

Bridge players descend on area for tournament

BY TIM CARVELL
STAFF WRITER

Martha Hoberman, a sweet-looking woman from Farmington Hills, softly explained her presence at the Wolverine Regional Bridge Tournament.

"It's the challenge, the stimulation," she said. "Plus the chance to cut somebody's throat."

Welcome to the competitive world of tournament bridge. Players from around the state — and the country — flocked to the Southfield Civic Center this week to test their skill at the game that, according to player Jim Perna, is "the most complex game devised by man."

Zeki Jabbour, a former national champion who flew in from Florida to lecture at the tournament, summed up the game's appeal succinctly.

"It involves both the left side and the right side of the brain," he said. "It's a science and an art. . . . You just have to be smart enough to play, and dumb enough to think it's important."

Judging by the turnout at the Civic Center — an estimated 3,500 people will have played a hand by the time the tournament ends Sunday night — plenty of people fit that description.

Those who attended said they enjoyed the fact that the game never grew old; indeed, many said they had played several times a week for decades, and still weren't sick of bridge.

"I've played for 70 years," said Rena Frankel of Bloomfield Hills. "I started when I was 10 because my parents played."

The enduring appeal of bridge can be explained with a calculator, according to Margaret Marchand, a player and former math teacher at Adrian College.

"You never see the same hand twice," she said. "There are 613 billion hands, and if you played one hand every five minutes, without breaking for food or sleep, you'd have to live six million years before you'd played every hand. I don't think I'll make it, but I'll try. So you see, bridge never gets dull. I may learn from my mistakes, but I can go and make new mistakes."

On a less scientific note, many

players said they simply enjoyed the mental exercise provided by bridge.

"It's very challenging, and it prevents Alzheimer's," said Babs Wilder of Bloomfield Hills.

While the players may speak of the joy of bridge, make no mistake about it — this is not a social event; it is a major competition. Food vendor Nicole Balhorn of Southfield was impressed with the "dedication of the players."

"It's unbelievable," she said. "I don't know how they can sit in there for that long. Do you hear how quiet it is in there? Everybody's concentrating."

The quiet in the center, as Balhorn noted, is somewhat unnerving. Sheila Lesser of Detroit explained the silence.

"You cannot talk," said Lesser. "All you can do is bid."

Between the games, however, the bridge fanatics chatted and compared notes. One major topic of conversation was the presence at the tournament of world-renowned Italian champ Benito Garazzo, described by Jabbour as "the Magic Johnson of bridge."

Garazzo, for his part, was more humble about his accomplishments. Asked if he felt his chances were good, he laughed and pointed to the sky.

"That's only up to them," he said.

Garazzo was not the only full-time player at the tournament; an estimated 1,000 participants had come from out of town specifically to rack up points and improve their standing within the American Contract Bridge League. Two such participants were Martin and Charlotte Buff, who noted that there was no money involved in becoming a bridge champion.

"There's no money in it," Martin said.

"Just the money we spend to go," Charlotte added.

For the most part, win or lose, the tournament's participants were just happy to be playing. Indeed, Karen Schawacker, of Plymouth, said she had but one complaint.

"The only thing I don't like is that they don't give you free coffee," she said.

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Proposal would turn court dates into fines

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Local governments could streamline their ordinances enforcement by turning "criminal misdemeanors" into "civil infractions."

Two Oakland County lawmakers strongly supported a package of bills designed to let violators pay tickets at a violations bureau rather than make them appear in district court.

"All local units can benefit," said Rep. Willis Bullard, R-Milford, a former township supervisor. "This (package) goes along with making most minor traffic violations civil infractions as we did a number of years ago."

"It inflamed them (ordinance violators) when they found it was a criminal offense," said Rep. Penny Crissman, R-Rochester.

"We're having trouble with our district court dockets. It sort of jams their schedules when they have to deal with people shoveling walks and posting signs. They (judges) don't want to take these up," she added.

Bullard and Crissman last week joined other members of the House Local Government Committee in reporting out 15 bills allowing — but not requiring — cities, townships, villages and counties to change local ordinances to civil infractions.

Such ordinances cover zoning violations, fences, signs, failure to obtain permits, dog control, burning junk vehicles, weeds, snow removal, noise and even bicycle riding on sidewalks.

"This legislation would allow local units to take the onus of criminality from the violation of ordinances like these," said the sponsor, Sen. Joe Conroy, D-Flint. "It's not right to deem a cit-

izen a "criminal" for having a loose pet, or for not shoveling their sidewalks, or for riding their bicycles on the sidewalk."

"Cities can have a civil infractions bureau, like a parking ticket bureau," said David Osborn of the Michigan Municipal League, an association of cities and villages supporting the bills.

Lansing city attorney Kevin McKinney said cities could save hundreds of hours of attorney time by not having to take rural housing inspection cases to court.

If ticketed by a city inspector, a person could:

- Pay the fine at the violations bureau in person or by mail.
- Admit responsibility in person or by mail and wait for a court decision.
- Fight the ticket at either a formal (with attorneys) or informal (without attorneys) hearing without jury, before the district judge, just as with many traffic tickets.

Fines and jail penalties would remain unchanged.

One-third of the fine money would continue to go to the local unit and two-thirds to the court. "There's no change. We don't want to tiddle with that," Conroy said in reply to a question from Crissman.

The House panel amended the bills to prevent an owner from losing his or her home for failure to pay a ticket. The Senate, which passed the bills last month, must concur before the bills become law.

The bills will go to the full House this week.

Conroy praised the House committee amendment. "It's a good argument for two houses in the Legislature," he said, chiding supporters of a one-chamber Legislature.

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