



Master Solvers Panel

By John Swanson
Lancaster, California



Thanks to returning panel members: Leo Bell, Steve & Kitty Cooper, Mitch Dunitz, Jerry Gaer, Fred Hamilton, John Jones, Eddie Kantar, and Mike Savage. We also have a new face in the crowd: Bob Hamman. Some of us have been playing bridge for sixty years. Bob has been playing and winning both national and international titles for sixty years, and still maintains both his skill level and drive to win. When not at the table he oversees SCA Promotions, a company which underwrites sports promotions. His company made the headlines recently by winning a multi-million dollar lawsuit against Lance Armstrong for his shenanigans. The problems this month are taken from various online games.

Problem 1.

Both sides vulnerable, IMP scoring
You are South holding:

♠108643 ♥AQJ ♦AQ732 ♣--

South	West	North	East
	Pass	1♣	Pass
1♠	Pass	2♠	Pass
?			

Coopers: 4♣. Short suit slam try. If partner has very few high cards in clubs, slam could be easy. If he is looking at good spades, he will know to go. Say: ♠AKxx ♥xx ♦Kxx ♣Qxxx: now slam is on 2-2 spades or a heart hook. Our response to a short suit slam try is to either sign off with too much in clubs, else respond with keycards. The 4♣ bidder can rebid the short suit to ask about kings, but only if the keycard response did not include this ♠A.

Hamman: 4♣, assuming it shows short clubs.

Savage: 4♣, a splinter raise of spades. It is perhaps a slight overbid, but best describes where my values are and aren't. Another possibility is for partnerships that play that 2NT at this point is forcing and asks partner to define his hand more specifically (3♣ = min three trumps, 3♦ = max three trumps, 3♥ = min four trumps, 3♠ = max four trumps), but even if I had this option I prefer the splinter jump to 4♣ and hope partner doesn't think this is some kind of club raise - shouldn't IMHO, as 3♣ would be forcing.

J.S.: Bidding frequently involves making a decision whether to describe your hand to partner (4♣ in this case), or to try to extract information about partner's hand (2NT).

Jones: 4♣. This bid is clearly a slam try with short clubs (3♣ would be natural and forcing), although the hand is barely worth it. Making a slam try with this hand is more aggressive than Eli Culbertson or Jeff Rubens would recommend. Culbertson in his articles about "Evaluation by Visualization," suggested only trying for slam (or game) when a perfect minimum made it cold. Jeff Rubens, in his book *Secrets to Winning Bridge*, more or less repeated this guideline. Slam will be nearly laydown if partner has both red kings and three of the four top spades. A perfect hand with the king-jack of diamonds and four top spades makes a grand slam good. Against that, partner will overvalue the ♠A, thinking it is opposite a singleton instead of a void. However, most of the slam tries that partner will have that contain the ♠A will be able to bid RKC. The chance for slam is low, and I will make one try.

Further, if there were any ambiguity about the meaning of 4♣ in this partnership, then I would merely bid 4♣. The chance that partner has wasted club honors is quite high.

J.S.: I can't let this 4♣ business go any further - I have an overwhelming urge to start ranting. 4♣ is NOT descriptive of your holding. Firstly, it does not show a club void. Partner will expect a singleton and thus believe his ♠A is a good card. In fact, opposite your cards, the ♠A is almost worthless. Secondly, it implies that you are not concerned about spades. The reason is that an artificial 2NT rebid is available here as an inquiry about spade length (and the overall quality of the raise). Failure to use 2NT implies at least five spades. Holding ♠10xxxx, if you find that partner has only three spades your interest in slam will disappear faster than a taco at a weight-watchers convention.

Dunitz: 2NT. I would like to bid 4♣ as a splinter, but I would be afraid to without any agreement. Absent this, I start with 2NT (simple spiral) and settle for 4♣ whenever partner showed only three spades. If partner shows four spades, I will cue twice, committing to the five-level.

J.S.: Forced by lack of agreement to make the best bid.

Bell: 3♦. I normally play transfers over 1♣, so I would already know if partner holds four spades. I can then inquire about shortness and strength. The usual method here known as spiral (2NT) won't help me much as partner could have a maximum with three spades but the range of makeable contracts is wide, and depends on the concentration of club values.

J.S.: Good bidders have found that it is important to be able to raise a major suit response with three cards on some hands. Because it is frequently important for responder to know whether the raise is three or four cards, (usually when responder holds only four), a convention known as "spiral" has come into use. A 2NT rebid by responder (some use 2♠ after a raise to 2♥) is artificial and asks opener to show the nature of his raise, as described by Mike above. Additional steps are frequently defined, including splinters by opener. More complicated responses are possible and may be better, but are not in general use. If your partnership doesn't use "spiral," then 3♦ makes sense.

Kantar: 3♦. If I hear 4♣ from partner I will try for slam; otherwise I'm simply bidding 4♣. At match points, I would bid 4♣ directly because I do not want to discourage a diamond lead.

Hamilton: 3♦; playing that 2NT would ask partner to make responses saying how many trumps and how good a hand, a new suit should focus on card(s) in that suit and our suit. This should point pard to the value of a double fit if there is one. Slam is possible, but I need to catch good spades and the ♦K. I would not jump to 4♦ if that showed two suits, as my trumps do not come close to qualifying for that.

J.S.: This is a situation where, for a slam contract, it is imperative that partner have good trumps. If partner holds the ♠AKQx of spades and nothing else you have a shot at twelve tricks. If he holds Axx you aren't safe at the five-level. And you have a tool to ask about trumps at the two-level.

Why mess around with 3♦?

Gaer: 4♣. Good clubs and so-so spades and we could be too high, but bad clubs and good spades and we could make seven. No real logical way to find out, unless partner would take 3♣ as a help suit game try rather than showing a double fit.

J.S.: There are various tries available in most partnerships, as we have read, but you need to select the right one, as was shown by the result which occurred after 4♣. North (me), holding: ♠A75 ♥7 ♦KJ7 ♣A107532, with no wasted values, tried 4♣. This drew a 4♥ bid. A keycard ask by North now or on the previous round

would have revealed the trump deficiency, albeit at an dangerous level. But after the response, it might not be clear how high to bid - the South hand is unlimited. So instead I cue bid 5♣. This drew 5♦, another try from partner. I accepted this third slam try, expecting something like: ♠QJxxxx ♥Axx ♦AQx ♣x, where my heart singleton was crucial and the initial 4♣ slam try would not have been misleading. One additional note: after a splinter, one can rebid the splinter to show a void. That would have been successful on this deal because North would then know to devalue the club ♠A.

Problem 2.

North-South vulnerable, IMP scoring
You are South holding:

♠Q753 ♥AK103 ♦64 ♣J103

South	West	North	East
	Pass	Pass	1♦
Pass	1NT	Pass	Pass
?			

Kantar: Double. Going with the field ... I hope.

Hamman: Double, if takeout.

J.S.: I'm surprised, no, make that shocked, that these two great players would treat a double as takeout. I was taught at my mother's knee that the double shows very good diamonds with at least opening hand values.

Savage: 2♣. I'd double for takeout but it would be a penalty double of 1NT, asking partner for a diamond lead. In my partnerships I ask all my partners to play that in the balancing seat over 1x - Pass - 1y - Pass; 1NT - Pass - Pass, that 2♣ is a universal, artificial takeout for the unbid suits and a double is penalty (no matter what suit opener opened with).

Bell: Pass. If I were to bid on this hand, it would have been a takeout double at my first opportunity. After the opponents have limited their hands, it's much easier for them to double for penalty.

Coopers: Pass. At IMPs we would not back in. At pairs we would bid 2♥ DONT, showing the majors, which is what we play over the enemy 1NT by a passed hand. At pairs we would likely make a takeout double the first time. We do not accommodate light takeout doubles later, so we make them right away!

Jones: Pass. I am a believer in aggressive initial doubles, and would have doubled 1♦. Having failed to act then, I will stay silent. Some players would play double here (after having passed an opportunity to double diamonds) as penalties. That would have been my agreement with the late Marshall Miles. Yes, initial aggressive doubles do occasionally go wrong. I went for -800 a few months ago.

J.S.: I think a vulnerable takeout double, holding a flat 10 HCP opposite a passed partner, would make a good story line for "Death Wish VI." It's been more than twenty years since "Death Wish V" was released. The opening scene would feature West suppressing laughter while pulling out his blue redouble card.

Hamilton: Pass. The upside of bidding is not real good, perhaps a 5 IMP gain if you make something, but the downside is a 12 IMP loss if they can double you and get +800. I would certainly have competed at match points.

Gaer: Pass. This would be a nice match point balance, but too little upside here with partner being a passed hand.

J.S.: This time the balance didn't cost too much because partner held ten HCP and four spades. The opponents didn't have the values to double. Even so, 2♣ was down -200.

Dunitz: 2♣. Ifti and I play 2♣ for takeout here, and I would employ that bid. I think it is superior to play that 2♣ and 2♦ are both for takeout, one showing greater heart length - a fine treatment.

J.S.: My partnerships use 2♦ as takeout after a 1NT response to a minor is passed around, but the Mitch-Ifti convention seems better. However, there is one drawback on this deal: you are taking the short end of the stick with any call but pass.

Problem 3.

Both sides vulnerable, IMP scoring
You are South holding:

♠107 ♥J75432 ♦Q98 ♣K5

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

Dunitz: Pass. Most interesting problem of the set. Partner would normally bid 2NT or 3♥ with extras and partner's hand is limited by his rebid of only one spade, so I'm playing him for a 4-0-4-5 minimum - so I pass.

J.S.: Partner would not bid over 2♥ with a minimum regardless of his shape.

Kantar: Pass. I think partner is 4-0-4-5 with some 17-18 point hand. Incidentally I never would have bid 2♥ with this heart suit; never! I would have bid 2♣ after 1♠.

J.S.: It is easy to understand a certain hesitancy, shall we say, to rebid a broken-down heart suit, even with six of them. But your proposed preference to 2♣ has a strong risk of violating Burn's First Law: the declaring side should always hold more trumps than the defenders. 2♥ is ugly but the alternatives appear worse. However, the point of this problem involves deducing the nature of partner's hand after his 3♦ bid, using both logic and bidding principles. How can partner hold a hand on which he could be forcing you to take a preference to the four level yet made a non-forcing 1♠ rebid? The answer is that he can't. He is asking you to choose between 3♥ or 3NT, with the possibility of a 4♥ bid, should your suit be at the top end. The bridge principle which applies is that one doesn't look for a fit in the fourth suit after your side has already bid three suits naturally. You might also think of the 3♦ call as fourth suit forcing or as a reverse. In any case, it is a forcing bid.

Gaer: 3♥. Let partner bid 3NT if that is the right spot. I want no part of this mess.

J.S.: You're going to bid hearts a third time on a suit that Eddie won't bid a second time? Ever! Something's wrong here.

Bell: 5♣. I don't have much, but my minor cards are working. I expect partner to have something like: ♠Axxx ♥-- ♦AKxx ♣AQJxx.

J.S.: You have nine top tricks in notrump if partner has that hand. But holding that hand partner should bid 2NT, not 3♦. He doesn't want to force a preference to 4♣.

Hamman: 3NT. Someone has a rule about this.

J.S.: Yes, it's called Hamman's Rule: "If you have a choice of reasonable bids and one of them is 3NT, then bid it." Using the rule saves a lot of effort trying to infer what partner has for his bidding.

Jones: 3NT. I wish I had a nickel for every time I changed my mind on this hand. Normally with this type of problem I would settle for a 4♣ call with a scattered six HCP and this distribution. However, in this case the ♣K is a monster card. Partner's distribution could be 4-1-3-5, 4-0-4-5, or 4-0-3-6. He must have a very good hand, one that would have forced to game if I had responded anything but
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