

# *I Love This Game*



**SABINE AUKEN**

World's #1 Ranked Woman Bridge Player

*edited by Mark Horton  
foreword by Zia Mahmood*

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# Foreword

I first saw Sabine Auken (Zenkel then) on VuGraph around twenty years ago in Turku, Finland. I was there to do commentary on the European Bridge Championships, as at that time of year the weather was too cold to play golf.

Being a conscientious commentator, I neither noticed the fact that she was a stunning blonde nor that she was wrapped in a closefitting leopard skin mini-dress — naturally I was totally absorbed in the magic of her card play. Since then, with the rest of the world, I have followed her progress from skilled competitor to multiple World Champion as a fan, a friend and even, on pleasant occasions, a partner.

While she and her long time partner, Daniela von Arnim, were taking over the mantle of the premier ladies pair, she married and moved from her native Germany to the Chicago Board of Options Exchange. A few years later she married again, finally settling in Copenhagen with her husband, Jens Auken, a prominent lawyer and bridge champion.

Of her many victories, none have been more thrilling than that in the Venice Cup Final in Paris in 2001. Her bridge story makes fascinating reading, but if you asked her for her greatest achievement, it would be her two gorgeous sons, Maximilian and Jens Christian.

Sabine has proved herself equal to the best of men — is she the best woman player ever? That I leave to your judgment as you follow her career and observe her brilliancies. You will look into her mind and life as she reveals all her secrets, except the one I really want the answer to: Whatever happened to *that* dress?

*Zia Mahmood*  
*London*  
*September 2005*



# Foreword 2

The atmosphere is charged with electricity. You are part of a vast crowd, and the air is rent with chants of “Allez la France” and “Deutschland, Deutschland.” (With France ‘at home’ there are considerably more of the former.) A mixture of groans and cheers greets every action. You will have guessed that we are in Paris for the final of a major sporting contest but if you think that we are at the Stade de France watching the final of the World Cup you are wrong. (Although strangely enough, the preliminary stages of this sporting contest were held in that very stadium.) No, we are in a vast ballroom at the Concorde Lafayette hotel, where it is standing room only for a bridge match — the last sixteen boards of the 2001 Venice Cup final between Germany and France.

Let me introduce the *dramatis personae*:

In the blue corner — sorry, in the Open Room — representing Germany, are Sabine Auken and Daniela von Arnim. Sabine’s many achievements include once holding the speed record for becoming a Life Master in the USA, a feat she managed in 6 weeks in 1989. She and Dany have been partners for as long as I can remember and they have a host of major titles including a Venice Cup, the one they helped to win in Beijing in 1995. Two things might help them here: one, that in 1995 they easily defeated France in the semifinals, and two, that they came from behind in the final session in Beijing to take the World title. Oh yes, I forgot to mention the small detail that they are 47 IMPs in arrears in this current match. They are opposed by the brilliant Catherine D’Ovidio and Veronique Bessis who, like their German counterparts, are used to standing on the podium at the end of a major event.

In the Closed Room, Germany have Pony Nehmert and Andrea Rauscheid (now Reim). Pony — a nickname derived from her curly hair that has stuck — and Andrea — I christened her the *Wunderkind* on account of her age — were on the team in Beijing and delivered a title-winning card in the last session. (Andrea lives for the game — once when asked out for dinner by a hopeful suitor, she replied, “No thanks, I have my Bridge magazine.”) They are mainstays of the German team. Just in case they need additional incentive, if they win, the German Bridge Federation has promised to buy them new dresses for the Victory banquet.

They are facing Bénédicte Cronier and Sylvie Willard. Bénédicte's numerous titles include the Generali World Individual Championship. I have enjoyed some happy days with her and her equally famous husband, Philippe, at their apartment in Paris. I interviewed her partner Sylvie Willard in Faro after one of her many championship victories. If I listed all the titles these four players have captured — to paraphrase a line from *Jaws* — we would need a bigger book.

It's no secret that I tend to cheer for Germany (except when England plays them at soccer!) but the 47-IMP deficit is significant. The French are very close to the ultimate prize — will they show any sign of nerves?

Join us now as Sabine describes one of the most exciting matches in the history of the game and at the same time takes you into her world of top-level bridge.

Dr. Siegbert Tarrasch, a famous German chess Grandmaster, wrote, "Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make men happy." That bridge can have a similar effect, Sabine shows in this book.

*Mark Horton*

*November 2005*

# *Introduction*

With just sixteen of the original ninety-six deals left in the final of the 2001 Venice Cup, Germany trailed France by 47 IMPs. If you were looking for a sporting metaphor you would perhaps equate it to being down 0-3 at half time in a soccer match. In a contest between equally matched contestants, that sort of lead does not normally get overturned. The players were to ply their skills on VuGraph in front of a huge, noisy and mostly partisan audience, for as luck would have it, the venue was Paris.

There we were, just sixteen deals to go in the final of the 2001 Venice Cup; in a couple of hours it would be all over. A series of unlikely events had led to both teams being there. The French had originally failed to qualify when the formidable squad of Bessis-d'Ovidio and Cronier-Willard decided not to compete. They wanted to play in the national trials, competing to represent France at the European Championships in the Open Series, and the French Bridge Federation, in its wisdom, decreed that if they wanted to play in the open trials, they couldn't also participate in the women's trials. As a result, a totally new French women's team appeared at the 2001 European Championships in Tenerife. Ultimately, it failed to finish among the top five teams there, which was the condition for a berth in the Venice Cup.

The 2001 Venice Cup was due to be played in Bali in November. The events of September 11th and the fear and insecurity that followed in their wake had made it impossible for the World Bridge Federation to carry through with its original plan. José Damiani, the WBF president, managed to accomplish the unbelievable feat of moving the World Championships from Bali to Paris in only a few weeks. As the new host country, France was entitled to place a team in both the Venice Cup and the Bermuda Bowl. The French had learned a valuable lesson and were in no doubt that their women's team should include Bessis-d'Ovidio and Cronier-Willard.

Our own German team would not have been able to participate with its usual line-up in Bali either. My partner Daniela was four months pregnant with her first child and was advised by her doctor not to travel to Bali. She was supposed to be replaced by Anne Gladiator, which would have been the revival of a very old partnership. Anne and I won our very first international championship together in 1985, the EC Women's Pairs

Championships in Bordeaux. Anne was very excited about this opportunity and invested a lot of time and effort in discussing system notes with me and making family arrangements that would allow her to take the 2½ weeks off to go to Bali.

When the championship site was moved from Bali to Paris, Daniela became available again, which created an unusual situation. Who had the rightful place on the team? There were many different issues to consider, both from an ethical and a sports point of view. Needless to say this was quite an emotional affair. Did you really believe bridge was only about playing cards? It's about time you changed your mind. In the end Daniela was back on the team and Anne was left on the sidelines. I can only guess how disappointed she must have been, though she hardly showed it. When I returned home from Paris she had sent me an email congratulating the whole team on our success and stating that she felt she had contributed to this success significantly — by not playing!

Was this destiny? The scenario that would have been impossible in Bali had become reality in Paris: it was France against Germany in the final of the Venice Cup. The French had outclassed the field in the round robin and had won every one of their knockout matches in superior fashion. Our own way through the round robin and the knockouts had been much rockier and our troubles had continued into the final. After a disastrous start we had actually managed to climb back to almost level, only to see the French strike back immediately in the penultimate segment. They were leading us by 47 IMPs going into the last sixteen deals. That seemed like a lot to overcome, but make no mistake, we were not disheartened.

The French were playing very solidly, but bridge is a funny game. Our systems were sufficiently different from those of the French that it seemed possible to get all the deficit back and more. There was no need to try for swings by making unusual bidding decisions; the difference in methods could be expected to take care of that. Our strategy was simple: Play well and be lucky!

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## *Mini Comeback*

On the first board of the championship session, Daniela and I would be playing against Catherine d'Ovidio and Veronique Bessis in the Open Room on VuGraph. Our teammates, Pony Nehmert and Andrea Rauscheid would be playing against Bénédicte Cronier and Sylvie Willard in the Closed Room. As usual, the start of play in the Open Room was delayed to give time for results from the Closed Room to come in for comparison in the VuGraph theater. For security reasons, however, all players had to be in place from the start of official playing time.

You might expect there to be a lot of tension in the air, but you would be wrong; anticipation, yes, but hostile tension, no. We were all sitting on the floor chatting and exchanging our views on life before the start of play. This is part of what makes coming back to the championships again and again a fantastic experience. It is like being part of a large family. It is wonderful to know that you share an interest with friends from all over the world.

But when it was time to sit down at the table it was a different story. There would be no favors; it would be a stern fight. Who would be best when it mattered?

**Board 1.** Dealer North. Neither Vul.

	♠ 4 2 ♥ 9 5 4 ♦ A 8 5 3 2 ♣ A Q 10		
♠ K Q 8 ♥ K Q 3 2 ♦ Q J 10 ♣ K 6 4	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;">                     N                      W                  E                      S                 </div>	♠ 7 6 5 3 ♥ A J 10 ♦ 6 ♣ J 8 7 3 2	
	♠ A J 10 9 ♥ 8 7 6 ♦ K 9 7 4 ♣ 9 5		

*Closed Room*

<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
<i>Andrea</i>	<i>Cronier</i>	<i>Pony</i>	<i>Willard</i>
	pass	pass	pass
1NT <sup>1</sup>	all pass		

1. 14-16 HCP.

The defenders started with three rounds of diamonds and declarer, sitting West, used dummy's heart entries to play spades towards her hand. South won the second spade and played back her remaining diamond. When North left her partner on lead the club switch meant one down, -50.

*Open Room*

<b>West</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>East</b>	<b>South</b>
<i>Bessis</i>	<i>Sabine</i>	<i>d'Ovidio</i>	<i>Dany</i>
	1NT <sup>1</sup>	pass	pass
dbl	redbl	2♣	2♥
2NT	pass	3NT	dbl
pass	pass	4♣	pass
pass	dbl	all pass	

1. 10-12 HCP.

In the Open Room, the redouble showed a five-card suit other than clubs. Unwilling to let the auction die in two clubs, Dany bid two hearts. The

French pair now lost their way, but Catherine judged incredibly well, smelling out what had happened, and pulled 3NT doubled to four clubs. This was also doubled, of course, but would not be quite as disastrous as 3NT.

Dany led the four of diamonds, which in our methods indicated either a doubleton or a four-card suit. Winning the first trick with the ace I tried to figure out what was going on and finally decided that Dany's two heart bid must have been meant as pass or correct. Although it was not something we had ever discussed, it was just bridge logic. The lead was clearly from a four-card suit and we had no more diamond tricks coming. However, for her double of 3NT, Dany surely had a major-suit ace. It didn't matter which one; with two sure trump entries, I would always be able to arrange a spade ruff. So at Trick 2 I switched to a low spade, which Dany of course ducked. When I regained the lead, I could play a spade to her ace and get my spade ruff for down two and 300 points. First blood to us. It wasn't much, but it was a start: 6 IMPs on the long way back.

After the match was over, a lot of people remarked on the fact that we had been able to generate points in a set of deals that was basically not very swingy. Indeed, some commentators even described them as dull. It helped that we were playing different methods from those adopted by the French. The IMPs won on the first board can easily be credited to our use of the mini-notrump.

When deals involving a mini-notrump opening are reported, one often reads comments like: "Reaching the good game was made easy by the methods." "Once again a success for the mini-notrump." "As soon as North knew that South had any values, she had every reason to go past game." "XY's mini-notrump jockeyed the opponents into an unmakeable game." These statements pinpoint two big advantages of the mini-notrump:

1. Partner immediately knows the general hand type, including high-card range and approximate distribution. This often makes it easier to determine the final denomination and level of contract. Hands that open a mini-notrump are usually passed in any standard system, but of course the pass could be a variety of hands from 0-11 HCP. If your system requires you to pass initially, by the time the bidding gets back to you as opener, the opponents' actions may have made it impossible to describe your hand any longer. Compare that with being able to open a mini-notrump. A good example is this deal from the European Championships in Montecatini in 1997, where our teammates Pony and Andrea outbid our Italian opponents.