



Dot Fleischer: A Mah Jongg Teacher Inspires Generations

by Susan Urbanetti

On a peninsula rich in nature, it's a sound for all seasons: the "twittering of the sparrows," which signals the start of another game of mah jongg among Cape Cod's growing community of players.

A game of Chinese origin, introduced to the U.S. in the early 1900s, mah jongg is played with 152 tiles. When shuffled, the tiles make a twittering sound that fans describe as melodious and magical, and critics pan as discordant and deafening. But there's no silencing the Cape's passionate players, many of whom have learned from Cape Cod's master teacher, Dorothy Fleischer.

"I've taught more than 1,000 students since I began giving lessons in 1998," says Dot, a sharp and spirited 85-year-old Brewster resident, who maintains a log of every class and student she teaches, both private and community-based.

As her students graduate, they convince their friends to learn, form their own mah jongg groups, and join the many walk-in games held in community centers across Cape Cod.

Devoting some 16 hours a week to mah jongg, "I feel like I'm running a small business," says Dot. That business is a cornerstone of the new life Dot built for herself in 1997 when her husband died and she wondered, "What am I going to do with myself?"

Exhibiting the take-charge approach to life that's a hallmark of Dot's personality, she spoke with directors at community centers and adult education councils, spread the word among friends and acquaintances, and soon began booking classes.

Since then, a steady supply of beginning and intermediate students has taken her into homes and centers in Orleans, Chatham, Brewster, Harwich, Dennis, Yarmouth and Hyannis.

"No student is unteachable," Dot says. "I've had students who were convinced they'd never learn, but then the light bulb went on."

While Dot's warmth and patience calm nervous students, her firm dedication to rules contains wayward learners. The rules she teaches are those published by the National Mah Jongg League Inc., which was formed in 1937 and promotes its rules as the official ones of the American game.

Each year, to keep the game fresh and challenging, the league issues a new card of standard hands. In early April, players excitedly await the arrival of the new cards, so they can learn the hands and be ready for play.



Using the tiles they draw, mah jongg players select and compose one of the standard hands appearing on the card.

Experienced players see patterns quickly, switch hands smoothly if the one they're working on goes "dead," evaluate their chances of success by monitoring discarded tiles, and block other players from assembling winning hands – all within the 10 to 15 minutes of playing time typically logged by advanced players (beginners can take upwards of 50 minutes to complete a game.)

Although players need to understand some math fundamentals – such as odd, even and consecutive numbers – the game's priority skills are concentration and memory. At the more advanced level of play, mah jongg's strategy "is as challenging as bridge's," says Dot. "The game makes you think."

But for many Cape players, mah jongg is as much about making friends as it is devising a winning strategy.

Although quiet reigns during play, the minutes between hands – when tiles are shuffled, stacked into a four-sided wall and drawn – are rich with conversation. It is this social engagement that Bari Pearlman and Phyllis Heller explore in their 1998 documentary, "Mah-Jongg: The Tiles That Bind" (available on DVD from the Brewster Ladies Library.)

Dot knows first-hand the richness of the game's social aspects. Throughout her life, beginning in the late 1940s as a newlywed in Vermont, and in the years that followed, as she and her husband moved to Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey and back again to Massachusetts, mah jongg opened the door to new circles of friends. Where there wasn't a ready-made group, Dot taught.

Most of her students, then and now, are women. Of the 1,000-plus students Dot has taught on Cape Cod, she estimates that five percent have been men. Mah jongg's reputation as a women's game seems largely an American phenomenon, since many Chinese men play.

Mah jongg's reputation as a game for older people is being reshaped by Internet players. By visiting such sites as Mahjong Online (mahjongonline.net) and Game Show Network (gsn.com), players can engage – as a solitaire or foursome – in computerized game play featuring tile-based strategies, and Asian-inspired soundtracks and graphics.

Tapping into the interest generated by computerized versions of the game, the [National Mah Jongg League](#) offers software of its own, which engages players in its game rules and standard hands.

Many traditional mah jongg players express little interest in online versions of the game, believing these versions diminish the pleasure of several of the game's most appealing aspects.

While sociability and friendship rank high on the list, players also speak warmly of the twittering and clacking sounds the tiles make when striking one another, and of the soothing ritual involved in building the square starting wall.

Players, too, appreciate the sensual, tactile beauty felt in handling the polished tiles. Tiles from the early 1900s, when mah jongg was a pastime of the wealthy, were made of materials like ebony, ivory, bamboo, bone and Bakelite; images on the tiles – dragons, winds, flowers – were hand carved and painted; and the four-drawer chests used for storing tiles were made of oak, bamboo and teakwood.

Today, tiles and racks are made primarily of plastic, brightly colored in shades of green, red, purple and blue.

While Cape Cod players appreciate the beauty of the tiles, what keeps them coming back to the table are the friendships they form and the communities they join. As their numbers continue to swell, thanks to Dot's tutelage, they expect to keep on twittering.

Susan J. Urbanetti lives in Chatham. After a 30-year career in corporate writing, she plunged into the world of creative writing.

She has workshopped her essays at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and Castle Hill Center for the Arts in Truro. Her essays have appeared in Cape Cod View and Cape Cod Life (online).

Dorothy Fleischer teaches Mah Jongg classes for Beginners and Up through
[Nauset Community Education](#)

See online course registrations for dates and times. Register online or call (508) 255-4300.

She also teaches at various community centers throughout Cape Cod. Ask your local recreation department to set up a class for you and your friends!