

# Crown Prince

Blake Sanders crowned King of Bridge.

By Sue Munday

In a year when the under-40 set is making its mark on the game, another talented young player, Blake Sanders, has been named ACBL's 2011 King of Bridge. The 18-year-old Jonesboro AR resident will receive a \$1000 scholarship from the ACBL Educational Foundation in addition to seeing his name added to a roster of bridge kings who have gone on to achieve success at the highest levels of national and international play.

Sanders feels both humbled and motivated to be following in the footsteps of superstars such as Bobby Levin, Jeff Meckstroth, Steve Weinstein, Brad Moss, Eric Greco and Joel Wooldridge. With many others in the world of bridge, Sanders is cheering as a seriously good, younger generation of players seizes national titles and trophies that were once the province of more seasoned, famous names only. Following wins in prestigious pairs events at the Spring NABCs — the Platinum Pairs, the Silodor Open Pairs and the top two spots in the North American Pairs — six young guns topped that performance when they won the USA 2 spot on the Bermuda Bowl-bound team. This is the youngest U.S. squad ever to represent the country in international play.

"It's awesome!" he exclaims. "Those guys have to be pretty good to be beating the best players in the world. My ultimate goal is to be able to talk to them, play with them and learn from them."

Sanders earned his gold card in more than a year. He is a frequent face at the Jonesboro Bridge Studio, his local club. At the International Fund Game in May, Sanders and his partner, stepfather Russ

Jones, scored a whopping 84.48% game to win the event. "Sometimes everything is just right," Sanders says somewhat sheepishly. They followed that up with a 79.81% game two weeks later.

"I like to play a variation of the Italian Blue Team club system," he says, which he describes as a simpler form of Precision. Sanders plays on Bridge Base Online (BBO) — socially and when practicing for tournaments. He and his Florida-based partner, Asya



**King of Bridge**

Ladyzhensky, competed recently in the Under 21 Youth Team trials hosted by the United States Bridge Federation via BBO, but failed to qualify. "We had a bad final session or we might have earned a berth on the team," he says. "Maybe it's just as well. The tournament is the same week I start college."

Sanders was introduced to bridge as a caddy at the 2007 Spring NABC in St. Louis. That same summer, he caddied at the Nashville NABC, where

he met Ladyzhensky, who was also caddying. But it wasn't until about a year and a half ago that he actually started playing the game. Before then, baseball (he pitched for four years), football, bowling and participating in National Honor Society activities consumed most of his extracurricular time.

Sanders will be entering Arkansas State University in the fall and plans to study international business. "School comes easy," he says. "It's bridge that comes hard." As many before him have promised, "I'm going to put school first, but I'll play as much bridge as I can." While he can envision playing bridge full time someday, "I hope I get out of school before I make that decision."

The King (or Queen) of Bridge title recognizes a high school senior's overall participation in the local bridge community in addition to the accumulation of masterpoints. Sanders helps out at local tournaments. He also makes himself available to duplicate newcomers for advice or consolation, and plans, perhaps, to teach "when I learn a little bit more myself." □