

New World Grand Master still in learning mode



Lynn Baker became a World Grand Master in October when her six-member team won the McConnell Cup at the 14th Red Bull World Bridge Series in Sanya, China. Back in her home town of Austin TX, Baker was congratulated by a friend who had the idea that Baker was probably going to hang up her convention card now that she had won a world championship. No way, says the highly regarded law professor at the University of Texas Law School. “It’s still fun, and I still care to win. I have no illusions that I’m done learning.”

Karen McCallum, Baker’s regular partner, says that when they first starting playing together Baker had desire but little natural talent. One thing quickly became obvious to McCallum, however: “The girl was born to win. She can’t be defeated when she decides to win, and she’s fearless.” Baker has been winning since her high school days in Hudson OH, near Cleveland. She was an athlete (softball, basketball and volleyball), a straight-A student and valedictorian of the class of 1974

On scholarship at Yale, she was a member of the varsity women’s crew team. In four years of rowing competition, her teams went 38-2. She was selected to try out for the U.S. Olympic rowing team but “never quite made it.”

In her senior year at Yale, Baker wrote an essay on the East German athletic system and was awarded a traveling fellowship to visit the former Soviet satellite to “see what I could find out.” Baker later earned a Marshall scholarship to study at Oxford University in England for two years and was considering going for a doctorate in psychology before changing her mind and entering Yale Law School. That career choice panned out spectacularly. Baker now holds the prestigious Frederick M. Baron Chair of Law at U.T. and is a widely respected expert on the ethics of mass tort settlements. She was the ethics advisor on the \$4.85 billion settlement involving the drug Vioxx.

Baker discovered “what I thought was bridge” at Yale, learning more after getting a clerkship with Judge Amalya Kears of the U.S. Court of Appeals in New York. “I knew she played bridge,” Baker says, “and I thought it must be a pretty interesting game if someone as smart as the judge liked it.” Kears is a world champion and six-time North American champion. The judge’s accomplishments in bridge sparked Baker’s interest and it wasn’t long before she found herself at the Beverly Bridge Club taking lessons. Burt Kniger, one of the teachers at the club, encouraged Baker to try a duplicate game. She went with a friend, who was not

comfortable in the duplicate setting and quickly gave up the game. “I thought it was great,” Baker says. “It was competitive thought.” Baker recalls playing her first duplicate game with a more experienced player who told her, “There’s only one rule: If I bid some number of notrump, you pass.” When she and the woman scratched in their section, Baker’s mentor, Kniger, took the fractional masterpoint slip and had it autographed by Alan and Dorothy Truscott and Judi Radin, who were also playing that day. Baker still has that slip. Baker’s bridge career took a turn for the better – although not immediately – when she met McCallum at the Beverly. “She kind of adopted me,” Baker says. “I liked her,” says McCallum, recalling an occasion when Baker kibitzed her during a game at the Beverly. “She was in awe of finesses and everything.” When her one-year clerkship with Kearsse ended, Baker took a job at the University of Virginia, where she taught law from 1986 to 1992. She later moved to Tucson AZ, where she met Sam Dinkin at a bridge club. They married in 1994 and moved to Austin in 1996, where Dinkin had taken a job and Baker had learned of an opening at the U.T. Law School. Before they left Arizona, Dinkin was quizzing his wife one day about what she wanted for her birthday. Baker’s choice was to play bridge with McCallum. A date was arranged for the two at the Las Vegas Regional. “It was the first bridge I had played out in the real world in some time,” Baker says. “I don’t know anything, and what I did ‘know’ was probably wrong.” After Baker and Dinkin moved to Texas, Baker continued lessons with McCallum, mostly online. Baker remembers her first North American championship – the Machlin Women’s Swiss Teams at the 1998 Spring NABC in Reno. At the time, she was four months pregnant with her daughter, Mahria, now 16. Baker played with McCallum and teammates Disa Eythorsdottir, Jo Morse and Rose Meltzer. Baker has tacked on 13 more NABC victories since then and learned a few things about herself and her role as a team leader. “It’s important to be a captain who makes everyone feel good about what’s going on,” Baker says. “I want to play with people I like.”

McCallum and Baker both recall the occasion when the teacher had a serious talk with the student, McCallum telling her friend and protégé that she had no natural ability. Baker’s response: “It’s not a problem. I’ll work as hard as I can and not worry about it. I liked the team competition because it reminded me of my athletic teams. It’s not just having good players. The team is more than the sum of its parts.”

McCallum says Baker has improved a lot since their introduction. In Sanya, McCallum says, Baker rose to the occasion against China Red, a team that included some players from the squad that defeated her teams in the Venice Cup final at the World Championships in Brazil in 2009.

“Lynn elevates her game under pressure,” says McCallum. “She was lights out in the semifinals in Sanya. We played the first two sets in the semifinal and final and were plus 40 on both. She is a pretty amazing lady.”

Kerri Sanborn and Baker won the Smith Life Master Women’s Pairs in 2003, and Sanborn has been her teammate in other major events. “I get a kick out of her,” says Sanborn. “She is very strong and a good organizer.” Sanborn, Baker’s teammate in Brazil five years ago, has been impressed with her friend’s work ethic. “She buckles down,” says Sanborn. “She has plugged away at it a long time.”

Baker says the victory in Sanya was satisfying on many levels, but mostly because she felt that she contributed significantly to the outcome. “I like winning but it’s fun to help the team win instead of them winning in spite of you.”

Text messages exchanged between McCallum and Baker on the morning of the final two rounds of the Marsha May Sternberg Women’s Board-a-Match

Teams at this tournament say a lot about Baker's mindset and her perspective on the sport she loves. McCallum texted, "Are you ready to win?" Baker's reply: "I'm ready to play as well as I can."

Baker

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