

Master Solvers Panel

By Marshall Miles
San Bernardino CA

Our panelists this month are Mike & Nancy Passell and Jerry Gaer, District 17; Gary Soules and Harvey Brody, District 21; Rick Roeder and Jon Wittes, District 22. Guest panelist from District 23 is Eddie Kantar.

Problem 1.

Neither vulnerable, matchpoints
As South, you hold

	QJ10642		—	K754		872
North	East	South		West		
1	Pass	?				

(a) What call do you make?

(b) If partner opens 2 and you respond 2 (natural positive), what call would you make over partner's raise to 3?

SOULES: (a) INT (forcing). I won't have much support for this bid, but feel I will get more information this way, and when I follow up with a jump to 4 over partner's minimum rebid, I will have shown a hand too good to simply bid 4 immediately. There still might be a slam, since RHO's pass over 1 is very encouraging. I don't think any spade bid directly describes this hand. (b) I must abstain here, since I feel strongly about bidding 2 here without 2 of the top 3 honors, or at least AJ10xxx(x).

One of the advantages of bidding 2 over 2 and raising partner's spades, it puts Key Card and cue-bids into perspective.

PASSELLS: (a) 2. We wish we knew what methods applied here: would 3NT show a good 4 bid? If so, that is our choice, since slam is on - opposite so very many great fitting minimums. We are not comfortable with the underbid of 4, and the huge overbid of 4 handcuffs partner. So we are stuck with 2 through the process of elimination. (b) On this auction we try 4; we will sign off at 4 if partner cues 4. This does justice to this hand.

GAER: (a): 4 (void splinter). This deal could be anything from a part score to a double slam swing, depending on where partner's values are. Give him something like Axxxx xx — AQJxx and we could even have a double GRAND slam swing. Best to let him decide how much duplication exists. LHO should have a good hand with lots of hearts since we never heard from RHO, so it's possible it's not even our hand.

(b): Again, 4. This time I am showing interest and denying either minor ace. I show first round controls before second.

KANTAR: (a) 4. O.K., I have a little extra for once, but I don't think I am strong enough to show my void. My partner will expect a better hand than this. (b) I would bid 4. I avoid cuebidding voids.

ROEDER: (a) 4. I will let partner make the final decision unless it goes 5 on my left, pass, pass, in which case I will chance 5. Will be delighted to cue bid if partner follows up with 5. Given the problem format with part (b), it sounds like pard has a great hand. Still, I give you an honest answer as if part (b) did not exist. The hand is not a limit raise, lacking an ace.

(b) 4. Would 5 be exclusion Blackwood or a splinter? Probably a splinter. Rather than risk a misunderstanding, I'll cue bid my second round diamond control rather than my first round heart control. Besides, you cannot be sure partner doesn't have a great heart suit, in which case a diamond control will be more encouraging to partner than a splinter in hearts.

M.M.: Sometimes, when you are planning to make two cue bids, you choose the order that will allow you to bid both without forcing to slam. Other players always cue bid length first.

WITTES: (a) 4. I'm a little too good for this bid, but partner will need a perfect to make slam anyway. More important, the opponents are likely to have a ten card heart fit (possibly even more) and this might very well be a double game swing hand. By bidding 4, I make it much more difficult for the opponents to enter the auction. Incidentally, Ross Grabel and I play 4 as a void-showing splinter, but I am not quite good enough for that bid.

(b) We play step responses over 2, so I couldn't bid 2. If not playing step responses, I do not feel the suit is good enough for a 2 bid anyway. That being said, if I had bid 2 and partner had bid 3, I would bid 5, which should probably show a void (possibly even Exclusion Blackwood, since I have bypassed 4NT to make this bid).

BRODY: (a) 4. I hope partner makes a slam try, or the opponents don't get into the auction. I realize that certain splinter bids could work well (see hand three), but I don't think this is good enough to use one.

(b) 4. Here the splinter is obvious. Over 4 sign-off or 5 cue-bid, I'll try 5.

M.M.: As Harvey guessed, this responding hand actually was opposite the hand in Problem 3. As you can see, you have a finesse for 7, but if you use most normal methods, you cannot even get to six. I agree with the panelists that said the hand is too weak to make a normal splinter in hearts. Besides, a splinter might help the opponents on lead (or conceivably outbid you by doubling the splinter bid). But the bid I am touting is a mini-splinter treatment for 3NT here, as mentioned by the Passells. A 3NT response to 1 (or a 3 response to 1) shows an undisclosed splinter with less than the usual 10 or 11+ HCP, [typically AJxx x K10xxx xx or Qxxxx Kx x x KJxxx], but it

could be a hand like the one in this problem. You are too good to settle for less than game, since it can easily make game opposite many minimum well-fitting opening bids. If partner has a strong hand, and is interested in slam, he makes the cheapest bid to ask where the splinter is. If he is not interested in slam, he just bids game, having given very little useful information to the opponents.

Problem 2.

East-West vulnerable, IMPs

West		East	
AQ8		K54	
7		9854	
AJ8		K1095	
QJ8762		A9	

West	North	East	South
1	Pass	1	Pass
2	Pass	3	Pass
3NT	Pass	Pass	Pass

Apportion the blame for getting to such a bad contract.

PASSELLS: We can't honestly assess any blame to either player. All bids seem normal, just a rub of the green. The old style of bidding up the line might solve the problem by pinpointing the heart situation, but in the reality of today's methods, we give zero blame to either party. Besides, they haven't set us yet ... but they probably will!

GAER: East 100%. Why 1 instead of 1? This not the hand to bypass the reasonable diamond suit to bid the non-suit hearts. But once he did plug the suit, if East had bid 2NT at his second turn they might survive. West did nothing wrong.

BRODY: East 95% for bypassing a good diamond suit to bid a worthless heart suit. East 5% more for playing any system that requires such a bid.

WITTES: East 80%, West 20%. I feel East has a clearcut 1 bid over 1. There is no justification for bypassing 1 when your diamond holding is significantly superior to your heart holding. I expect partner to bid 1 over 1 any time he has four, so nothing is lost, and you tell partner where your values are. West might be somewhat skeptical about bidding 3NT over 3. On the actual auction, since he has only moderate values and a poorer club suit than might be expected, a 3 bid might be a better game try. Now partner can bid 3NT with the right hand, or 3 if he has a 3NT bid but is worried about a spade stopper.

SOULES: East 70%. IMP bidding gets you to plus scores. Deciding to bid 1 with four rags, with all honor cards outside should not be considered. I guarantee if my partner had four hearts with an intermediate hand, after I bid 1 we will get to 4. I do not want to play a 4-3 fit anyway. West gets 30%, since a bid of 3 or 3 could have revealed possible shortness in hearts. Then East would be in a better position with a different hand to bid 3NT, or with this hand could evaluate to end in 4 or 5. (Yes, I know, hearts are 4-4 or not led, K10 conveniently behave, and you find Q. Only Itabashi gets to make those).

KANTAR: West 0%. Who wouldn't rebid 3NT with the West hand? East 30% for probably being brainwashed into always responding with the four card major regardless of the strength of the suit and regardless of the strength of the hand. Clearly, when the responding hand is strong enough to bid twice (11+ HCP), it is an error, in my opinion, to bid 1 on such a rat-infested suit. With the actual hand, a 4-4 heart fit could be missed if the opener believes in rebidding 1NT with a 3-4-3-3 pattern because responder is not strong enough to check back for a 4-4 fit. Otherwise, it is unlikely that a 4-4 heart fit will be lost. If LHO overcalls 1, doesn't "double" by the opener show four hearts with a hand not strong enough to reverse?

M.M.: Yes, I think it is "standard" to play that way. Support doubles only apply when responder bids a major suit.

ROEDER: I give 25% to East because he could have bid 1 instead of 1. But most of us westerners have Walsh in our blood and would bypass diamonds with a less-than-game-forcing hand like East's. If game is a good bet, West cannot be sure which game is best, 3NT or 5. Give West many possible hands, other than the actual one (i.e., xx Axxxx xx Kxx, and 5 is superior to 3NT. So the 3NT bid was impetuous. West should bid 3 over 3.

M.M.: I disapprove of letting a system prevail over bidding judgment. With x xxxx AJxxx Qxx it is logical to respond 1 for at least two reasons: LHO is likely to bid spades and you may get shut out of hearts if you don't bid them now. The second reason is that your hand doesn't look very good for notrump, and if you find a heart fit, your hand will be worth a lot more in hearts than in notrump. But, in general, bidding is easier when you bid where your strength lies, and even if you miss a heart fit, this hand may play just as well in notrump, perhaps better.

With opener's hand you would rebid 1NT over 1 with AQx Qxxx Qxx Kxx (not a disaster if we missed a 4-4 heart fit, but with Ax KJ10x xx Axxxx or xx AKJx AJx xxx, you should rebid 1 with your concentrated strength.

Problem 3.

North-South vulnerable, matchpoints
As South, you hold

	J873	K742	KQ85	9
North	East	South	West	
2NT	3	?		

What call would you make?

BRODY: 4. To me this looks like a 34-point deck that will easily make slam.

KANTAR: 4. (I'm assuming 3 is natural.). Double is Staymanesque, but 4 gets three suits into the game instead of two. True, we can no longer play 3NT or 3 doubled, but at least I have enough hand to be able to play 4NT if it comes to that.

ROEDER: 4, unless I have an agreement that double is negative. Frankly, many expert partnerships have not discussed competition over 2NT, since competition seldom happens. 3 doubled could easily be the best spot (if I had a more balanced hand). Partner is likely to have a four or five card major in this auction, but a bad trump break looms. It would not surprise me if 3NT is the best spot with your 29-30 HCP, even with your likely major fit.

WITTES: 4. I plan to bid again over anything but 4NT by partner, which must show a lot of club wastage. The only drawback is that our trump suit might be breaking more poorly than usual.

SOULES: 4. However, a double in the majority of my partnerships shows a stolen bid and is not penalty oriented, just Stayman. Pass should be forcing, but this hand is too good to pass. Three controls already puts you in slam range if you have a good fit. Over 4NT, I pass, over 4 of a major, I raise to 5, and over 4 I bid 5.

GAER: Double. Had it gone 1NT, 2, double would be Stayman, so it should also apply here. I can make a forward move over any rebid, even 3, since that rates to be at least four long. Partner is not likely to have four clubs unless RHO is a lunatic.

We assume the overall is natural.

PASSELLS: Double (negative). We think most now play this as negative, so if partner leaves it in we expect at least 800. We certainly can't cue-bid and go past 3NT or 3 doubled. This could be unanimous.

M.M.: Sorry, Mike and Nancy, but most of this panel was more optimistic offensively, and chose 4 instead. And when this hand came up at the table, my partner and I had not discussed a 3 overall of 2NT, so we fell into the trap mentioned by Rick in his answer. I thought (and still think) that at the three-level the double should be for penalties, but my partner intended it as Stayman, and I left it in for +100 when we were cold for 650 in either major.

My reasoning that the double should be penalty (and used with flat hands of 4 or more points) is based on the fact that (a): the opponents are down one or two when you have no game, or (b) you can often set 3 for more than the value of game if you have one. The alternate choice (4) is available on this hand, since 4NT by either hand afterwards should be natural, and you have enough strength so that 4NT should be safe. But suppose you have the same distribution with fewer high cards (take away the queen of diamonds). Now 4NT would not be safe, and you wouldn't want to get to the four-level without a major fit. So I thought that 3 should be a substitute for Stayman - or, to put it another way, partner would show a four card major at the three level, just in case there was a major fit. But no one agreed with me; (story of my life!)

Problem 4.

Both vulnerable, IMPs

	North		
	—		
	AK986543		
	10		
	Q872		
West		East	
K2		AJ943	
Q		72	
AK9762		QJ543	
10543		K	
	South		
	Q108765		
	J10		
	8		
	AJ96		

South	West	North	East
2	3	3	5
Pass	Pass	Dbl	Pass

Playing Rusinow leads, North led the K. Playing upside down signals, South followed with 10. North continued with the A. West ruffed and made his contract.

Apportion blame between North and South.

PASSELLS: This is a bizarre set of problems: Who would ever double with that North hand, and how can he possibly guess his partner has two hearts? The jack would certainly be a singleton. We give North 100 percent of the blame for not bidding 4, and for playing the A at trick 2, even though it didn't cost. Finding the club shift would be double dummy. As for South, he gets zero percent as he was never involved with this hand, and would have bid 5 over 5 (we hope!) if his partner had bid a proper 4. Selling out to 5 would not be an option.

GAER: North 100%. He must be a card-carrying Republican, except his actions are even too conservative for the GOP. If he had bid 4 with his three loser hand, his partner could have cooperated and they could let their opponents push them to their cold (admittedly lucky) slam.

If he was planning to "walk the dog" with his first bid he forgot to take the second step. Again, since South is not required to

be clairvoyant, he is blameless.

BRODY: North 100% for not bidding 4 at his first opportunity, giving South a chance to bid 5, also for doubling with little defense. Also on defense there is a good argument for switching to a high club, trying to get a spade ruff if South has A or a natural spade trick.

KANTAR: I see nothing South can do. If South plays J at trick one, North will think it's a singleton and lead something like the 9 at trick two, hoping partner can ruff and return a spade. If South plays the 10 at trick one, and North plays it to be from a doubleton, North should shift to the Q (so South will not return a heart) and hope to get a spade ruff. I don't see this contract being defeated very often.

ROEDER: Note to agnostics and atheists: This defensive problem proves that God's wrath does exist. The fate was incredibly cruel to North as he rationally played South for a stiff heart as the best chance to go plus. South's card is 100% count. Given their carding, the only doubleton South could hold is J10. How was North to know that South had 6 of his 8 HCP outside his suit? Still the cruelty was metered out justly. North, with a 3-loser hand, sold out to 5! Good God, this reminds me of France's posture in 1939. Thus I have to assess 200% to cover both the bidding and the defense. North's bidding gets 85%, South 15%. North's defense 0%, South's bidding 0%, God 100%.

WITTES: It's pretty clear that this hand was blown in the bidding, since N/S have a lucky heart slam available, and should certainly have bid to 5 in any case. I must admit that in my methods, I might also have bid 3 as North, since a jump here could have different meanings, like fit-showing or shortness. But if North could have described this hand with a bid of 4, he probably should have done that. However, I think on the auction as it actually went, South should have bid 5 rather than pass. The fact that they did not beat 5 doubled is too double dummy to assign blame; the fact that they belonged in 5 is assessed as 80% South's fault, 20% North.

SOULES: South's only play with his heart holding is the ten, so how can you apportion any blame to him? But I don't understand why 2 vul in first seat was chosen; I guess North has no guarantees about what his partner has. North is looking at the dummy and knows opponent has two spades. Could the 3 bidder overcall with two small spades and Qx without the A? If so, South would have doubled 5.

Therefore without the A partner could have just the KQ and a stiff heart. Since partner did not double 5, North must continue with the heart. I blame South 100% by denying the A by not doubling 5.

M.M.: I was South, and I thought that my failure to double 5 implied a fit for hearts—the sort of hand with which I would have raised 3 to 4 if East had passed. So I felt I had denied a singleton or void in hearts. I was expecting a different kind of hand for the 3 bid—perhaps 15 or 16 points with AKJxxx, and probably a doubleton spade—and our opponents were sacrificing. But my showing the defense was mostly a red herring, since we lost the hand in the bidding. I think, since North has eight probable heart tricks and something in clubs, plus a poor defensive hand, and no interest in giving me a chance to choose spades over hearts, he should bid 4 immediately in an attempt to shut East out if he has a marginal raise. If he had bid 4, I would have known he had a very strong suit and his side length was in clubs, which is ideal from my point of view. I would have competed to 5.

Problem 5.

Both vulnerable, IMPs

As South, you hold:

AK873 QJ87 AJ9 A

What would you open?

BRODY: 1 - is there any other bid?

SOULES: 1. Why is this a problem? I cannot imagine another option.

WITTES: 1. Surely this is not a problem. I wouldn't dream of anything else.

PASSELLS: 1. Is this a trick question? This surely will be unanimous!

KANTAR: 1. This must be a joke.

GAER: 1. Too many major cards for 2NT, too many losers for 2. I'm not too worried about it going all pass, and I have an easy jump shift at my next turn (assuming I get one.)

ROEDER: 1. I would only open 2NT with a client or a girl friend (unless my girl friend was Jill Meyers).

M.M.: You are too late for that, Rick. Jill is a happily married woman. Admittedly she does know how to play bridge quite well. The panel was unanimous, and I too would open 1, resisting the temptation to open 2, since I try to bid like other people (not always successfully). Admittedly, this hand is not strong enough to force to game with confidence. It might go down several tricks opposite a weak hand and/or a misfit. But you can so easily miss a game, or even a slam opposite hands like the responding hand in problem 1 or Qxx Kxxxx Kx Jxx (quite likely the bidding will go 1 -2 -4 and the heart suit will never be bid). Why should it be so embarrassing to be set in game when you open 2, although some of us are quite willing to open 4 with x KJ8xxxx Q10xx — (or even less)? Why do you require guarantees in some sequences, but allow yourself to speculate in others?