

## Steve Weinstein – the Vulnerable Truck Driver

By Christina Lund Madsen

Steve Weinstein grew up in a small town with a population of 500 in Upstate New York. As a child he dreamt about being a truck driver.

“There were no real jobs, most people were farmers and on our little road the trucks would go by and me and my friends would put our arm to make them do the air horn. And the guy would do the air horn and wave at us. There was nothing cooler than a truck driver.”

The closest Steve ever became to a truck driver is the cap glued to his head.

Today his name in combination with partner Bobby Levin is spoken in a whisper by opponents about to face them. However frightening Steve may appear at the bridge table, meeting him in person all you feel like doing is give him a hug and keep him safe from harm.

### The parents

*How did you start to play bridge?*

“I was the youngest of four children. My sister moved out and my brothers had stopped playing with me. My parents played bridge so I decided to start playing, and eventually my parents got divorced, my dad moved to California and bought a bridge club, so I played waaay too much bridge in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

*How long did you live there?*

“I lived there for two years. Then I moved back to NY.”

*How come?*

“Because I wanted to be with both my dad and my mom. So I was with my dad for a couple of years then I was with my mom. Luckily they both wanted me to be with them.” He laughs shyly.

*How is your relationship with them? Are they still alive?*

“No, they are not alive anymore. I really had parents that... you know, some people talk about having a hard childhood or difficult parents. My parents were supportive, loving, caring, you know... My dad was not wealthy at all, but still no matter what, you will always be fine, you will always be able to make a living, to eat, to enjoy your life, don't worry about anything. My mom was more cerebral and passionate, but such a



Steve Weinstein

wonderful loving person. She took on many foster children. We had a huge house with lots of kids and no money and all scampered for food.”

*When did they die?*

“My mom died in 1995...” Steve’s voice is throaty as he speaks the words, his glasses mercifully hiding his eyes. “My dad in 96. They both had different versions of cancer. I found out about my dad being really sick on a hotel answering machine. People who enter my hotel room and see the answering light blinking ask ‘Are you not gonna get your messages?’ ‘No.’ Anybody knows that if they leave a message on my hotel phone I won’t get it. It is too bad of a memory. “

*How much time passed from they got sick till they died?*

My mother was very sudden. I was working on Wall Street at the time. She had been sick, but she didn’t know how sick. My wife called me and said “you have to come home now.””

He continues to tell though the air between us is heavy from the memories.

“My dad had an illness that lasted six to nine months. I went every weekend to California to be with him. It got to a point where I was physically sick on the plane ride from New York to California because my dad was deteriorating. Every time I got off the plane he was worse.”

*How was it for you after they both passed away?*

“Intense atmosphere for a very long time. It was very hard to believe you could ever be happy again.”

*Did you have someone with you?*

“My wife. She is tremendous. We have been together since 1986 and married since 1993. She is incredibly supportive and strong and wonderful.”

After their divorce, Steve’s mother remarried bridge star Fred Stewart, who became not only Steve’s bridge partner but also a second father.

“My relationship with Fred has always been amazing. He helped teach me so much about life and competition that I have no idea who I would have been without him, but certainly not who I am.”

*Which is the fondest memory of your father?*

He pauses. “I can’t think of one memory as much as I can think that... it was always ok. When I spoke to my father or was around him you just felt like the world was always gonna be ok.”

*What kind of impact do you think their early death had on you as a person?*

“I think that I may have been more serious faster and value life and appreciate friends and family. I am not sure I would have learned that so easily.”

## **The Partners**

*How did you fall in love with your wife?*

I fell in love with my wife in 1986. She was friends with a bridge player and they were in the lobby at the nationals. I went up to her and was like wow, this girl is awesome. I was still in college and she came during my last semester and she helped me write my senior seminar of economics. I was like... this is the greatest girl in the world. She is beautiful, she is brilliant, she fixed my paper..." His voice proudly rises during the last sentence.

Steve began to play with Bobby Levin in 1998.

*What did you think about him when you first met him?*

"He is a dynamic personality, charismatic. Great guy to be around and a great bridge player. He has sides to him that some people don't necessarily like. At the table he is a tough opponent. He has a reputation as being a difficult partner, but he has been a dream partner for me."

*If Bobby had to describe you with three words, what would he say?*

"I don't know. I really don't know. You have to ask him that. Piece of shit. That's what he would say."

*What about your wife?*

Long pause. "Loving, caring and respectful I would hope, but you have to ask her... Very competitive she would tell you. Hates to lose, miserably bad mood after losses, but besides that pretty even tempered."

*Which was the most challenging time in your partnership with Bobby?*

"Psychologically the most frustrating was losing the open pairs in Verona 2006. We really felt we were going to win, it was a very hard loss. But there hasn't been a lot of downside. We really enjoy playing bridge with each other. I feel like I am the luckiest guy in the world to have him as my partner. I don't know if he feels the same way or not. At least he feels like it is not so bad." He shrugs his shoulders smilingly.



**Bobby Levin**

## **The Team**

Steve and Bobby originally played the American trials with their regular team, the powerful Nickell squad. After losing first the semifinal of the American trials to the Kranyak team and then the final to the Fleisher team, who went on to become USA2, Steve and Bobby were invited to join the USA1 team with the four youngsters John Kranyak, Gavin Wolpert, Kevin Dwyer and Kevin Bathurst.

*Did you have any doubts entering USA1 since you played the trials with the Nickell team?*

"I thought it would be okay, but we did call Nickell and asked if it was ok. He is a tremendous guy and said: 'You guys go win with that team.'"

*What is it like playing on USA1?*

"It is a very optimistic team. A lot of energy, they are cocky, which I like. "We're gonna win easy, kill them, claimer". It is how I like to talk. Bobby doesn't like talking like that, but Gavin and Kran (John Kranyak, ed.) do. The Kevins aren't so much like that. Kevin Bathurst is much more subdued and Kevin Dwyer is... well, if you get him drunk you never know what will happen... And Shane is the perfect captain for this team. Not only has he done a killer job of preparation, but he also manages to keep our gang of whacko's all on the same page."

*How is your relationship to your teammate Gavin Wolpert?*

"Early in our relationship I felt he was sort of like a son to me. I really always cared about him, loved him. Now our relationship went from what felt a little paternal to me, somebody wanted to care of, wanted to help in his life and always, and now I feel like it has grown to a full blown friendship where we are absolutely each other's equals."

Besides being the godfather of Gavin's 4-year old daughter, Steve is also Gavin's partner in the rapidly expanding project Bridgewinners.com, a web community for bridge players around the world from beginners to experts.

Gavin Wolpert and Jason Feldman started the website and Steve soon wanted in and was warmly welcomed. Since then more and more people have joined and a wide range of the world's foremost experts regularly contribute articles and posts.

*What is your dream for the site?*

"I don't have a clear picture of what it will be. I just know that if we really care about it and do a good job, we will work it out. I want a place where all bridge players can go, talk, learn. I want every bridge player to have to check Bridgewinners every day. That would be my goal."



**Gavin Wolpert**

## **The Past**

Steve graduated college in 1986 and was in Wall Street in different position till after 9/11. He was seen as a golden boy, but after 9/11 being originally a country boy he did not want to be in New York City anymore. He thought about his parents dying so young and did not feel was enjoying his life as he should.

“I told my boss that I wanted to quit. He said ‘Why aren’t you taking a few months off to think about it? I will pay you.’ I said ok. So I took a couple of months off and came back to see him. He said ‘Are you ready to come back?’ I said ‘I really don’t wanna go back to work.’ I just started to play poker and I realized there was a lot to the game. He said ‘Take a couple of months more off, I’ll keep paying you.’ I said ok. A couple of months later I went back to him. He said ‘Are you ready to go back to work?’ I said ‘No, I’m really not.’ He said ‘I CAN’T KEEP F... PAYING YOU’ and I am like ‘I don’t know why you keep paying me, I tried to quit!’”

After finally quitting Wall Street in 2002 Steve started to play poker for recreational purposes and soon became an amazing poker player. It was more of an income for him than bridge for several years until online poker was forbidden by law in the US.

## **The Present**

Today Steve in his partnership with Bobby is one of the world’s most sought-after partnerships. Besides numerous American titles they are particularly known for winning the Cavendish years after year. However the partnership is short in world titles. Bobby Levin has won the Bermuda Bowl back in 1981 as the youngest player ever, but not since. Steve has never won it.

After their disappointment at the World Championships in Verona, they revenged by convincingly winning the World open pairs four years after in Philadelphia, even on home soil.

“When Bobby and I won the World open pairs it was orgasmic, but the only thing missing was during the victory banquet when we couldn’t hear the Stars Spangled Banner because it was a transnational event. I always wanted to hear the Stars Spangled Banner when I won for the United States. Hopefully we get to hear it after the Bermuda Bowl.”