

Around the world with 52 cards

by Migry Zur Campanile

Operation Cherry Blossom: NEC 2005

“Veni, vidi, vici.” The famous phrase used by Caesar to communicate to the Roman Senate his whirlwind conquest of Gaul (much too early as it turned out) could well have been modified to “Veni, vidi..came second!” to succinctly sum up the outcome of the 2004 NEC Cup. A great result which however, like all second places, still left that unpleasant “what might have been if . . .” feeling in the back of one’s mind. Naturally we were all looking forward to our next visit to Japan and to our chance to go one better in this year’s edition of the event. Our optimism was, however, somewhat dampened when we received the list of the participating teams by Tadayoshi Nakatani, the tireless organizer of the event on behalf of the Japanese Contract Bridge League. It was a similar field to the year before but with the addition of four or five top class teams to make even simply surviving the qualifying Swiss and reaching the knock-out stage a much more daunting prospect. Still the chance of a battle of wits against Gawrys, Kwiecien, Helgemo, Robson, Balicki, Zmudzinski and many other top class players was very enticing, come what may.

This time Michael Barel and I arrived a couple of days early to do a little bit of sight-seeing in Tokyo, and one of our selected destinations was the Tsukiji fish market, whose history goes back all the way

to the beginning of the Edo period, in the 16th century, when the first Shogun of the Tokugawa family invited fishermen from Osaka to settle there in order to supply the area with fresh fish. So it was that we bravely set out from our hotel at the ungodly hour of 5 a.m. to make our way there. The first threads of light reflecting against the Tokyo skyline and the streets empty of the seemingly perennial crowd that populates them were an astounding backdrop to our expedition. Despite its alleged popularity as a tourist hot-spot, we were quite surprised to see that we were the only “gaijin” in the cool, vast halls of the building but this seemed to bother no one. Some



people who knew a little English went to some extraordinary lengths to describe to us what they were selling or asked where we were from. Most stallholders gladly showed off their wares, offering a small sample with the word “dozo,” (“please eat”). We replied, “arigato,” and made a point of always accepting what was offered, however odd it looked. It was always delicious, although we often had no idea what we were eating.

The people selling the larger fishes possessed impressive collections of knives and were obviously showing off their skill with their blades when they saw us standing next to them, camera in hand. Some of the knives had incredibly long blades and we watched in astonishment as one man neatly

and effortlessly divided a meter long fish in half — head to tail — with one smooth stroke, a feat worthy of a Samurai.

Tuna stalls were everywhere. Each one had stacks of huge headless, frozen tuna carcasses piled at the back. When someone requested a piece of the fish, the vendor simply pulled a carcass off the pile, placed it on a band saw and, expertly sizing the fish to decide where to make the cut, sliced off the requested steak.

After a few hours of wandering around the stalls, our stomachs began grumbling and we headed back towards the subway. Some of the shops that had been closed on our way there were now open for business, and, in fact, were small restaurants. Each restaurant was tiny, with no more than a counter and a row of stools. The customers were the local workers — men and women seated at the counter, dressed in their work clothes. It was breakfast time and people were slurping bowls of noodles or eating sushi and sashimi. Clearly this would be a far more interesting breakfast experience than any hotel restaurant. We poked our head in a few of them, looking for one that appealed to us and had free seats. After about 10 minutes, we found a place selling sushi and sashimi that had open seats near the door. Sashimi for breakfast was going to be a first for us. The proprietress greeted us curtly with the standard “irashaimase” (“Welcome”), and the other diners briefly glanced up at us before returning to their eating and conversations. We quickly got served what turned to be the freshest and most delicious fish we had in Japan.

The following day we made our way to Yokohama, where we met our teammates, Israel and Doron Yadlin, who had just flown in from Tel Aviv. The tournament

started well and we quickly soared to third place after the first day. We went out to celebrate and on our way back we had the clearest sign ever that this year was going to be “the” year: The flashing clock encased in the huge panoramic wheel on the pier outside our hotel greeted us on the way back with a prophetic “11.11”!

Eventually we squeaked by in the last of the qualifying places, edging the Canadian team thanks to an obscure form of tie-breaker called “IMP quotient.”

The quarter-finals brought a few surprises. The two Japanese teams that had unexpectedly qualified proving their mettle by defeating their more famous opponents, Japan Open beating Poland (Gawrys-Kowalsky, Kwiecien-Bizon) 74-50 and Japan Hana emerging victorious over USA (Casen-Landen; Mori-Koneru) 67-54.

Russia/Poland (Balicki-Zmudzinski; Grovov-Dubin) had the best of the Dutch Open team in their all-European encounter while we had an unexpected easy time against the star-studded team of Robson-Shugart and El Ahmady-Sadek, running up a 135-43 win. In the semifinals we defeated our Japanese opponents and that meant that we got to the final for the second year running! Our opponents, however, were going to be Russia-Poland, a team with a truly impressive pedigree, which was given the extraordinary odds of 5-1 to win by non-resident bookmaker Drew Casen. The final was a hard-fought affair that saw us leading most of the time but with Russia-Poland snapping dangerously at our heels. The point where I knew that we had clinched victory was when my partner, Michael Barel, topped an impressively steady performance by making short work of a rather difficult 4♥ contract.

North dealer North
 None vul ♠ Q 6 2
 ♥ Q
 ♦ J 10 5 4
 ♣ A K J 5 3

West	East
♠ 8 7 5 3	♠ K J 10 9 4
♥ K 10	♥ 9 7 6
♦ Q 7 6 3	♦ A K 9
♣ 8 4 2	♣ Q 7

South
 ♠ A
 ♥ A J 8 5 4 3 2
 ♦ 8 2
 ♣ 10 9 6

Open Room

West	North	East	South
<i>Israel</i>	<i>Dubin</i>	<i>Doron</i>	<i>Gromov</i>
—	1 ♦*	1 ♠	2 ♦ (hearts)
2 ♠	pass	pass	3 ♥
(all pass)			

*Precision, but 4+ diamonds

Closed Room

West	North	East	South
<i>Balicki</i>	<i>Campanile</i>	<i>Zmudzinski</i>	<i>Barel</i>
—	1 ♣	1 ♠	2 ♥
3 ♠*	pass	pass	4 ♥
(all pass)			

*preemptive

With the Russians playing in 3♥ and us in 4♥, there was sure to be a swing. A spade was led at both tables to the 9 and ace, and a low heart went to West's king. Israel Yadlin continued spades. Gromov ruffed, drew trumps, led to the ♣A, ruffed himself in with a spade, and led the ♣10 to dummy's king, deliberately playing on an anti-percentage ♣Q offside to succeed against

the likely line in 4♥ adopted at the other table: +230. (He wanted the ♣Q to be off, so that 4♥ would fail in the other room.)

The stakes were higher for Barel in 4♥. Balicki switched to the ♦3 when he won the ♥K. Barel called low from dummy and East took with the ♦9 and played the king and ace. Barel ruffed, drew trumps, led to the ♣A, ruffed dummy's last diamond, and eventually dropped the ♣Q, believing West would not have bid 3♠ with that card in addition to the ♥K and ♦Q; +420. This correct view gave us 5 imps to increase our lead to 30 imps, 154-124 with only five boards to go in the match.

Note that Barel could have made the hand on a flashier line, thanks to East-West cashing the diamonds. He ruffs the third round of diamonds and runs the hearts, setting up a show-up squeeze on West in diamonds and clubs. Once West sheds one of his clubs to retain the ♦Q, declarer can play the top clubs making his game. While this option is probably the most appealing to readers, I can tell you from my experience that the card-reading skills demonstrated by Barel's line are just as impressive despite the simplicity of his solution.

The final score was 158-127 and the huge thrill of such a win will stay for us for some time. *Sayonara!*

