



Master Solvers Panel



By John Swanson
Lancaster, Calif.

Thanks to our June panel: JoAnna Stansby, Dublin, Calif., Paul Ivaska, Las Vegas, Jerry Gaer, Phoenix, Ifiti Baqui, Irvine, Calif., and David Weiss, Pasadena, Calif. The problems this month are taken from the round of 32 in the Vanderbilt Teams event at the national tournament held in Memphis a few months ago. The second-seeded team of Frank Nickell, Ralph Katz, Eric Rodwell, Jeff Meckstroth, Zia Mahmood, and Bob Hamman were facing a team headed by Juan Carlos Ventin of Barcelona, Spain. The Nickell team has rewarded their fans with a number of spectacular comebacks in the past few years. They would need another one this time out.

Problem 1.

Both sides vulnerable, IMPs
You are South holding:

♠AQJ1065 ♥87652 ♦5 ♣5

South	West	North	East
—	—	—	Pass
?			

Gaer: 2♠. Less downside than that with any other action.

J.S.: What are the risks and rewards of the possible initial actions? A high level preempt may gain because the opponents cannot safely enter the auction or exchange information. The risk is that partner won't appreciate the value of secondary heart honors or heart length. A pass doesn't offer the potential preemptive rewards, but allows for the possibility of showing both majors. The in-between 2♠ opening incurs the risk of missing a heart fit without getting the full benefits of a higher level preempt. The passers have cogent arguments:

Weiss: Pass. Although I preempt more freely than most folks do, this is not the right hand for putting the ball in the air. I have the boss suits, so am not too worried about being blown out. I plan to show both of my suits at my next turn, unless the auction convinces me not to do so. I do have the values for a 2♠ opening, but partner will not realize his heart holding is crucial to our prospects.

If I were told that my preemptor's license would be revoked if I passed, I would try 4♣; at least I get to game when it makes.

Ivaska: Pass. Preempts in second seat should be straight out of the book, since East's pass dramatically increases the probability of partner holding a good hand. This holding obviously is not found in any book with which I'm familiar (at least if we're discussing preempting opposite an unpassed partner). If I were to preempt with this hand, I would find partner with ♠7♥AKJxx♦Axxx♣xxx or something similar, scoring +200 or +650, neither of which will compare favorably with +1430, and this example includes only a good fitting 12 HCP. Unsuccessful preempts of this nature are also quite destructive of partnership confidence. If someone were to put the proverbial gun to my head and force me not to pass, I would test my luck with 1♠. After all, this hand contains only six losers if a fit can be found.

By the way, in third seat, I would probably try 3♠, though I'd prefer to have the nine of spades.

J.S.: In the Vanderbilt, South for the Ventin team passed and heard his partner overcall West's 1♦ opening bid with 1♥. Spades no longer held any interest as a trump suit. 4♥ made with an overtrick. For the Nickell team, Meckstroth opened 3♠ and his partner had no reason to bid on with a single-

ton spade. This was one of the deals which put Nickell down -36 midway through the third quarter.

I might well have chosen 3♠ also, as did:

Baqai: 3♠. Choices are 3♠, 4♠ or pass. Based on the texture of the suit and playing strength, I favor a spade preempt and would settle for 3♠. Another possible approach is to open 2♣ and respond with 4♥ over partner's 2NT inquiry.

Stansby: 3♠. My second seat preempts are conservative. In first or third seat I would open 4♣.

J.S.: Unlucky seat position this time.

Problem 2.

Neither side vulnerable, IMPs
You are South holding:

♠2 ♥K6 ♦QJ104 ♣KQ9754

South	West	North	East
—	—	—	3♥
Pass	Pass	3♠	Pass
?			

Ivaska: 3NT. I'm not going to guess that precisely 3♠ is the right spot, and 3NT is clearly the most likely game (if indeed there is one). In fact, partner will have only a five-card suit much of the time, in which case 3♠ will likely fail miserably. So bidding 3NT will not be jeopardizing a certain plus score in search of a speculative game. Should North be highly distributional, she/he can bid again, another advantage of keeping the bidding open.

Stansby: 3NT. This hand is a guessing game; it could be right to play five or six of a minor.

J.S.: I would guess 3NT. As Paul points out, there is little upside to passing 3♠, and partner will bid over 3NT with some distributional hands.

Baqai: 4♣. A tough hand to tackle with 3NT and 4♣ as the likely choices. An interesting challenge is partner's interpretation of 4♣ - as natural or a cuebid. If I go with the 4♣ bid, I would want to follow up with 4NT over partner's 4♣ re-bid with the intention of showing clubs and diamonds, and leading to a further test of partnership agreements. A downside to 3NT is the potential of a much larger minus score if a key card is in the wrong hand.

A lot of food for partnership bidding, but at the table I would go with 4♣.

J.S.: 4♣ is forcing and should be treated as natural. On some hands you might have spade slam aspirations, but partner won't know this unless you raise spades on the next round.

Gaer: 4♣. Too much to pass, so I might as well show what I've got.

Weiss: 4♣. I would like to pass, as I expect us not to make anything much. But 3♠ is unlikely to be our best spot. Taking a positive view, partner could have ♠AQJxxx♥xx♦Kx♣Axx or ♠KJ10xxx♥Ax♦Kx♣Axx, where 5♣ is good. I will forego 3NT, which requires partner to have a heart card and a club card, in which case 5♣ will usually be okay.

Over my 4♣, if partner rebids 4♣, I'll pass and hope there's no booming double.

An interesting decision arises if he instead rebids 4♦. Opposite a pointed two-suiter, my high cards will not pull their weight and I'll pass, prepared to apologize if we have missed a game.

J.S.: Partner did remove 3NT to 4♦, holding: ♠AK1043♥AQ♦87532♣3. A pass of 4♦ would have resulted in a plus score, but I regard passing as anti-percentage and anti-partnership. Partner will think that 4♦ is forcing. The Spanish team was down one in 5♣. At the other table Rodwell did not

remove Meckstroth's 3NT response. This was slated for down four (!) but inexplicitly West shifted to a low spade, rather than continuing hearts, after winning the second trick with the ♦A. Meckstroth, with no other hope for a ninth trick inserted the ♠10 from dummy - and it held. Making 3NT!

This was worth 10 IMPs to Nickell. Despite the windfall they were still down 24.

Problem 3.

Both sides vulnerable, IMPs
You are South holding:

♠Q65 ♥93 ♦865 ♣AJ1085

South	West	North	East
—	Pass	1NT	Pass
Pass	2♣*	Pass	2♦**
Pass	2♥	Pass	Pass
?			

* Majors
** You choose

J.S.: Would you have bid previously in the auction?

Ivaska: Pass. If I could bid a clearly natural 2NT now, I would, because there's definitely a danger of a double partial swing and partner should be able to play the hand accurately. However, as it is, I think North might regard 2NT as takeout, so I won't risk a fiasco, especially since we should have a fair chance to defeat 2♥ and, at IMPs, I just want to be plus.

Yes, I would have bid 2NT over 2♦ to forestall the development of this predicament in which we now find ourselves. Partner wouldn't have taken that as takeout for the minors since I would have doubled 2♥ with such a holding.

Gaer: Pass. Very dangerous to try to create a swing here when we may already have one.

Stansby: Pass. I would pass the 1NT opening and bid 2NT natural directly over the 2♦ bid: this shows the value of my hand and conceals my LHO's longest suit. On the given auction the delayed 2NT over 2♥ (instead of directly over 2♦) would be for takeout, since you could have bid a natural 2NT on the previous round. I don't want to risk partner playing 3♦ when the suit rates to be breaking poorly and held over the opener, so I pass 2♥ and lead a trump.

Weiss: 3♣. I don't like letting the opponents play in a two-level contract without our side having explored its fits. Sure, I could be wrong if East was forced to choose a major with 2-2-4-5, but that is unlikely, and I do have the safety offered by a strong suit.

I didn't have anything convenient to do earlier, so I agree with the previous passes.

Baqai: 3♣. Mitch and I, by agreement, play double in the balancing seat to indicate ownership, but promise at least three cards in opponent's suit. I'll settle for 3♣.

J.S.: The comments by the panel make it quite clear that it is necessary to have agreements about the meaning of double and 2NT ... not only on this round, but the previous round. I would treat a double here as takeout. The likelihood of having sufficient hearts and high cards to make a penalty double after this auction seems quite small. The Baqui-Dunitz agreement is also quite sound. I would not pass with East/West in a probable eight-card, maybe even a nine-card fit at the two level. In Memphis, Rodwell was able to open a forcing 1♣ with the North cards, and Meckstroth, with the South hand, bid a shaded 2♦ showing five or more clubs with game values. Declarer would have been tested with a spade lead, but with the actual heart lead 3NT could not be defeated.

At the other table, after this auction, West played 2♥ off two, although it might have been held to down one. This deal occurred at the end of the third quarter and reduced the Nickell deficit to 17 IMPs.

Problem 4.

Both sides vulnerable, IMPs
You are South holding:

♠AQ73 ♥8 ♦KQ75 ♣KJ63

South	West	North	East
1♦	1♥	Dbl*	2♦**
?			

* Four spades
** Heart raise

Baqai: 3♠. Bidding 2♠ appears way too conservative and 4♠/3♥ a bit too aggressive, leaving 3♠ as the most descriptive

bid. I am not sure as to the subtle hidden nuance behind this problem.

J.S.: Stay tuned - I'll try to be shockingly explicit.

Stansby: 3♠. Shortage of aces and no real trick source makes the hand not quite good enough to force to game.

Ivaska: 3♠. A straightforward value bid. Partner should be able to infer my heart shortness and therefore be well placed to judge the degree of fit. This is a nice hand, but it does have a considerable disadvantage, i.e., the striking lack of spot cards. (The highest spot card is an 8, and it's a singleton.)

J.S.: I should have changed it to a 7. The legendary Mike Smolen, along with Kerri Shuman (Sanborn), believed that a 7 was singleton more frequently than other spot cards. This might have come from Barry Crane. Paul must be from that school also (see his example hand in problem 1).

Weiss: 3♥. I really have a 3½ spade raise, but choose to go low because I have the dreaded 4-4-4-1 pattern, which usually plays disappointingly. Also, my spot cards are really weak and I have a lot of quacks. Moreover, I know that partner has only four spades. A ninth trump is often very helpful in the play, and our methods have told me we don't have one. If 4♣ is to be a good contract, partner will need high cards ... and he will be looking at them.

J.S.: 4-3-3-3 is boring and 7-5-1-0 is exciting, but 4-4-4-1 dreaded?

Gaer: 3♥. A mini-splinter raise of spades, if partner is on the same wavelength. We could have anywhere from nine to twelve tricks, so let partner do the investigating.

J.S.: I expected a unanimous choice of 3♥. In modern expert bidding a jump reverse shows invitational or better values with shortness in the jumped suit - a splinter. The original convention required game values, but it was discovered that a wider range of hands could be used because responder can inquire whether the jump was based on game interest or slam interest. (Actually, in the original convention, devised by Monroe Ingberman, responder jumped in the suit where he had length, a "fragment" bid.)

Opener, by showing his distribution, allows responder to better evaluate his hand. Obviously, secondary honors across from a singleton have little value.

Early in the fourth quarter of the Vanderbilt, both South players faced this bidding situation. The Ventin team player bid 3♠ and his partner passed, holding: ♠J1086♥J63♦Q10♣A864.

Meckstroth bid 4♠, but after a 3♥ splinter, Rodwell, with nothing wasted in hearts and a couple of working tens, would have bid 4♠ anyway. The spade game cannot be defeated, but Rodwell, trying to guard against a 4-1 trump split, went set with spades 3-2 and the side suits slightly unfavorable.

This was a devastating swing; a possible gain of 10 IMPs instead became a loss of six.

Problem 5.

East/West vulnerable, IMPs
You are South holding:

♠3 ♥J6532 ♦KJ7 ♣AK53

South	West	North	East
—	Pass	1♦	Pass
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♣*	Pass	3♠	Pass
?			

*Artificial, game force

Baqai: 4♣. The trick on this hand is to find the most expeditious path to slam exploration. Bidding 4♦ seems straightforward but it is fraught with trouble on the next round of bidding. If opener bids 5♦, what should South do? North could hold ♠KQJxx♥xx♦AQ10xxx♣— ... or clubs and hearts could be switched.

I like 4♣ as an advance cuebid, planning on showing the diamond fit on the next round of bidding, but giving North an opportunity to cuebid at the four-level. With that the partnership should be well positioned to get to the right contract.

J.S.: A 4♣ bid here should be a cuebid. With partner showing at least 5-6 in spades and diamonds there would be no reason to (See Master Solvers on page 11)

Declare or Defend -- Hand of the Month

North
♠AKQJ108
♥2
♦---
♣865432

West
♠---
♥10
♦AKQJ107
♣AKQJ107

East
♠2
♥AKQJ987654
♦8
♣9

By Joel Hoersch

This month's hand is a contribution from John Mohan, a world-class bridge champion ex-patriate American now living in Mexico. John is preparing a series of Webinar discussions on high-level bridge play, and this hand is a delightful example of what to expect from him several months down the line.

South plays 6♣. As a double-dummy problem, assuming best play on both sides, would you prefer to play or to defend that contract? Think the hand through, then turn to page 11 for more enlightenment.

South
♠976543
♥3
♦965432
♣---