

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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[Interview with Reese Koppel and Michael Xu](#) continued.

Michael: Yeah, I identify with what Reese just said. I think I wrote about it in a Bridge Winners article but the tournament that really made me identify as a bridge player was my first nationals in Toronto. Playing in the youth nationals and going to another country to play, and I was funded by my youth bridge organization. Looking back I feel so fortunate, so lucky to have had all these opportunities after Toronto. I was still not that good of a player, but I somehow wound up going to Atlanta to compete in the trials. My team lost, but we lost to a five-handed team and I ended up getting added on to that team because prior to that tournament, I'd ask like so many questions to the head of the US Junior training program Michael Rosenberg and he kind of advocated for me to join the team because he saw that I was very curious about the game and interested in learning and improving. I wasn't asking questions because I thought that it would help me get onto the national team. I was just like traveling along and I ended up finding myself with all these super cool opportunities. I'm really lucky to be where I am today.

Bill: That's great. You mentioned your youth bridge organization. You're talking about SiVY, Silicon Valley Youth Bridge, right? SiVY seems to have been almost uniquely successful. What has made it so successful?

Reese: You go for it. But I mean, as an outsider, there is an incredible structure. There's incredible mentors. And naturally, there's a demographic bias that I've always been jealous of. But you go, Michael.

Michael: Like Reese said, and to get in a statistic that's kind of crazy is that in the 2018 world youth championships, I think like half of all the U.S. Teams were composed of SiVY players. There were a lot of youth events that SiVY ran back in the day and the demographic is also a factor. There's a lot of nerdy kids who are just good at this type of game. It's really well funded, and there's a lot a lot of dedicated volunteers. So I think the combination of the funding, the volunteers, and the demographic of kids who are interested in bridge really help the program thrive.

Bill: What would it take to have that same type of thing in the New York metropolitan area, including western Connecticut, or in the Boston area, which seem to have similar demographics, in many regards?

Michael: My guess is that it would take a massive push where you get everybody to adopt it, and by adopt, I mean,

be committed to helping this organization, and having a lot of kids sign up and go to something that's like SiVY. Imagine you're a young player but you're the only youth player interested in bridge in your area and there's not a lot of opportunities for you. I'm guessing what would end up happening to you is that you kind of fizzle out of the community or just fizzle out of bridge. But if like, every week, there's a Youth Bridge event that funny kids go to and it's well run and well funded, it's a lot easier for you to pursue the game.

I wonder if Reese has any thoughts on it?

Reese: Yeah. So obviously, you know, that kind of network effect, right? The more kids, yeah, it's gonna be amazing. I think we're neglecting to discuss Atlanta, which is another hub for amazing junior bridge, and a big reason for that is one, that they can get it into schools with various schools adjacent and two, that there's just such a super mentor in Patty Tucker. Obviously, California has their super mentors as well, but having someone willing to dedicate every Saturday morning, regardless of who shows up, is just inspiring to everyone as well as to other volunteers. Someone that dedicated, and someone that passionate about promoting youth bridge. Having someone like that as well as, I guess, parents getting kids to go sometimes. It's not always

something that kids opt into. Michael's unique in developing that love for the game. But sometimes it does require a bit of prodding. I think that combination is something that the Atlanta Junior Bridge program has mastered and Silicon Valley as well. Those are a couple of good role models.

Bill: I'm really glad you mentioned Patty Tucker and Atlanta. I've been in touch with her, too, about some ideas, and I had only omitted highlighting that because neither of you were directly connected to it. But it's great to see your appreciation for that, Reese.

I think I'm hearing pretty clearly that it's really important to have a critical mass of young players who can share this great experience with their peers.

Michael: Yeah, that's what I feel like. Having a real push to build up that network, a wide, expansive network, would be a good idea.

Bill: I want to try to make this happen in the New York metropolitan area. I'm not sure I can do as much directly to make it happen in the Boston area, though I'll certainly be talking to people there, too. But I may know enough people to pull some strings and get some things going in the New York metropolitan area, centered in western Connecticut or in the city. There are a lot of great mentors there, including people who are very committed to the

junior programs, and a lot of great junior players.

You two have also been through the USBF junior program, right. You want to say anything about that?

Reese: Again, more of the same. But this is different in that some of the best, if not the best players in the world are volunteering their time to help juniors learn bridge. I mean, it's something unique and something that is a big reason for my love for bridge. A lot of other games or pastimes don't have that. You can't. You know you're not going to get a tennis lesson from Roger Federer too easily or anything like that. But just the idea that these people care so much about this game that they're willing to volunteer their time to help the younger generation improve and develop a passion for the game is just phenomenal.

Michael: Yeah, I echo Reese's sentiments. It's unbelievable how fortunate we youth players are. Like, honestly, we're just so spoiled. The USBF junior program is such an awesome resource. The opportunity of having the best players to mentor you is unbelievable.

Bill: You've both been kind of modest in talking about your most memorable experiences in terms of things that reflect your gratitude and not so much in relation to your achievements. Is there a particular tournament achievement, or win, or anything like that, that sort of

stands out to you or that you are most pleased about?

Reese: Yeah, when Bill and I won that tournament and I made Life Master.

Bill: Awww, thanks, Reese. That was pretty cool, wasn't it? And we beat your mentor, Mitch Dunitz, too.

Michael: Wait, you guys? I didn't know you guys had history like that.

Reese: Yeah, this was in one of the Covid years, in the fall of 2021. Mitch and (Mark) Itabashi had won all these events, and then we got him. And I don't know if you saw it, but Mitch just qualified for USA II in the Senior Trials.

Bill: I did see that. That's just awesome, and talk about people who have had a really big impact on bridge through their generosity and their work.

Reese: He's almost unparalleled in how much he's done for junior bridge, as Michael knows.

Michael: Yeah, Mitch is incredible. He's like the OG sponsor.

Bill: How about you, Michael? Any particular win or thing that you that you want to mention?

Michael: Yeah, for me it would have to be last summer's Italy tournament, the world transnational, where I ended up winning gold with Finn (Kolesnik) in the under 21, and then gold again in the under 26

teams. So that was, I felt so good after that.

Bill: That's just fantastic. And you had kind of a special game the next game, too, didn't you?

Michael: (laughs) I had the best game of my life.

Reese: That was a fun article (in Bridge Winners), man. That was great.

I gotta hop off in a few minutes, so if you have any last questions.

Bill: You know what, I'll give you a call with my other questions that I want to ask.

Reese: Sure thing. Thanks, guys.

Bill: But I'll keep going with Michael. Thanks, Reese! So do you want me to put in the story that you followed it up with that game in the individual where you were last?

Michael: Yeah, I wrote the article about it.

Bill: I know, I read it. It was hilarious.

Michael: Yeah, I love the like, the story that it paints.

Bill: That's bridge, you know. All you can do is do your best on every bid and every play, and you can't necessarily control the results. Especially in an individual.

Let's go back to something we were talking a bit about before. What kinds of things can be done in terms of encouraging youth and collegiate bridge that

we haven't already talked about? How can individuals, clubs, units, districts and the ACBL help to encourage collegiate bridge specifically and youth bridge more broadly.

Michael: Hmmm. So I guess I'll answer the question by talking about something that I've been experimenting with and thinking about. So in the Bay Area we have a lot of youth bridge players who are committed, who are in the community, and last summer, or early last winter break when I came back from college like a lot of my peers who are also in this age range, we had a holiday party, a SiVY holiday party, where basically, we invited players and like 10 or so people came. We played like a two hour individual, then we did a post mortem and somebody bought pizza. So we ate dinner at the club post morteming, and that was so much fun. And we did it again the following summer, where we got to the club, we just hung out for 30 minutes, and then we played an individual. I like that. These individuals are very relaxed. People are talking at the table and, you know, it's not serious game, it's like fun social bridge, and then we went to get dinner afterwards. And then the next one we did, I invited others (who weren't involved in the advanced junior bridge scene). There is a core group of people who are like me, for example. I'm not like a junior that the community needs to think about like getting into bridge because

I'm really into bridge and we have a sizable core of people who are like this and those people would come to these parties. Now I'm also inviting people who are not as much a part of the community. They've learned bridge before and they play a little bit. For example, I invited somebody who I just started teaching at Amherst, who didn't know bridge before, but is now part of my Amherst bridge club, and he's also from the Bay Area. So I invited him, and I also invited a guy from my high school who came to my high school club, but afterwards, didn't play bridge any more. So invited him, and they came and liked it. I asked them how it was, and they all had so much fun. So I was thinking, like this type of event, there's the structure of this event. It's like you have a bunch of advanced junior players get together, and then you also invite, like the more peripheral players who don't identify as strongly as bridge players, but still know the game, and you just have them play in the individual. And like, maybe if these per peripheral players come to this event and have a fun time playing the individual, and then getting dinner afterwards with people roughly their age that they might associate the amount of fun they had at this party with the game itself and want to keep playing more at the club or something.

Bill: That's great. You mentioned Amherst. You've

done great stuff at Amherst. So what's the secret sauce?

Michael: Well, it really helps to have some secret funding from the OG platinum patron. Yeah, Mitch is so generous he offered to pay my students \$15 an hour to learn bridge. And so the freshman year, like most of them, all of them came because of that pretty much - I wrote about it on Bridge Winners (<https://bridgewinners.com/article/view/reflections-on-teaching-college-bridge/>) and I think one of the things I wrote about was that there was this friend group among the people who came and the friend group collectively was like, OK, we're gonna go every Sunday. It's just what they do. And then we have a club meeting at 4:00 and we're done, it's about dinner time, and we go get dinner together. And so, we met every week, and I'm pretty diligent about getting them to come, and I prod them into being committed by telling them that if you come late I'm going to pay you only half. Even if you're only 5 minutes late. I thought about the things that are detrimental to the club, which is like a lack of enthusiasm, or not being very committed, and when somebody is late that really kind of messes up the flow for everybody, and for the person who comes late, they get into the habit of being like, OK, this is something that I don't really care about being on time for, it's not that important to me. And so I really try to do things that help them identify with

being a bridge player. So that was freshman year. Then sophomore year, we ended up becoming an official registered club. We started going to local tournaments, which was very fun for them. And then we went to New Orleans (for the North American Bridge Championships in March) which I think was like a huge highlight.

Bill: I'm just curious. Did they get paid for the time going to tournaments?

Michael: No, just for the club time.

Bill: And how long do they get together at a time?

Michael: In the beginning, we just got together for an hour, but then as time went on, people just started staying longer and longer. It was like, just one more hand. Now, we meet for like two hours.

Bill: And do they get paid for two hours, or do they just get paid for an hour and then voluntarily stay longer?

Michael: Like, two hours. Honestly, though, now they don't even think about the pay as far as I can tell. Before, they'd ask when's the paycheck coming? And now, they don't ask me that anymore, which if my assessment is correct, and I'm pretty sure it is, I don't think anybody is coming for that any more. The people who were have stopped coming. It's just like everybody who comes is committed to the group. And I'm hopeful that by the end of

senior year that they'll keep playing bridge after they graduate from the club.

Bill: It's actually an interesting way to think about it. If you weren't interested, there are almost certainly other things you could do that could get you paid \$15 an hour on campus like Amherst's, that you might find more interesting and more useful to your long term goals. It reminds me a little bit of what we (in academia) do to encourage young people to pursue careers in scientific research by providing fellowship support. They're learning, they're doing something that they think is worthwhile, and they're getting a little bit of money that enables them to do that instead of having to have a job during that time.

Michael: Yeah, if they were completely rational then maybe even if they didn't enjoy bridge, they would still come for the money. But that's just not how it works. The people who still come are those who want to take an hour on a Sunday afternoon to do this. I don't think the money is necessary any more, but don't tell that to Mitch!

Bill: What's next for you both? Reese, you just graduated from Yale with your degree in Cognitive Science and a certificate in Data Science. It was great to see you there – congratulations! Where are you off to next and what will you be doing?

Reese: I'll be working as an investment analyst for an outsourced chief investment office. My bridge aspirations are to continue to improve and never stop learning.

Bill: And Michael, you're just finishing up your sophomore year, majoring in Computer Science and Math. What do you see for the rest of college and beyond?

Michael: Yeah, so career-wise, I'm interested in doing quant trading. But that's a very competitive field. So if I don't manage to land a quant trading internship, I'll be doing tech.

Bill: What kind of tech do you mean?

Michael: Just like regular software engineering. In terms of bridge, I've now been playing more pro and I plan to keep playing just semi-pro and I'll obviously keep doing the junior events. My mindset with bridge is just to play as much as possible without having it interfere with the rest of my life, like in terms of career or school.

Bill: That sounds like a great plan. I know that many top players - Jeff Meckstroth talked about this in his *Sorry, Partner* podcast - tend to urge young players to complete their education and pursue more traditional careers rather than becoming full-time bridge professionals.

Michael: I'm optimistic for my friends who are planning on going full pro or who are doing

it right now, but for me personally, it's not what I want from my career. It is nice playing semi-pro where I get my trip covered and more.

Bill: Oh, for sure. I would do exactly the same thing.

Let me come back to high school. You mentioned there was a high school bridge club. Who started it? How did that happen?

Michael: It existed before me, but it died out so I revived it. It was just me inviting my friends.

Bill: It really takes a student who is a leader, doesn't it?

Michael: Yeah.

Bill: I think that really is the bottom line. The right student is a leader who can be the Pied Piper.

Michael: Yeah. High school is tough, though. Honestly, my Amherst club is like ten times more successful than my high school club and I don't think it's just because I've gotten better at recruiting people or retaining people. The issue with high school is that you're only playing during your lunch period, and there are so many distractions, so like you're eating lunch and it's not that long. You get your lunch and there's like 20 minutes left and you have to go to the next class. The logistics are pretty daunting. If you have people who like to play, they'll make it happen and you'll have a club but if people don't really

identify as bridge players, it's logistically really challenging.

Bill: Thanks for that perspective. Thinking about colleges, there are several institutions here in Connecticut. Yale already has a bridge club and it's been fun being involved with that during Reese's time here. But let's say that someone in Connecticut wanted to get a bridge club going at Sacred Heart, for instance. What could adults who are bridge players and also part of that college community do to help stimulate the creation of a bridge club at their college.

Michael: (laughs) They could become a patron and offer to pay students.

Bill: Would pizza alone do it? If there were a student there who was motivated? That's what some of the other student leaders I've talked to thought. And I saw this when I was working with student groups in the sciences. Free food gets people there.

Michael: Yeah, yeah. But for me, I personally don't like pizza, because it's logistically not good for playing cards. I don't want my players to be distracted. Imagine you're at the table and you want to play this game, and the person to your left is on lead, but he's like eating pizza. His cards are down and he like takes two bites. He wipes his..., there's like pizza oil...

Bill: Is there some other kind of food that's more compatible?

Michael: Well, maybe. I did espouse pizza before, but logistically it's not that great. I think like a drink. Milk tea's pretty popular. Boba's pretty popular, and that's not as big of a hassle. So I guess, going back to your question.

Bill: Do they need something like people from the local club to come in and give some lessons, or at least help get them started with stuff?

Michael: Well, for me, I never felt like I needed help.

Bill: Because you knew how to do it. You knew how to do stuff yourself. But there's not going to be a Michael Xu in most places.

Michael: Right, but like what do we mean by a Michael Xu? There's two pieces to it. One is that I'm enthusiastic about playing bridge. The other thing is that I'm knowledgeable. But if you don't have someone who's enthusiastic then I think it's pretty dead. And if you do have somebody who's enthusiastic they probably know a little bit about bridge, and I think a little bit is all they need to know to teach the game. Like in what I wrote about in my article reviewing what I did for my first year of teaching when I started my club up - I feel like I can be a good teacher in the sense of getting them good at the game, but a lot of times that's superseded. I don't make teaching the most important thing. Instead, I try to make it as entertaining as possible for them, and that sometimes

comes at expense of actually teaching. Yeah, you don't need them to become good players, which is why I don't think it's necessary.

Bill: That's a good point. Yeah, it's got to be fun for them first off.

Michael: Right, and I don't know how, like an outside adult will be able to help with that.

Bill: Maybe at least getting school administrations to provide space and the amount of support that goes to official clubs and things like that?

Michael: Actually, what you said made me think more about this idea I have about that special event. One of my good friends is now interning at the ACBL Education Foundation, so I'm thinking if I could formalize exactly what we've been doing the Bay area and actually see what the results are.

Bill: Let me know if there are any ways I can help you.

Michael: Yeah, like, just having this talk that actually, I feel inspired to go do that.

Bill: Great, great. Oh, by the way, August 11-13 is going to be another Sectional in Orange, and then there will also be one in October.

Michael: Yeah, we won't be able to make August, because we're not in school yet.

Bill: But if there are any of you who happen to be around for the summer. Actually, one of your students, Tom Ye, wrote me

about getting about getting together this summer and we've been in touch about tournaments, playing a bit, and anything else I can do to help him with moving along. (Tom did make it Orange and placed in the overalls for his flight in both of the Saturday pairs events!)

Michael: Yeah, he's like one of my super club members. He was one who really suggested the idea of making our club an official club, and he just did all the work. He dealt with the paperwork and all that stuff. He's super good for the club, and serves as vice president now.

Michael: I also won a travel package to Chicago, but since I'm playing pro I gave my package to Tom.

Bill: What did you win it for?

Michael: Oh, I just won an online collegiate bridge tournament. (Tom Ye went on to win the Collegiate Pairs in Chicago.)

Bill: All right. Well done. I will look forward seeing you in Chicago. Actually, I'll see you in Nashua.

Let's see, a couple of other questions. What is your funniest bridge experience?

Michael: What happened in Italy was pretty funny. But when I play bridge, I get like super serious. It's a very weird feeling, because I become kind of anti-social when I'm playing. I can't talk or socialize when I'm

playing bridge, because my mind is in a state where I'm so serious and logical that I feel kind of like a machine.

Bill: That's probably good, and certainly, if it's what feels right, it's good for you.

Michael: Yeah, I just thought of a funny hand that happened. This was in Providence and I was playing with John McAllister. So I did some silly bidding, and we ended up in slam. John was playing 6 hearts and I'm dummy, with a stiff spade, and John looks at my dummy, looks at his hand, and he sees that we're off the spade Ace and the trump Ace. It's like (expletive deleted), we're in 6 hearts. So the play proceeds and John starts touching trumps and on the second round of trumps his left hand opponent shows out and discards a spade. John was like (expletive deleted).

Bill: Uh, oh. Revoke. (Both laugh.)

Michael: So I'm dummy, and I see the discarded spade, and then that person says finally, I have a trump, I have to follow suit. After, when that second round from he places down in the queen of spades and we make eye contact. I just started laughing. It was just like it was so funny, but what made it even funnier was that I was dummy and I knew what was going on.

Bill: Yeah. Oh, there's moments, yeah, when you're on the losing end of that when you just have to laugh.

Michael: The opponents were such good sports about it. We were trying to contain our laughter but we were kind of failing but they were great sports about it.

Bill: Yeah, there are a lot of great people in the bridge world. That's why I sometimes have a hard time not getting distracted by enjoying the social aspects of the game. But I admire your ability to focus, and I do try to achieve that myself when I'm playing.

Favorite convention?

Michael: I love the idea of Last Train (an artificial bid of the suit immediate below the trump suit to indicate continued interest in slam but inability to take control of the auction). I think it's just conceptually a beautiful idea, the idea of this last try below game. And also because I could like do it as shifting blame. (Both laugh.)

Bill: My partner Last Trained this morning and then played a nice slam. I like Last Train, too. How 'bout you, Reese? Favorite and least favorite?

Reese: I love SIKKOH. (SIKKOH is a variation on Kokish, a convention first described by the late great Canadian player and coach Eric Kokish to help with bidding of very strong balanced hands. In Kokish, 2C-2D-2H is artificial, either hearts or very strong balanced. After responder's forced 2S bid, opener bids 2NT to show the very strong balanced, and in the original

version, bids naturally at the 3-level to show a 1-suiter or 2-suiter with hearts. In SIKKOH, first described by David Caprera in August 2012 The Bridge World, 3C shows hearts, 3D shows hearts and spades, 3H shows hearts and clubs, and 3S shows hearts and diamonds.)

Bill: Sciencey! One of those things I should probably be playing but haven't. And least?

Reese: I can't stand MUD leads.

Bill: I'm not a fan, either, but Michael Rosenberg likes them, at least against suits, so they can't be all bad.

And Michael?

Michael: Let's see. I hate New Minor Forcing. Because like, why would you do that when you could do 2-way (2-way checkback, with 2 diamonds as an artificial game force and 2 clubs forcing 2 diamonds to initiate most invitational sequences) instead?

Bill: You're preaching to the choir, baby.

Michael: I started off learning New Minor Forcing. And then when I learned 2-way I'm like, why did they teach me that other thing? It just should not exist, in my opinion.

Bill: 2-way's easier.

Michael: It is. It sounds a little bit more spooky but once you get past that spooky part where you're bidding partner's minor, it's easier.

Bill: It really is. Once you've established whether you're in a forcing or invitational sequence, you can just bid naturally.

Let's see, is there anything else I should have asked you about that I didn't?

Michael: I can't think of anything, but I do have some things that I want to ask you about.

Bill: (laughs)

(to be continued?)