

Kyle Larsen—The Quiet Man

!One of the great bridge stories in recent years was the 2001 Bermuda Bowl win by the Rose Meltzer team -- you remember the squad: **Meltzer** and her trademark million-dollar smile; **Peter Weichsel** and **Alan Sontag**, still tough after all these years; **Chip Martel** and **Lew Stansby**, another of the world's great partnerships, and . the almost forgotten player, often seen standing off to the side nursing a Diet Coke or non-alcoholic beer. Not that Kyle Larsen minds the lack of attention. He is secure in his role as Meltzer's partner. He knows he is a key player on a team that will always be among the favorites in any major competition. Weichsel, who put the Larsen-Meltzer partnership together, is more sure than ever that the one-time teen prodigy was the best choice for the squad.

Larsen grew up in the bridge world. He remembers caddying with **Gary Soules** and **Bob Crossley** at the 1963 NABC in Los Angeles. "Bob and I were caddying and the directors needed a pair to fill in. We were probably the best of the caddy players so we got paid to play.

"Bridge has always been such a fun, high-interest thing for me." **Bob Hamman** remembers the young Larsen. "In 1964 Harold Shaw owned a bridge club in San Francisco and he made arrangements with me to teach a class every Tuesday. "The Sonny Liston-Cassius Clay fight was on a Tuesday night and I didn't really want to teach that class. I wanted to listen to the fight.

"Hamman laughed as he reminisced: "I made up some problems -- tough problems-- and gave the class their assignments. Then I went into the next room to listen to the fight. "About midway through the second round, Kyle came out. He had finished the problems and said, 'Relax. I want to hear the fight too'." A few years later, Hamman was playing money bridge at a club. "Some guy always wanted to organize a team game and I was being somewhat critical, so the guy says he and (Paul) **Soloway** will take on me and the kid (Kyle).

"Kyle comes over to me and says, 'How much of the action can I have?'"Larsen, says Hamman, "was probably the best-ever young bridge player."

At the 1965 NABC in Chicago, Larsen and Bonnie Brier won the Teenyear Pairs. Larsen was playing bridge, poker and backgammon -- "a little action," he says. "It's always good for the soul, especially when you win.

"He became a Life Master at age 15, at that time the youngest player ever to earn a gold card. In 1968 his team -- **Larsen, Erik Paulsen, Peter Pender, Hug Ross and Howard Schenken** -- won the Reisinger Board-a-Match Teams. Larsen was 18, the youngest player to win a North American team title. Other titles would follow but there were problems.

"I've had some addiction problems through the years. I had a big problem with drugs and alcohol," Larsen said frankly. "I fought it a lot." He spent time at the Betty Ford Clinic in 1988 and 1991 "and I've been clean and sober since the end of '96." There was a time, Larsen added, when "clean and sober" was not an option but "at least it seems possible now. My team has been very supportive."

The Meltzer team debuted in the Spingold Knockout Teams at the 1999 Summer NABC in San Antonio, where they lost in the round of 64 to a Junior team: **Samuel Ehrlichman, David Gurvich, Ari Greenberg** and **Joe Grue**. Weichsel wasn't discouraged. "I hand-picked Kyle to be Rose's partner," he said. "I thought of othe people, but Kyle seemed like a good fit and I'm sure now he was the best choice.

"Kyle has been a friend of mine for many, many years. He's a very easy-going partner. Kyle is a tower of strength. He's a very good partner for Rose. He's a very good listener and a very good card player. "They're very supportive of one another. They don't get upset at the table." Meltzer agrees. "Kyle is such a special partner, I just can't tell you. He is just literally a perfect partner.

You get from Kyle 100% support every minute of the time. He is always at the table, always on his partner's side." Meltzer plays with Larsen in team games and with Weichsel in some pair games. Her favorite? Larsen. "Kyle, by nature, brings out my best game. We feel very fortunate to have found each other and feel we are a very strong mixed pair." **Jo Morse**, a frequent Larsen partner, is also a fan.

"Kyle is one of the best partners," she said. "He's so supportive of his partner that you really want to play

your best. He's low-key. He's quiet. He's just a really nice guy."

The really nice guy and his teammates played in the Reisinger at the 1999 Fall NABC but didn't make the first cut. The following year was different: the team finished second in the Open Swiss Teams at the 2000 Spring NABC in Cincinnati, advanced to the semifinal round of the United States Bridge Championships and were runners-up in the Flight A Grand National Teams at the 2000 Summer NABC in Anaheim -- where they also won the Spingold Knockout Teams. "That (the Spingold win) seemed awfully good," said Larsen. The win was just the prelude: the team won the repechage final in the USBC and designation as USA II in the 2001 Bermuda Bowl.

The competition was originally scheduled for Bali, Indonesia and moved to Paris. "We went over there a few days early," Larsen recalled. "Once we got there, it was like it had been the plan all the time -- it went so smoothly." The team qualified easily and defeated France in the quarterfinal match and Poland in the semifinal. Next up: the Norwegian team in the final. The match wasn't pretty early on. "We were just getting crushed," said Larsen. "We had lost every set. The dirt was just about covering us up, you know?"

Meltzer remembers set five: "We were down about 80-something IMPs and Kyle said, 'Come on, babe, let's get some of this back.'" Larsen took up the story: "Norway went down in grand slam. Chip and Lew stopped in six, which was enough on that hand. They kind of took the low road." That was the turning point as the Meltzer team went on to claim the Bermuda Bowl.

According to Martel, Larsen is "a terrific partner and teammate in terms of an upbeat attitude. You couldn't ask for anyone better. He's always supportive when things are going well or not." As for the future, "we're hoping to keep this team together for a long time," said Larsen.