

February 2008 Master Solvers Panel

By Marshall Miles
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This month's panel, in keeping with our February tradition, consists of six mixed pairs partnerships. From District 22 are Judy Elbogen - John Swanson and Trisha Menefee - Andy De Leon (Trisha and Andy were the Mini-Blue Ribbon winners at the recent San Francisco Nationals).

District 21 is represented by Rose Meltzer - Kyle Larsen and JoAnna & Lew Stansby.

District 17 is represented by Nancy & Mike Passell and Kitty & Steven Cooper.

Problem 1.

North-South vulnerable, IMPs
You, South, hold

♠void ♥KQJ54 ♦void ♣AKQJ8654

What is your opening bid in first position?

JoAnna & Lew: 6♣. The opponents surely have a good save (maybe even a make!), and it's not clear one could locate the heart ace on a slower auction anyway.

Kitty & Steve: 1♣. With two voids this will not get passed out. Opening one is our best chance to work the hearts in, and perhaps find out enough to know when we have a grand. But in our own system we could open 4NT, which we use as specific ace Blackwood; now we can locate the ♥A.

John & Judy: 1♣. We both choose this approach to better communicate to partner that we have a two-suiter.

Opening 2♣ blocks partner from evaluating his hand effectively when he holds values in spades and diamonds.

Kyle & Rose: 2♣. We expect lots of bidding, but hope to buy the hand at 6♣. Walking the hand gently by opening 1♣ will give the opponents more bidding room to find their own slam!

Mike & Nancy: 2♣. We hope to be able to jump to 4♣, which would set trumps and ask for a cue bid from partner. We realize we're risking interference with this approach, but we will have an easier time getting partner to cooperate later than those who open 1♣ and try to catch up later.

Andy & Trisha: We open 2♣, using control responses. If partner shows an ace, we have a bid which asks the suit it is in. If partner has two aces, we use the same bid to ask for the lower ace. We might not be able to guarantee the ♥A, but at least we made the effort!

M.M.: Obviously, this area of bidding needs careful partnership discussion if you are going to try to find the heart ace. If you can bid hearts naturally at some point, the grand slam force (5NT) would be ideal if you play graded responses, so that 6♦ would show the ace or king of hearts. Barring that, the ideas expressed by the Passells, the Coopers and Andy-Trisha all have merit.

Problem 2.

Neither vulnerable, matchpoints.
You, South, hold

♠A6 ♥AQ8 ♦AQ543 ♣1054

North	East	South	West
1♣	1♦	?	

JoAnna & Lew: Pass. It won't be easy to reach 6♣ when that's right, so we will play for penalties. Most of the time they will go down more than our game. On a good day,

partner will reopen with 2♣ rather than double, and then we will follow through with Keycard, driving toward slam.

Mike & Nancy: Pass. At matchpoints we will go for the throat with the penalty pass. Plus we may get more slam information than by bidding a mundane 3NT. We don't fear it will go all pass, since if partner has the dreaded three small diamonds, then LHO rates to bid anyway. And if instead of doubling, maybe partner will reopen with 2♣ (or 3♣!) and we'll be off to the races!

Kyle & Rose: Pass and go for the penalty. True, slam may be possible, but partner would need very good clubs. If LHO redoubles or bids after the pass, depending on what partner does you'll know what to do. If partner passes, he/she is on minimum. If partner doubles, cuebids or bids 3♣, you will know you're in slam territory.

Trisha: Pass. I want to hear what else partner has to say. A club rebid might lead to a club slam. I think 2♦ now suggests a better club fit.

Andy: 2♦. My next call will be 3NT. This should show a somewhat balanced 16-17 count. My clubs could be a little better.

Kitty & Steve: 2♦. We will bid 3NT next. This may overstate our club support, but indicates the strength of the hand better than an immediate 3NT.

John & Judy: 1♥. Yes, this bid is unorthodox, but pass implies that we want to defend at the one level, and the diamond spots argue against that.

The other obvious choice of 3NT is too much of an underbid. We will give partner the most room for his rebid, which we're hoping is 2♣, in which case slam will likely be in the offing. And if partner insists on hearts and drags his feet, game in that denomination should play quite well.

M.M.: There is a split vote between going for penalties or trying for slam, and both sides have problems. The diamond spots are so poor that if East has a six-card suit, he will almost surely take four diamond tricks, and only needs one other trick to hold the set to 300. And you might make a slam if partner has a little more than a minimum, in either high cards or distribution. I (sort of) agree with an effort to find out about extra strength with the cue bid, but a likely outcome is that partner will bid 2♠ to show a spade stopper, and will pass when you bid 3NT. The slam try bid I like is one nobody mentioned - a negative double! I think this gives partner the best chance to show extra values (like rebidding 3♣ with ♠Kxx ♥Kx ♦x ♣AKxxxx or 2♠ (or a cue bid) with ♠KJxx ♥Kxx ♦x ♣AKQxx. The latter was his actual hand, and you had an easy 6NT bid over 2♠. And if partner bids 1♥ or 1♠, a 3NT bid will imply extra strength (you usually have at least four of both majors for a double of 1♦, and if you bid 3NT instead of raising partner's major, it must be because you are too strong for an immediate 3NT bid).

Problem 3.

East-West vulnerable, IMPs
You, South, hold

♠AJ754 ♥7 ♦AJ843 ♣106

North	East	South	West
1♥	Dbl	?	

Kyle & Rose: 1♠. We'll just use natural bidding, and it's best to start off slowly.

Andy & Trisha: 1♠. Seems automatic.

Kitty & Steve: Redouble. We usually prefer to bid a 5-card major, but at this vulnerability and a singleton in partner's suit, we want to try to get them for a number.

Mike & Nancy: Redouble. At this vulnerability we can't let them off the hook. We have two suits wrapped up, so we go for the big number.

JoAnna & Lew: Redouble. Must look for penalties at this vulnerability. If partner can't double 2♣, then we bid 2♦ and hope to be able to stop in a makeable contract.

John & Judy: Redouble. We are eager to try for a penalty. Admittedly, if West bids 1NT or 2♣ and partner passes, we will not be well placed.

M.M.: I agree that trying for a penalty makes good sense. But if you redouble and LHO bids 2♣, passed around to you, you will not be happy. I think the best gamble is to start with a pass, which is what I did at the table. With my misfit I didn't think we had a good chance for game when partner opened, and the takeout double, implying four spades, reduced our prospects even further. But I have a great hand for defense. If I pass, we might get to double 2♣ (if LHO bids 1♠ and RHO bids 2♠) or 2♦ if LHO bids 2♣ and RHO bids 2♦. If I redouble, LHO might pass with 3-3-3-4 distribution and RHO would bid 1♠. So I hope to double some contract at the 2-level, preferably spades or diamonds, but even clubs if that is what is offered. And even though the opponent had eight clubs between them, we set them 500 at the 2-level. Even if they could have made it (highly unlikely), it wouldn't be a game.

Problem 4.

Both vulnerable, IMPs
You, South, hold

♠void ♥A754 ♦AKJ8742 ♣76

South	West	North	East
1♦	2♣	Dbl	3♣
4♥	5♣	Pass	Pass
?			

John & Judy: 5♦. This must be an offer to play, since we made no slam move over 3♣. Partner's pass should be forcing and almost certainly includes a club singleton or void. Obviously, we could be on for a slam. If it makes, maybe we should claim that 5♦ was a slam try!

Kitty & Steve: 5♦. We show the good diamonds since this may be the better game and slam is not impossible. This is a forcing pass situation, so with an unsuitable hand for offence, partner would have doubled.

JoAnna & Lew: 5♦. It's easy to imagine either 5♣ or 5♦ making, especially since partner is unlikely to lead a spade against 5♣ doubled.

Kyle & Rose: 5♦. Partner will get the message that you have longer and better diamonds, plus four not-so-good hearts.

Mike & Nancy: 5♦. Partner may have the right hand for more, but his forcing pass doesn't promise it. Would partner think of saying double with ♠KJxxx ♥Qxxxx ♦Qx ♣x? We don't think so.

Trisha: Pass. If partner had good hearts, he would have bid 5♦ or 5♥. There's a chance 5♣ won't make.

Andy: 5♦. My first instinct was to double, but I think the most likely hands for partner's pass will give me a play for 11 tricks in one of the red suits.

Problem 5.

Both vulnerable, matchpoints
You, South, hold

♠6 ♥8 ♦KQJ64 ♣AKQJ109

East	South	West	North
1♠	?		

Kyle & Rose: 2NT, followed with a cuebid, and let partner make the 5-level decision.

Kitty & Steve: 2NT. And then we'll bid again to try to get to game if partner has an ace.

JoAnna & Lew: 2♣. We will commit to the 5-level if they bid four of a major, but not otherwise. If we happen to belong in 3NT, we will be able to play it from the right side.

John & Judy: John bids 4NT to block the opponents from finding their double fit. Judy bids 2NT so that partner can choose a minor at a lower level. Now if the auction is at 4♥ or 4♠ when next it is her turn, she can bid 5♣ to show the longer (and probably safer) suit at the five-level. If partner is 2-2 or 2-1 in the minors, you definitely want to play clubs.

Andy & Trisha: 4NT. For the minors, obviously, and the level should be right.

Mike & Nancy: 4♠. Since we play 4NT as Blackwood here, we use this to show a huge hand with both minors. This puts max pressure on the opponents, and partner will know to bid a slam with two aces. It may help to play everything from his side.

M.M.: At the table my RHO bid 5♣ with this hand, which was passed around to partner, who doubled. I led my singleton diamond, the only lead to set the hand, but partner won with the doubleton ace and shifted. Since my lead was the lowest missing diamond spot, and since, on this bidding, I would usually lead partner's suit, I thought partner should have given me a ruff, but he said it wasn't possible for declarer to have the hand he had or for him (partner) to play declarer for that hand. I said I thought the 5♣ bid was logical, since there are very few circumstances when this hand will play better in diamonds than in clubs. As it happened, 5♦ was cold while 5♣ could have been set with a ruff, but it could easily have been the other way around. It is hard for the opponents to defend when declarer has an undisclosed five card side suit. And the chances of finding partner with two aces when RHO has opened the bidding are remote as compared to the problems the opponents would have over an immediate 5♣ bid. For one thing, if South had bid 2♣, followed by diamonds (or 2NT followed by 5♣, the opponents would be less likely to double or sacrifice. Also, responder would know that heart values would be more useful on offense than diamond values. And if, over 2♣, West had bid 4♠ (a fairly likely bid), would 4NT by South have shown five diamonds or only four? Would he know when to sacrifice and when to double for a one-trick set?