

Natural Selection

Darwin Li is 2024 King of Bridge

By Chip Dombrowski

Some people achieve remarkable things at a young age. Disney films have often celebrated fictional child prodigies as heroes. The idea of a 13-year-old engineer or robotics whiz may seem far-fetched, but there are a few out there.

Darwin Li of Richmond Hill ON remembers seeing the movie “Big Hero 6” when he was 8 and thinking he wanted to be like main character Hiro Hamada, a young robotics prodigy. So, a few years later when Darwin got interested in neuroscience, he didn’t think of it as something he wanted to do someday, after another 12 years of schooling – he decided to start doing it right away.

Darwin was finishing seventh grade in 2020 when the supply of free time got a massive stimulus from the pandemic, and he used that time to learn. With the help of science teacher Dr. Amit Morris, he taught himself all the high school- and college-level math and science he would need to start working in the field. A year later, as a high school freshman, he began doing the sort of research he might do as a grad student.

This year, just one month after turning 17, he became a published author in the *International Journal of Psychiatry* – his paper: “The Cognitive Benefits of Playing Contract Bridge in Elderly Patients with Dementia” – and is now working on a doctorate. He still has a year left of high school.

“I guess I could be called a junior neuroscientist,” Darwin said, “but I’m by no means an expert in the field.”

The King of Bridge is an annual award and scholarship given to a graduating high school senior by the ACBL Educational Foundation. Given Darwin’s tendency to work ahead of his grade level, it’s perhaps not that surprising that he managed to win it a year early. With apologies to the class of 2024, it seems the class of

2025 will be getting a second king or queen next year.

Former Canadian Bridge Federation President Nader Hanna called it an excellent choice.

“I have known Darwin for about six years now, and I have always been impressed by his poise and maturity,” Hanna said. “He is passionate about bridge, and he is always looking for ways to improve. Moreover, he is also always looking for ways to promote the game to young and old.”

Hanna’s wife, Joan Eaton, another of Darwin’s mentors, was also thrilled.

“Darwin is not only an excellent bridge player, but he is also an amazing ambassador for the game,” Eaton said.

“He is a very thoughtful, well-spoken young man who is very interested in the benefits bridge can offer to all ages. He is an advocate for bridge for the young, the not-so-young and the barely-remember-being-young. He is particularly interested in the potential for bridge to slow the mental decline in the elderly. For someone so young, he has a perspective that is much broader than that which attracts most younger people to the game.”

Darwin began learning bridge when he was 8, when his parents signed him up for a beginner class at the Toronto Youth Bridge Club in 2015. He played Friday nights with about 20 other kids. He attended his first Youth NABC in 2017 and was the top masterpoint winner the following year, when he represented District 2 in the Grand National Teams, Flight C.

At the 2019 Summer NABC in Las Vegas, when Darwin was 12, he and a team of young Canadians entered the Spingold. There were 98 teams, and they were seeded 97th, drawing a first-round match with the No. 2 Nickell team. The late Eric Kokish, the Nickell team’s coach, sat down to kibitz the youngest of his team’s opponents and watched Darwin play all day. At the end of the day, he offered to mentor Darwin, and Kokish did so for the last four years of his life.

“Eric’s unwavering belief



in my abilities gave me the confidence to push past my limits and strive for success,” Darwin said in his application. “He taught me the importance of critical thinking, of questioning assumptions and of constantly seeking to improve. He reminded me the importance of keeping a healthy mindset, or ‘staying on an even keel emotionally,’ as he liked to call it.”

Darwin became a member of Canada’s Under-16 national team, winning gold medals in transnational events at the 2022 World Youth Championships in both the U16 pairs, with regular partner Anshul Bhatt of India, and the U16 teams with Bhatt and teammates Jasper Vahk and Albert Pedmanson of Estonia. That year at the YNABC, he placed second in both the pairs and teams. Last year, he represented Canada on the U26 team in the Netherlands, playing with Olivia Laufer, a fellow Kokish mentee.

Though Darwin practices online with Bhatt every day and participates in Canada’s Junior training program, he doesn’t play much in ACBL-sanctioned events and doesn’t have a lot of masterpoints. As of early July, he needed more than 160 points to make Life Master. Though he’s made it to a handful of Toronto-area tournaments over the years, his previous one before this year’s Summer NABC was in February 2023. His last club game was in 2021, when he was serving as the director for the Mixed Inter-Club League of Toronto, an organization that held unofficial online tournaments for players in several Toronto clubs.

“It’s been a challenge to return to in-person bridge, especially with schoolwork piling up,” Darwin said. “The major events I play are WBF-sanctioned.”

He and Bhatt are currently preparing for the World Youth Transnationals in Poland, where their 2022 team will expand to include Americans Eric Xiao and Nathan Gong.

Darwin has been teaching bridge since grade four, when an elementary school teacher, who wanted to learn herself, encouraged him to organize classes during recess and lunch. He became an ACBL-accredited teacher in 2017, when he was 10. He continued teaching through elementary school and last year started a club at his high school, where two tables gather once a week to play socially. He also writes for the Unit 166 Kibitzer, edited by Andy Stark, who also runs Canada’s Junior program.

Darwin has also taught online for the Youth Bridge Association, the organization founded by 2022 King of Bridge Arthur Zhou, and recently became its president.

In his teaching experience, Darwin has been dismayed by how few students stick with the game. A group of 40 beginners will quickly drop to 20 and finish the beginner class with 10 or 12. A few years later, only one person from that group is still playing. While there has been a lot of focus on how to improve teaching so that so many beginners aren’t immediately turned off, Darwin believes

the problem is something else: the lack of a path to start playing the game as an individual without a partner.

“The game itself needs a revolutionary overhaul in terms of its playing rules, to reduce the strenuous and discouraging demands of forming partnerships, the particular flaw that hinders not only youth bridge but all players,” Darwin said. “Bridge, a partnership game – playing bridge needs a partner!? Chess doesn’t need one. That, in my opinion, is why chess is now flourishing among youth. We need to work together to develop more individual games with better and fairer formats, and more individual titles, especially for Juniors to get them started.”

He also believes research is key to drawing more interest in bridge. Along with his own research, he’s interested in the work of sociologist Samantha Punch of Scotland.

“There is a pressing need for more research into bridge,” Darwin said. “This research should aim to demonstrate and redefine the positive impacts of playing bridge beyond pastime, not only in terms of combatting neurodegenerative diseases in seniors but also in mitigating developmental disabilities in youth, such as autism and ADHD.”

When studies can conclusively show and quantify the benefits of playing bridge – and prove it’s better at developing those benefits than other activities, such as chess – Darwin believes new players will flock to bridge. (Provided they aren’t hindered by the need to find a partner.)

What he’s found so far in his own research and his review of literature in the field is quite promising. “A recent study introduced bridge to a group of patients diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Comparing their results with a control group, they found cognitive decline to be significantly lower in the bridge group.”

His current research takes it a step further, assessing the impact of bridge for delaying cognitive decline at earlier stages of minor cognitive impairment, before significant impairment set in. “I’d like to pinpoint as much as possible the key functional networks in the brain where bridge may have a significant impact on cognitive resilience,” he said.

Darwin is unsure of his college plans as he still has a year to go. He’s unsure whether he’ll make use of a scholarship he’s already received for medical school worth \$400,000.

Despite all he’s accomplished, Darwin doesn’t seem himself in Hiro from “Big Hero 6.”

“I’m nothing special, just someone with a lot of distinct areas of interest,” he said.

As he explores them, he keeps in mind what he learned from Kokish: “‘Talent starts the journey, hard work finishes it.’ He made me realize that talent is a gift, and only through hard work, dedication and perseverance can we unlock our full potential.” ■