

18,000 AT TOURNEY

\$25Gs split pros from bridge bums

By PAUL BILODEAU
Staff Writer

"Sure I'm a pro, the same way as a tennis pro or a golf pro," says the "bridge bum" between hands.

Sorry, that's bridge professional — New Yorker Ron Anderson makes more than \$25,000 a year playing that casually intense game of cards.

The 80th annual Canadian National bridge tournament, which ended yesterday, attracted Anderson and 18,000 other players for six days of cards in smoke-filled halls at the Royal York Hotel.



ERIC R. MURRAY
Canadian champion

"For the first five years, I was a bridge bum, then I became a bridge pro — the dividing line is roughly \$25,000 a year," Anderson added.

He earns it by writing books on how to play bridge, and "prostituting" himself at bridge — having his

way paid at tournaments by partners who want to cash in on his winning hands.

But bridge bums and pros are strictly an American syndrome; in Canada, the real bridge players stand out, like Toronto lawyer Eric R. Murray, the top Canadian bridge player, and Iraqi-born Sammy Kehela.

Neither classifies himself as a pro, yet you can tell where they're sitting among the 150-odd tables in the packed convention hall — they're the ones surrounded by "kibbitzers" watching the masters

While a bridge bum might spend more than 40 weekends a year at bridge tournaments like this one, Murray, 51, now finesses his way through only six or seven weekends.

"In no sense of the word am I a professional," he says. "I don't play for money."

But Saturday, Murray and teammates proved their prowess once again by winning the "knockout" final Saturday night.

Murray and Kehala broke up a 20-year partnership at the bridge table this year, deciding to split their talent for team trials next weekend. The trials determine which four-man team will represent Canada at the 1980 Olympiad of bridge set for Holland in September.

Enough is enough, bridge team says after 24 years

They've bid their last grand slam together.

Now, the world's most durable bridge team is breaking up after representing Canada for 24 years.

"After so many years, we've lost a lot of enthusiasm," says Sammy Kehela, 47, the analytical player who would dazzle opponents with his style.

"I have a heavy legal practice and playing regularly is a tremendous mental exercise," says Eric Murray, 54, the man who describes his approach to bridge as being that of a poker player.

In their long careers as a team, they came third three

times in the Olympiad of bridge — the most recent award being last month — and finished in



Murray

second place three times in the international Bermuda Bowl tournament, in which they represented North America. And they hold what is thought to be the world tournament

record for the time they played every session — for a total of 732 deals.



Sami Kehela

What could be more lethal than boxing?



Eric Murray

There is a body of opinion that duplicate bridge is the most dangerous sport, or game, in the world. It is more dangerous than mountain climbing, more lethal than boxing. Spells of mind-boggling concentration in rooms blanketed with cigar and cigaret smoke followed by long stretches of absolute inactivity can be enough to kill all but the toughest competitors.

Although bridge hasn't killed them, it has taken its toll of the long-standing and very peculiar relationship between Canada's — and two of the world's — most celebrated and successful players.

After nearly a quarter of a century of competition that put Canada on the international bridge map, the somber, brooding Sami Kehela and the mercuri-

al, boisterous Eric Murray, are splitting up.

They have lost their hunger to win. Their skills are yielding to age. They no longer have the legs — or the backsides — for cut-throat international contests.

"In the old days, I loved to play every session," Mr. Murray says. "I could sit down and literally play forever. I never seemed to get exhausted. Competition was meat for me. Now, it gets tougher every year and I don't think we're staying with it. My mind can't do it any more."

Mr. Murray and Mr. Kehela talk about their improbable partnership and their shared passion for bridge with *The Globe and Mail's* Nora McCabe, on Page S7.

Canada's bridge Odd Couple splits

By NORA McCABE

You have to understand madness of the game to see union of Kehela, Murray was a miracle

ANY GOOD matchmaker knows opposites attract. And if there's a couple around to illustrate that adage to perfection, it's Eric Murray and Sami Kehela, Canada's top bridge-playing duo who've been joined in an odd marriage for 24 years.

But Murray — a blustery, 54-year-old, big-shot litigation lawyer — and Kehela — a brooding, 48-year-old, bridge hustler — are splitting. After nearly a quarter of a century; after recently winning a bronze medal at the 1982 Olympiad of bridge; they've retired from international competition.

They're going out with distinction. Not only did they play on every team Canada has had since the Olympiads began in 1960, they have won three bronze medals and came fourth once. They are the only Canadian pair chosen to play on a North American zone team in the Bermuda Bowl, the bridge world championships. They were on three teams, finishing second each time. In 1964 and '65, they won back-to-back Spingold Cups at the summer North American national championships, not losing a single hand in either of the double elimination contests. No other Canadian team has duplicated this feat.

"Hell, you have to understand the madness of duplicate bridge," says Al Lando, a Toronto trustee in bankruptcy who was non-playing captain of three of the Canadian Olympic bridge teams on which Murray and Kehela were the anchor pair.

"The partnership of Murray and Kehela was a miracle."

Why quit playing when the pair is in demand?

Toronto lawyer John Laskin, himself an international class player, agrees. "Almost singlehandedly, they made Canada a bridge country and they're responsible for making Toronto one of the great bridge centres in North America. At one time, Murray and Kehela were the most in demand pair to play with on the continent. They are



Sami Kehela (left) and Eric Murray almost made Canada a bridge power by themselves.

the intercollegiate bridge trophy, donated by the newspaper.

Graduated from Osgoode Hall, he married another lawyer, acquired three non-bridge playing sons, a big house in Forest Hill and a thriving practice with Cassels, Brock — in spite of his addiction to the game of bridge.

Murray started playing international bridge with Doug Drury, another Torontonian who moved to San Francisco in 1958, forcing Murray to look for a new partner. Kehela was the best around.

Together, Murray, already an unpredictable bidder, and Drury won the national men's pair championships in 1954 and 1955. Later, in 1962, he teamed briefly with Bostonian Charles Coon and they won a spot on the 1962 North American zone team, which finished second in the Bermuda Bowl.

Says Kehela: "Like any marriage, from time to time, we had an affair."

By 1960, Murray became involved in the development of Canadian bridge. As the first Canadian director of the American Contract Bridge League, the parent organization that rules the game in the North American zone, Murray was also the founder of the Canadian Bridge Federation.

"I played a very key role in the development of the organizations that now control bridge," he says. "At one time, I was president of two competing Ontario organizations. I solved the problem by appointing myself chairman of the merger committee of each, meeting with myself and deciding to wipe out one of them. I spent very agreeable meetings with myself. I found that I got along with myself very well. No problems with a large committee. Mind you, I ran them in a rather dictatorial fashion."

Bridge club raided, then faced charges of gambling house

About this time, Murray was dragged into the only case in Canadian law concerning bridge. He appeared in court as an expert to testify for a bridge club raided by the cops and charged with being a common gambling house, since people were clearly playing cards

extraordinary."
So why quit?
Says Murray, puffing on an ever-present cigar: "Apropos of that South Korean boxer in the news, do you know that, some years ago, after other boxing deaths, Sports Illustrated did a survey and concluded that bridge is the most dangerous sport played in North America because of the heavy smoking and long periods of immobility."

Not the real reason, obviously. They're packing it in, reluctantly — except for the odd local tournament with buddies. Inevitably, they're getting long in the tooth, losing it, sometimes to patently inferior opponents. That's galling. Anyway, increasingly, bridge is becoming a young man's game.

By any measure, Murray and Kehela are the odd couple. By bridge standards, well, bridge is a strange and quirky game — the only sport where the players pay to play and the fans watch for free. An exercise in problem solving, computer experts figure there are 23 trillion possible bridge hands. Given that each player holds 13 cards, that means there are 13 times 23 trillion possible mistakes a player can make. Still, some 20 million North Americans, 2 million of them in Canada, play the game with varying degrees of avidity. People take it up because it looks easy and discover it's capricious. If the hands are simple, then the problems are simple and anyone can solve them; if the hands are complicated, then the problems are complicated and only the best players can solve them.

Given the margin for error, some insist the secret of a good partnership is a thick skin. Kehela, whose skin is flimsier than tissue paper, disagrees. "Bridge is an intellectual game so both partners have to be relatively equal in ability. Ego is very much involved so you have to respect your partner's game. You cannot start criticizing his game in public, thereby denigrating his abilities in some way. Bridge is a very intense experience. One's nerves are on edge so you can take umbrage easily."

In other words, shut up, no matter what your partner does.

"Yes," says Murray, who's notorious for offering unsolicited opinions on every player in the game. The sole exception is Kehela, whom Murray protects like a mother hen. "Being a lawyer, I developed more powerful lungs than most people and I shout and scream and rant, but very early we came to the understanding that we should never

discuss hands at the table."

They go farther, opting not to see each other socially, even though they live within walking distance. Contrary to rumor, they don't dislike each other; they just subscribe to the theory that absence makes the heart grow fonder.

"That's Sami — S-A-M-I, not Sammy," Kehela announced the other day on a rare visit to Murray's spacious Forest Hill home.

"News to me," retorted Murray. "You've always spelled it S-a-m-m-y."

"That's how my name is really spelled," Kehela said.

"Yeah, just like you use to add an 'R' for a middle initial," Murray muttered *sotto voce*.

Walking into a world class duplicate bridge tournament and seeing wall-to-wall tables filling a room the size of the Royal York Hotel's big ballroom is a shock to those whose acquaintance with the game is limited to college rec rooms. Smoke hangs heavy in the air as players silently eyeball their hands. These days, in the wake of repeated scandals over cheating, players sit behind tall screens that bisect the table diagonally to prevent partners from illegally communicating information. There are also leg partitions to stop anyone playing footsie. Bids are pulled out of a box and passed silently through a mailbox in the screen. Silence reigns until the last trick of a hand is played.

In the courtroom or at the bridge table, Murray has a mind like quicksilver. He plays aggressively, seizing control, often through unpredictable bidding, often through his intimidating table presence. "He has a perpetual snarl on his face," says Kehela.

"Eric never minded looking foolish. He would take positions, gamble a bit. He was mercurial. He used to lose some points, but he brought in more than he dropped. I, on the other hand, was more the theoretician. My style was just not to make errors so that I didn't lose points because I didn't bring points

in. I didn't cause opponents to make mistakes, which was Eric's style when he was at the top of his game. He made it easy for opponents to make mistakes by putting them off their stride. I never did that. I just kept my nose clean. I used to be able to go through session after session without making a mistake," Kehela said, admitting he used to bite his nails, once had such severe chest pains he went to hospital thinking he was having a heart attack.

"But now, I make mistakes and my game is no longer effective," Kehela said softly.

Bidding systems complicating difficult game

Besides, playing internationally is not as much fun. Bidding systems, based on artificial conventions as opposed to the more natural what-you-see-is-what-you-bid method Murray and Kehela play, have sprung up like weeds, complicating an already complex game.

"The proliferation of bidding systems just means bridge is a more difficult game to play," says Kehela. "If I were starting out, I would find that a greater challenge — mastering systems, perhaps inventing a system of my own, trying to find flaws in other people's systems. But I'm beyond that. I no longer have the enthusiasm.

Anachronistic or not, Murray wouldn't change styles — although he's a staunch supporter of both screens and bidding boxes. "Artificial conventions are a crutch. Natural style requires exercising bidding judgment. We exercise that judgment. That's been a major part of our success, good judgment and good instincts.

Tilting back his chair, Murray waves his huge hands in the air and laughs, savoring a sweet moment of

triumph. Eyes glinting, he quickly replays a hand from the inaugural Olympiad in 1960 in Turin. "I made a bid that nobody in his right mind would make and achieved an incredibly good result," he chuckles, remembering the consternation of his U.S. opponents Tobias Stone and Johnny Crawford who came apart and blew the hand. "Stone, literally, went right up in the air, screaming, 'This idiot. This moron. Who would ever dream that anyone would make such an ignorant bid.' And the whole room rose up and said, 'Stone, go home. Stone, go home.' I've made many outrageous bids in my day but that was the funniest."

Typically, Kehela has a different recollection of the same Olympiad.

"Eric, at the time, was not sufficiently aware of my sensitivities and he held forth with our teammates and the captain about this bid that I made which put us in jeopardy, but from which he had extricated us by playing very well. It had the effect of putting me down and I was sufficiently immature at the time that right afterwards I went to the captain and said, 'Look, you have to tell Eric that he should not criticize me or I don't want to play with him any more.'"

No doubt about it. Murray and Kehela are chalk and cheese — physically and temperamentally.

Born Nov. 8, 1934, to Jewish parents in Baghdad — "which is the oldest Jewish settlement in the world" — Kehela left there "at age 7, having just survived a pogrom by 10 minutes." The family fled to India.

Next stop was California, where, like thousands of other players, Kehela discovered bridge in college — in his case, University of California at Berkeley, which he entered as a 16-year-old sophomore, studying English, economics and bridge in that order. Working his way through school, Kehela rapidly calculated that bridge could be a "small source of income. At 10 cents a point, I could win \$1 a day and I could live on that. It bought two sandwiches and a coke."

A bout of mononucleosis terminated his studies and he took off for London, where "in the beginning my parents had high hopes for me becoming a success in some sort of legitimate profession... but I was not cut out for honest toil. Then, in 1957, I ran away from home and came here," he says, sitting in his slippers in his one-bedroom apartment filled with Humphrey Bogart memorabilia, bookcases of bridge books and a small selection of his numerous trophies.

Sipping a cognac and puffing on a cigar, Kehela laughs and says, "Eric does very well in his law practice. Now he buys more expensive cigars. I've never been very wealthy. I was always indigent. But I've always had very good friends so I've always been able to smoke good cigars." Friends store Kehela's other passion: good wine in his 300-bottle cellar.

Although he prefers to sidestep the question, he still makes his living the same way he did in college, playing rubber bridge for money. The difference is now it costs more than a buck a day.

Within a year of immigrating here, Kehela was paired at the bridge table with Murray; off-hours with one beauty after another. He's still a bachelor.

'Like any marriage, from time to time, we had an affair'

In contrast to Kehela, who's slim, dark and soft-spoken, Murray is big, boisterous and blonde. Born Aug. 31, 1928, he grew up in Hamilton, Ont., discovered bridge at a local tennis club and quickly organized an ad hoc bridge club on the premises. Moving on to McMaster University, then a proper Baptist institution that frowned on card playing, he was soon in hot water after making banner headlines in the Toronto Telegram for winning

for money at the time of the raid. Murray attempted to disprove the charge, arguing that bridge was a game of skill, rather than an illegal game of mixed chance and skill. No deal, said the judge. The case moved to the Ontario Court of Appeal, where the conviction was upheld — although some of the judges were currently learning bridge at the same kind of club. Commented Murray afterward: "In my opinion, the way the judges on the Ontario Court of Appeal play bridge, it's a game of pure chance."

Back at the bridge table, Murray and Kehela were piling up an enviable record of North American national trophies, including the two Spingold Cups. Bridge was not popular yet and Canada could only field a four-man rather than the usual six-man team. Rising to the occasion, the other pair — hard-drinking Shorty Sheardown, then Toronto's Mr. Bridge, and Bruce Elliott, a cerebral palsy victim — played their finest hands.

For the record, Murray and Kehela played on all eight Olympiad teams representing Canada since the competition began in 1960 (since 1978, Olympiads are every two years) winning bronze medals in 1968, '72 and '82, coming fourth in 1964. They contested the 1966, '67 and '74 Bermuda Bowls, heartbreakingly losing each to the legendary Italian Blue teams that dominated bridge from 1957 to 1975 when screens and leg partitions were introduced.

Yes, Kehela says, the sixties and early seventies were the glory days. They were young, enthusiastic, with fields to conquer, things to prove. They were stars in the international bridge world, attracting huge followings of kibitzers, bridge's name for groupies. Back home, they were virtually anonymous outside bridge circles. Compared to chess, where Canada is nothing special, Canadian bridge teams, which rank in the top five, don't receive their fair share of publicity, they both grumble.

Any regrets?
Yes, says Murray. "Retiring without ever winning a world championship is the most upsetting thing to me by far, because there's no question in my mind that we should have won several world championships... I feel confident that if we'd played behind screens in the early stages of our careers, we'd have a few in our pockets. I leave the reason we don't to speculation."

Says Kehela: "It only matters when I think of it."

Not about to throw in his hand

I would like to clear up some misconceptions from Nora McCabe's remarkably lugubrious portrayal of me (Canada's Bridge Odd Couple Splits — Nov. 20).

While it is true that I no longer play up to my own standards, I believe that I can still hold my own in any company.

I am perfectly capable of providing my own cigars.

Eric Murray's retirement does not oblige me to commit "sati."

Sami Kehela
Toronto

I am told by one and all that Nora McCabe's article is excel-

lent, and captures some of the excitement and color of the international bridge scene.

Those informants, however, express dismay at the statement attributed to Sami Kehela that he is "no longer effective." If that is what he said, perhaps he really is a hustler.

Mr. Kehela is still Canada's most effective bridge player and still one of the best in the world, an opinion which I invite you to test by selecting your favorite partner . . . (well, perhaps I'm the hustler).

E. R. Murray
Toronto

Canada's Bridge Odd Couple Splits was a wonderful article

honoring two great bridge players, Sami Kehela and Eric Murray, and I am sure all Toronto bridge players agree with me that this recognition was long past due.

However, I take exception to the reference to Mr. Kehela as a "brooding 48-year-old bridge hustler." If ever a person does not fit the normal interpretation of a hustler, it is Mr. Kehela. He is the most respected and best loved of all the Canadian bridge players. No hustler would ever generate this worldwide respect.

Reuben Kunin
Liaison Officer
World Bridge Federation
Blonay, Switzerland