

The Hunter from Norway

By Christina Lund Madsen

Interview with
Geir Helgemo,
Monaco



The magician from Norway dreams about retiring from professional bridge at an early age to spend more time going fishing and hunting in the mountains of his home country. He seemed destined to be a bridge player, however, he never had any dreams about bridge, since they all came true before he got the chance – but he had many dreams about girls.

Geir was 11 years old and playing football. One day, as he was about to walk home after practice, it started raining heavily. He went to his father's bridge club to seek shelter from the rain. After one of the first boards he watched he told his father "You can get an extra trick on this hand." He had never played a hand of bridge in his life.

After thinking the hand over for a few seconds, his father said to his son "You are right".

"I went to the library and borrowed every bridge book they had and read them all."

We sit at the terrace of his hotel room with the rain pounding heavily into the sea in front of us.

"I worked very hard when I was young. I started playing chess when I was five years old and I did the same. So I was a decent chess player when I quit at age 11." He laughs gently.

What did you dream about as a child?

"What did I dream about? Who can remember that? Later on it was girls of course. My father was away playing bridge sometimes and I said I am never going to play bridge. I think my plan was to walk in my father's footsteps to become an electrician. I worked there once a week during school for a full year. I was lucky since one

of his employees was a good bridge player, so we talked about bridge. I learned a lot."

Geir was about 13 at the time. When he was 16 he got a phone call from the best team in Norway inviting him to join the team. So he travelled 160 km back and forth once a week and still had to get up in the morning and go to school.

During his first years of bridge Geir still did sports seven times a week. However at the age of 16 to 19 bridge became almost an obsession to Geir.

"I wanted to be the best. At that time I had to work hard to keep up my grades at school and improve my bridge game."

19 years old Geir went on to university to study maths and economics.

"When I went to university ... Well, I wasn't going to be an electrician, so I really had no idea what to do. I loved playing cards and having a good time, as most students."

So most of his time at university was spent playing bridge and partying with his friends, and very little on his studies.

"I remember I was supposed to have an exam and my father called me to hear how it went. I said we won the first two matches, getting 25 VPs. He wasn't happy about it but soon realized this was it."

The columnist of Norway's biggest newspaper died in 1990. Geir applied for the job and got it.

"I was 20 years old with a full salary. I knew what to do and never looked back."

After two years Geir skipped his studies and started playing professionally full time. Though Geir's parents were not thrilled with him giving up school, his results soon convinced them he had made the right choice.

"I think they both respected my choice of career. They never had any say in it. I was always deciding on my own what to do. Maybe they were not happy about it the first couple of years."

His father died in 2005, about six months before Geir won his first world championship.

"He was 67. Too much smoking. He needed oxygen the last six years. It wasn't fun. He stopped smoking for 15 years, but it was just too late."

It is the only time during our interview he doesn't have the characteristic smile on his face.

“He lived 150 km away. I went to see him sometimes, but not enough when you think about it. He tried to get new lungs, but he was too old in Norway. It was gradually getting worse. He was weak for years, couldn’t walk much. I didn’t realise how bad it was. If I had known I would have spent more time with him. He never told anyone how bad it was.”

His father missed Geir’s first world championship, however, he saw his son win the World individual and winning silver out of the blue in 1993. That year Geir lost two world championship finals, both junior and open.

“When I was younger it was said about Edgar Kaplan that he was the best player never to win a world championship. I didn’t want to be that player.”

Which is your favourite bridge memory?

“Winning the European Championships in 2008 was fun. The first one for Norway and the first time I didn’t play with Helness.” He laughs and I join him. It is hard not to.

What is the best part about playing with Tor?

“Probably his love for the game, and his high spirits. He really wants to win.”

Today Geir is 44. He is used to being in the spotlight and being asked standard questions about himself and his career. Yet he listens to my questions patiently and often accompanies his answers with a smile and a flirty look in his eyes.

When you think back, at which time did you feel most happy?

“Childhood was great, good friends, good parents. Also when I got to university. There have never been bad times, only best times. If I was going to change something I would have exercised more and eaten less earlier as I am trying to do now. It is never too late, but...”

The hardest opponent Geir has ever faced is his own reflection in the mirror. Today he is 40 kilos lighter than when his weight peaked.

When did you start changing your life style?

“It has been ongoing since I was 19 I think. When I was 16, I was very slim and fit. When I was 19 I was not. It was all bridge. From 10-15 hours of exercising every week to nothing. Reading bridge, playing bridge. It can be bad, it can be good. From 16-19 I gained a lot of weight.”

Geir describes himself as an outdoor guy.

“I love to go into the wilderness, especially to go fishing and hunting in the mountains.”

He also walks a lot, so the exercise is not to blame. His weakness is snacks and the life style during his university years, and later the bridge years with too much tempting dining.

“There have been many times losing weight. Up and down. Luckily I have lost more than I have gained every time.”

How do you find the motivation?

“It is easy to find it, when you get more sleepy.

Looking in the mirror. I am feeling good now. It is rarely too late. I just woke up one day and decided I have to do something about it. You have to do it all the time, that is the problem.” He laughs and takes a zip of his water.

I try to interrogate him about his preference for women. Not very successfully.

Do you remember the first one you fell in love with?

“Yes.”

Tell me about her.

“No.”

What did she look like?

“Blond, pretty. I am sure I was not the only one dreaming about her.”

Did you ever consider having children?

“I am pretty certain I don’t want to have children and now I think it is too late anyway. My first girlfriend really wanted to, perhaps that was the reason for the break up.”

Geir has always been the one ending his former relationships. None of them have been with bridge players.

Do you think it would have been an advantage or disadvantage to have met a bridge player earlier?

“Probably a disadvantage for me. It is fun walking around flirting a bit.”

You like flirting? I never would have guessed.

“Oh, well what do you know,” he says, winking at me.

What is most important in your life right now?

“I think still losing weight. Getting maximum health. Keep playing bridge for few years. Looking forward to do more fishing, more hunting. And less bridge maybe in the summer and fall. That is when I play most and when I want to play least. Sometimes it is too much, but it is a good job. There are times it is fun to play, but mostly it is just a job.”

How do you feel about that?

“It is a bit sad actually. I would enjoy bridge more playing less seriously every now and then, as we did before.”

Was it a difficult decision to play for another country?

“Not at the time it wasn’t. Earlier I had an opportunity to go to the States to play, but I turned it down. At the time I think it was the right move.”

Do you think you will at some point quit playing bridge?

“Not altogether, but professionally maybe. It depends on how long I need the income. When I am not dependent on that anymore, maybe I will slow down. Do more what I want to do than what I have to do. Maybe one day I will come back to play for Norway.”