

SOUTH-AMERICAN BRIDGE: THE HISTORY

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In 1932 a group of bridge enthusiasts founded the “Club de Bridge Argentino,” the first exclusively dedicated bridge institution in South America. The second did not appear until five years later when the Bridge Club of Punta Arenas, Chile, started its activities.

In 1935 the “Comisión Argentina de Bridge” was formed and existed until replaced in 1947 by the still extant “Asociación del Bridge Argentino (ABA).” Silvia Boldt is its present President.

The first President of the ABA, Alejandro Castro, organized the first international bridge competition in South America with the participation of Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. This tournament planted the seed for the creation of the South American Bridge Championships; the first edition was in 1948 in Buenos Aires.

The “Confederación Sudamericana de Bridge” was founded in 1955 with the original four countries plus Paraguay. Other countries became affiliated over the next 20 years: Peru in 1955, Venezuela in 1956, Colombia in 1963, Ecuador in 1965 and Bolivia in 1974.

Discussions about South American participation in the “Bermuda Bowl” (then a “World” championship at least in name, contested only by North America and Europe) were instrumental in the founding in 1958 of the World Bridge Federation, which included Europe (Zone 1), North America (Zone 2) and South America (Zone 3). 1958 also marked the debut of South America in the Bermuda Bowl, Argentina representing the new zone in Como, Italy.

Marcelo Lerner, who played that championship and still plays as a member of the Argentine National Senior Team, tells us that actual time in the air to Como (with a stop in Switzerland) took 36 hours. The “rest” stop in Saint Moritz gave the Argentine team an opportunity to play some friendly matches against teams from both Italy and Switzerland, whose national team included future WBF President, Jaime Ortiz-Patiño.

In 1961, Argentina, South American Champion the previous year, was invited to stage the Bermuda Bowl. It took 15 months of hard work to organize the event that was considered, at the time, the best-ever world championship. Argentina also hosted the Bermuda Bowl in 1965, an event best known for the infamous Reese/Shapiro incident.

Brazil takes South-American Bridge to international recognition

The first Bermuda Bowl played in Brazil was in 1969. By winning the 1968 South-American championship, Brazil earned the right to organize the Bermuda

Bowl on behalf of Zone 3. It was played in Rio de Janeiro and, for the first time, included a representative of the Far East Zone (Zone 6). Italy (the defending champion), host Brazil, France, North America and Chinese Taipei (then Nationalist China) participated; surprisingly, the newcomers (sort of a zonal all-star team comprised of two top pairs from Taiwan and two experts from Thailand) made the final against Italy; USA did not.

Brazil has since hosted three more World Championships, all of them Bermuda Bowls: 1973 in Guarujá, 1979 in Rio de Janeiro, and 1985 in Sao Paulo.

In 1976 Brazil brought the first world title to South America by winning the World Bridge Teams Olympiad in Monte Carlo immediately after the Bermuda Bowl in which Brazil played-off for third place, losing to Israel. In the Olympiad Brazil defeated Indonesia in the last match to win the event outright as there was no knockout phase that year; the famous Italian Blue Team was the runner-up. Remarkably, Brazil and Italy never officially played against one another because they sat in the same direction during their head-on match, making score comparisons impossible.

In 1978, in New Orleans, Marcelo Branco and Gabino Cintra won the World Open Pairs title with a huge final session, catching the Canadian pair that had held the lead after each of the other four final sessions. The Brazilian Open Team was also a finalist in the first edition of the Rosenblum Cup, losing to Poland in the final, after defeating the favorites, USA, in their semi-final.

That year Colombia and Venezuela left the South American Zone to join the newly created Central American/Caribbean Zone 5. Both those countries have since returned to their “roots,” Colombia in 2005 and Venezuela in 2008.

Brazil organized the 1979 Bermuda Bowl in Rio de Janeiro. Although the Brazilian team did not perform well, Brazilians had the opportunity to watch a most electrifying final between United States and Italy. This World Championship was a model of organization and, by request of the WBF President, generated the “Complete Blueprint for the World Championships” many parts of which are still employed by planners.

In 1985, Brazil received the “mission” to organize the World Championships with only eight months notice. For the first time the Bermuda Bowl and Venice Cup were played simultaneously, ten teams participating in each event. The Brazilian team, coached by Eric Kokish (“who is this man and what can he teach me?” was the reaction by world champion Pedro Branco) and including a very young pair, Claudio and Fabio Sampaio, won the round robin and lost its semi-final to the strong American team on the last board of the 160-board match. According to Kokish, that final deal – a humble random choice of low partscores – was one of the most dramatic he’s ever experienced; the tension in the Vugraph theatre was incredible.

Brazilian Bridge was consistently strong during the next few years, culminating in 1989, in Perth, Australia with a convincing victory in the Bermuda Bowl. Gabriel Chagas, Carlos Camacho, Ricardo Janz, Roberto Mello, Marcelo and Pedro Branco, with Pedro Paulo Asumpção as non-playing captain, were the heroes of this story. With this title Marcelo Branco became one of the few triple-crowned players in bridge; in 1990, he added a second World Pairs Championship, this time partnered with Gabriel Chagas, who earned his own triple crown with that victory. Remarkably, one of Marcelo's victims in that final-session 1978 Open Pairs comeback was (the late) Peter Nagy of Canada, who endured the same disappointment in 1990.

Brazil, representing South America, Brazil played in the exhibition tournaments for the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1999 and 2000, finishing first and second.

The Bermuda Bowl and Venice Cup returned to South America in 1993, Santiago, Chile, playing host. Eerily, Brazil again was defeated on the last board of the semi-final, losing to Norway.

CSB and the Internet

New technologies have created new forms of home entertainment. Bridge has benefitted by the increased accessibility offered by the Internet. Confederación Sudamericana de Bridge, besides maintaining a comprehensive web page packed with information and entertainment and coordinated by Argentinian Fernando Lema, is starting to run tournaments in collaboration with BBO (Bridge Base Online), which will include awarding South American ranking points to the winners.

2009: Brazil organizes its 5th World Championship

In 2009, again in Sao Paulo, Brazil will host the World Bridge Team Championships, nowadays a big event with 66 participating teams (22 in each of the three parallel main events: Bermuda Bowl, the Venice Cup and Senior Bowl (which in 2009 will launch the Ernesto d'Orsi Trophy for the winning team). More than 100 entries are expected for the Transnational Open Teams, to be played in the second week of the tournament.

Presently, the Confederación Sudamericana de Bridge, which consists of 10 member countries, organizes, in odd-numbered years, the Zonal South American Championships for Open, Women, Junior, and Senior Teams, and in even-numbered years a festival with more than 40 teams and 120 pairs participating. Ernesto d'Orsi is the President of the Zone.

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