

Coming off their silver-medal performance in the Venice Cup in Estoril, Portugal, Auken and von Arnim have made their mark at the Fall NABC in Denver – winning the Marsha May Sternberg Women’s Board-a-Match teams by more than six boards and finishing second in the Edgar Kaplan Blue Ribbon Pairs. They were one round from becoming the first women’s pair to win the Blue Ribbon.

Their resumés include numerous European championships, plus two Venice Cups among a long list of titles. Auken has come a long way from her beginnings in North American bridge, arriving in 1989 as a wideeyed 24-year-old. She made an immediate splash at the Fall NABC in Lancaster when, as Sabine Zenkel, she and Rhoda Walsh won the Life Master Women’s Pairs.

She went on to set a record – since broken – for shortest time to make Life Master. With the help of the late Ron Andersen, it took her six weeks. Auken grew up in a small town in Bavaria, leading a rather sheltered life. Her world expanded, however, after she became interested in bridge, thanks to Agatha Christie. Auken loved the Christie whodunits, and she became interested in bridge when she read “Cards on the Table,” the novel in which Hercule Poirot solves a mystery by using cards from a bridge game. Auken was 12 years old at the time. She was soon taking bridge lessons from the parents of a classmate. While Auken was living in the U.S., von Arnim came over occasionally to play in big tournaments. They won the North American Women’s Swiss Teams in Fort Worth in 1990. Auken returned to Germany in 1993 and moved to Denmark in 1994. With now-ex-husband Jens Auken, Sabine had two children, Jens Christian, now 10, and Maximilian, 6. Now fluent in Danish, she worked for a bank in Copenhagen for a time and is now trying to establish a translation business – English, German and Danish.

In February, Masterpoint Press will publish her book, “I Love This Game,” edited by Mark Horton.

In contrast to the effervescent Auken, von Arnim is somewhat reserved, quietly playing top-flight bridge and happily avoiding the limelight for the most part. Von Arnim lives in Hockenheim, near Heidelberg, Germany. She is self-employed as a developer of software for marketing research. Four years ago in Paris, von Arnim was center stage as the last set of Germany’s Venice Cup match against France was coming to a close on vugraph before a rapt audience in the hotel and thousands of spectators on the Internet. It was a tight, hotly contested match and every trick was important. Near the end, Von Arnim had to make a series inspired plays to make a crucial contract, and she did so, securing victory for her team.

To this day, it is only the dimmest of memories. “I can’t remember anything,” she says.

She had to be reminded the other day that when the match was over, Auken said to her, “Danny, you played great. I think we have a chance.” Recalls Auken: “She looked at me like I was a mad woman.” Today, von Arnim is proud to say that daughter Lara, who is three and a half years old, “is the most beautiful girl.” There have been triumphs and disappointments,

but the Auken-von Arnim partnership has stayed strong. “Partnership trust,” says Auken, “is our best point.” No matter what happens, they remain supportive of each other, and they don’t fight.

“We found out,” says von Arnim, “that it’s the right way.”