

# Bridge enthusiasts make bid for new generation to pick up cards

Easybridge! First six weeks free

**TUESDAYS:** Beginning Sept. 4, 7-9:30 p.m.

**SUNDAYS:** Beginning Sept. 9, 2-4:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** The Bridge Center, 1911 Bishop Rd.

**DETAILS:** Call Linda MacCleave, (804) 744-6577

BY JANET CAGGIANO  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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Katherine Cabell folds her arms as she surveys the table where she sits.

Across from her is her partner, to each side two older gentlemen. The four are deep in thought, trying to outbid and outguess each other during a game of bridge.

"You have to be analytical and competitive," Cabell said during a break from the action. "It feels good to see how far you can push yourself."

Cabell, 47, is one of the younger bridge players inside the Bridge Center on this summer afternoon. Most of her colleagues are retired. They've played the card game since they were youngsters and still haven't outgrown their desire to win.

"A lot of people played bridge as a pastime when I was in college," said Moon McMullan, a 78-year-old retired dermatologist. "Now you go to college and everyone's watching television. I'll tell you what I think of TV. I put mine in the basement."

McMullan's hobby of choice is bridge. But as he glanced around the Bridge Center recently, he couldn't help but notice the empty chairs. Less than half of the 15 tables were filled with players.

"We are going to lose this game if we don't find people to play it," said Mike Fine, president of the Richmond Bridge Association. "Computers have taken over. Younger people just aren't playing cards."

Formed in the 1930s, the Richmond Bridge Association boasted more than 600 members during its heyday 20 years ago. Now that number stands at about 450. Most are in their middle 60s.

"Our players are dying off," Fine said. "We need to do something."

That something is free bridge lessons. Beginning Tuesday, the Richmond Bridge Association is offering six weeks of free Easybridge! lessons at the Bridge Center. Participants can take six lessons each Tuesday, beginning Sept. 4, or Sunday, beginning Sept. 9, to get a feel for the once popular game. After that, the cost is \$3 per lesson.

"Our target audience is people who have never played bridge before but want to learn," said Linda MacCleave, a retired teacher and member of the Richmond Bridge Association the last 25 years.

MacCleave will teach some of the Easybridge! classes. Her top priority, she said, will be to help people feel comfortable. Too often, she said, new players are intimidated because the people around them already know how to play.

"With Easybridge! they will be playing against people on their same level," she said. "We want them to feel comfortable to make mistakes."

Easybridge! was organized by the American Contract Bridge League. The national group, which totals about 180,000 members, has already established the classes in other cities, including Washington. MacCleave promises lots of hands-on learning instead of discussion.

"This game is so much fun," she said. "It's so unpredictable. You never stop learning. You never stop making mistakes."

Retired professionals enjoy their hobby, they say, because it keeps them on their toes.

"It keeps you sharp," said Fine, a 40-year veteran of the game. "I remember hands I played 20 years ago. There are 6 billion combinations of cards, so you never have the same hand twice. That's why this is so fascinating. When you pick up a hand of cards, it's always different."

Bridge can be traced to the early 16th century, when a game called whist was played in England. Through the centuries, whist evolved and grew in popularity. Early in the 1890s, bridge appeared in America. It underwent many changes until Harold S. Vanderbilt perfected a new form of bridge in 1925.

MacCleave refers to it as a "four-person game of war." Serious in her terminology, she also concedes that players become best friends.

"It's wonderful," she said. "When you come to play bridge, you meet people who have occupations and a way of life so different from your own. You aren't just dealing cards. You're meeting interesting people who lead interesting lives."

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