

**The US Bridge Championships
By Spencer Hurd**

Part I

The 2006 US Bridge Championships were held in NY in August and many of the matches, including all of the Finals, were shown live on the internet.

Bridge Base showed the view-graph often with several matches simultaneously in fact. One may play bridge with no charge on BBO, and IMP and matchpoint play is available. During the championships, one could log onto BBO.com and watch the matches at home. AT NO COST.

Many of the world's best players were there of course, and the famous Nickell team (Nickell, Freeman, Meckstroth, Rodwell, Soloway, Hamman) was seeded into the Semi-Finals, as was Ekeblad (Russ Ekeblad, Ron Rubin, Fred Gitelman, Eric Greco, Geoff Hampson) Two other teams were seeded into the Round of Eight. There was an "Open" round-robin and the goal was to get into the next round (12 teams in a Round of Sixteen, counting the seeded teams).

Surviving preliminaries and getting into the Round of Sixteen was Charleston's **John Hurd**, now of NYC, playing on the Swartz team (Richie Schwartz, Mike Becker, Joel Wooldridge, John Hurd, Chris Willenkin and Grant Baze).

Their opponents on the Weed (Non-Playing Captain) team were James Cayne, Michael Seamon, Bobby Levin, Steve Weinstein, Benito Garozzo, and Richard Reisig. By the last hand Schwartz was leading, by 4 imps after many ups and downs, when a soon to be famous Last Round Hand occurred.

| | |
|--------------------|--------------|
| North (Hurd) | |
| ♠ JT63 | |
| ♥ T96 | |
| ♦ AQT8 | |
| ♣ 62 | |
| West (Seamon) | East (Cayne) |
| ♠ 5 | ♠ 7 |
| ♥ AQ832 | ♥ J75 |
| ♦ 76 | ♦ KJ9432 |
| ♣ AQJ94 | ♣ T53 |
| South (Wooldridge) | |
| ♠ AKQ9842 | |
| ♥ K4 | |
| ♦ 5 | |
| ♣ K87 | |
| Both Vul | East Dealer |

| | | | |
|-------|-------|----------|-------|
| Cayne | Joel | Seamon | Hurd |
| East | South | West | North |
| P | 1S | 2H | 2S |
| 3D | 4S | all pass | |

There are many ways to open the South hand, and the 1S bid chosen by Wooldridge allowed a maximum of exploration for slam. Another approach is to open 4S – but the hand is too strong for 4S according to most players. Vulnerable at IMPs, one should distinguish between the given hand and ,say,

1. ♠AQJT876 ♥42 ♦T♣QJ4
or even
2. ♠QJT87632 ♥42 ♦T♣J4

At any rate, Seamon (West) also has a problem. Do you bid a Michaels Cue Bid (2S) or just overcall? He chose to overcall in hearts, leaving clubs for a later surprise. Probably the style of opponents and the partnership agreements (and vulnerability too) have something to say about the choice. A Michaels cue bid would be appropriate for most partnerships with, say,

1. ♠5 ♥KQ6543 ♦T ♣AT985,
or

2. ♠5 ♥KJT65 ♦T♣KJT872
so maybe the actual hand is too strong
for the cue bid in their partnership.

Seamon led the passive ♦7 (in the suit bid by partner!). Declarer rose with the ace, ruffed a diamond high (stripping the West hand of safe diamond exit cards) led a spade to dummy's jack, and a heart to his king. Seamon won and cashed a heart and exited with a third heart. And 4S was duly defeated when declarer eventually lost two hearts and two clubs. The expert commentators on-line pointed out that if Levin-Weinstein could stop in 3S somehow, then Weed would win the match. The other auction, however, was completely different and explosive:

| | | | |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| East | South | West | North |
| Baze | Levin | C.W. | S.W. |
| P | 4D | 4S | 5D |
| P | 5S | P | P |
| P | | | |

Levin opened 4D, a super-transfer to 4S showing a hand too good to open 4S. Called the "Namyats" Convention, which is Stayman spelled backwards, it is still played by many experts who wish to clarify their major suit pre-empts. A bid of 4C would show a great heart pre-empt.

Willenken found a great call, since waiting is not an option. His cue-bid of 4S (South's suit), showed hearts and a minor. Now North (Weinstein) also found a great call, since the partnership is virtually committed to 5S at least. He bid 5D. If South had held say

♠AKQT876 ♥2 ♦K7 ♣A43
then a slam could be reached.

Now Baze, at the end of a grueling week, having drifted back in this tough match from way down, fell

from grace. He could have doubled 5D, letting partner in on the real dangers and on **non-dangers**. There is a tendency not to double such bids hoping the opponents will climb too high. There are other dangers in keeping secrets in bridge.

Willenken could not lead a diamond – his partner did not bid diamonds as at the other table. Usually, if you defeat contracts in which the opponents may have 15 tricks once they get going, you have to cash winners, and the difficulty is often knowing which winners to cash.

Willenken cashed the ace of clubs.

His partner played the three, showing count (and in their partnership agreements, which might not apply at the 5-level, suggested an "obvious shift"). In hindsight, Baze should prevent partner from cashing another ace because BAZE KNOWS the diamonds are not dangerous. He should get his partner to continue clubs. This may give away one trick (if partner cashes the club king and sets up the queen in declarer's hand). Note that the auction shows West is 5-5 at least in hearts and clubs. Thus, only one winner can be set up in clubs, even if declarer holds KJx in clubs. But one heart pitch in dummy is not a danger either - Baze knows from the Michaels cue bid that declarer has at most two hearts anyway.

So Baze slyly declined to double the 5D bid, and now missed the opportunity to falsecard partner into making a safe club continuation. Opportunity only knocks twice. Willenken cashed the heart ace. Now 5S was cold. And the Weed team edged ahead at the wire.

The US Bridge Championship Part II

The Semi-Finals (120 board matches) included seeded into it the Nickell team (Nick Nickel, Richard Freeman, Jeff Meckstroth, Eric Rodwell, Paul Soloway, Bob Hamman) and the Ekeblad team (Russ Ekeblad, Ron Rubin, Fred Gitelman, Eric Greco, Geoff Hampson).

Qualifying also were the Jacobs team, seeded into the Round of Eight. There they beat Fout (John Fout, Jeff Roman, William Ehlers, John Rengstorff). Next they beat Weed (240-169), making it to the last two teams to qualify for the Semi-Finals, where they played Nickell. Meltzer who had edged Robinson by 193-191 in the previous round had to play Ekeblad.

Ekeblad led Meltzer 66 to 43 after 30 boards but Meltzer crept back to down only 15 imps with 45 boards to go, 156 to 141. But the next 15 hands went 57 to 3 for Ekeblad, who were able to coast to a 281 to 188 victory.

It looked like the same story in the other semi-final as Jacobs leapt ahead of Nickell 64 to 13 in the first 15 boards. With 15 hands to go, Nickell was down 59 imps. They “won” the last 15 board session 62-13 so trailed by only 10 – but the match was over. It would be Jacobs versus Ekeblad in the finals.

The quarter by quarter (or eighth by eighth, actually) scores in the Finals were:

| | | | | | | | | |
|---------|---------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Ekeblad | 43 | 15 | 0 | 29 | 44 | 32 | 30 | |
| 20 | Tot 213 | | | | | | | |
| Jacobs | 8 | 40 | 33 | 31 | 17 | 23 | 9 | 57 |
| Tot 218 | | | | | | | | |

Down 32 imps, 193 to 161, with only 15 hands to go, Jacobs roared back 57 to 20 and won by 218 to 213. Here

again, the last four hands were a fitting conclusion to a great battle by both teams. We show the match with four hands to go, 210 to 188, Ekeblad leading.

On Hand 117, a slam auction goes awry for Greco-Hampson.

East: ♠---, ♥KQJ652, ♦AJ32, ♣A32
West: ♠AKT72, ♥A, ♦K987, ♣J95

Observe that 6D (or 6H) only requires diamonds splitting 3-2, so the slam is a good percentage action at IMPs. Weinstein – Garner used a little known gadget to handle the East hand.

| | | | |
|-------------|-----------|--------------|-------|
| Jacobs Team | | Ekeblad Team | |
| East | West | East | West |
| Garner | Weinstein | Hampson | Greco |
| 1H | 1S | 1C* | 1S* |
| 2C* | 2D** | 2H | 2NT |
| 3D^ | 4D^^ | 3H | 4C |
| 4H | 4NT | 4H | P |
| 5H | 6D | | |

Garner’s 2C bid is an artificial bid showing a variety of hands and the 2D response guaranteed 8+ points. The 3D call said 16+ points, 5 hearts, 4 diamonds, not 3 spades. Not bad for one bid. 4d was alerted, evidently a slam try, and 4H is probably another push for hearts. Weinstein put it in slam.

Hampson’s 3H rebid (after his big club opening) made things difficult. Maybe he should show his second suit immediately. If a 3D bid doesn’t strike gold in partner’s hand, there is time to bid hearts again later.

Greco’s 4C (cheapest cue bid) did not make it easier for Hampson but we can see no reason for not trying 4D here. Greco could then bid 6D (and if Hampson’s diamonds were not a true suit, he could correct to 6H or 6NT). Over 4H, I think Greco should bid 5D,

saving the day. Greco has a massive hand opposite a strong club opening. He should assume that, with 30+ high card points, the opponents at the other table will bid a slam. He has the responsibility to put it in what seems the best slam

Nine imps were lost here, lowering Ekeblad's lead to 13 imps.

On the next hand (see next page) two different auction led to a dramatic result:

| | | | |
|------|-------|------|----------|
| East | South | West | North |
| 1C | 1S | 2H* | P |
| 3D | P | 3NT | all pass |

Here the 2H bid was a system bid (apparently asking about hearts) and 3D must have showed good enough hearts. After the inevitable spade lead, West came to nine top tricks, plus 600. At the other table, the initial bids were different, but had the same essential meaning. Having missed a good slam, Greco-Hampson bid a poor one.

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| North (Gitelman) | |
| ♠ 9765 | |
| ♥ 654 | |
| ♦ Q753 | |
| ♣ T9 | |
| West (Weinstein) | East (Garner) |
| ♠ K2 | ♠ T4 |
| ♥ 87 | ♥ AQ92 |
| ♦ AJT92 | ♦ K4 |
| ♣ AQJ2 | ♣ K6543 |
| South (Moss) | |
| ♠ AQJ83 | |
| ♥ KJT3 | |
| ♦ 86 | |
| ♣ 87 | |
| Vul EW | Board 118 East Dealer |

| | | | |
|---------|-------|-------|-----------|
| Hampson | Zia | Greco | Rosenberg |
| East | South | West | North |
| 1D* | 1S | 2S** | Dbl |
| 5C | P | 6C | all Pass |

The so-so slam is down one since the heart finesse (into the overcaller) loses. The 1D was a precision-like bid, and 2S was artificial. Greco took a shot at raising to slam having extras for his 2S bid (evidently the 2S bid denied a 4-card holding in hearts). Since a 2C opening would show a 6-card or longer suit, Greco must have pictured a hand in East with better diamonds or better shape, say,

1. ♠xx ♥Axx ♦KQx♣Kxxxx

Or even

2. ♠x ♥Ax ♦KQxx ♣Kxxxx

Plus 12 Imps, Jacobs down by 1.

An extra undertrick in 4H at each table gave Ekeblad back Imps, to lead by four Imps going into the last hand.

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| North (Gitelman) | |
| ♠ T5 | |
| ♥ AKT9754 | |
| ♦ 753 | |
| ♣ 9 | |
| West (Weinstein) | East (Garner) |
| ♠ K9753 | ♠ AQJ82 |
| ♥ 863 | ♥ ---- |
| ♦ QJ6 | ♦ KT84 |
| ♣ A2 | ♣ QJ73 |
| South (Moss) | |
| ♠ 4 | |
| ♥ QJ2 | |
| ♦ A92 | |
| ♣ KT8654 | |
| Vul - None | Board 120 West Dealer |

| | | | |
|------|-------|------|----------|
| West | North | East | South |
| P | 3H | Dbl | 4H |
| 4S | P | P | 5H |
| Dbl | P | 5S | all pass |

The barrage of bids by NS made it hard for EW to realize that their hands meshed perfectly for a slam, and one feels that NS did all they could do. Also,

another push and the opponents may sniff closer to the slam! And 6H would seem to be -500 against normal defense (spade ace, diamond shift). NS was probably happy with the result. But Zia and Rosenberg can make magic happen

| West | North | East | South |
|-------|-------|---------|-------|
| Greco | M.R. | Hampson | Zia |
| P | 2H* | 2S | 3S |
| 4H | P | 4S | 5H |
| 5S | 6H | P | P |
| Dbl | P | P | P |

The 2H opening was a “good” weak two bid).

Note that a push on the hand (or a gain) wins for Ekeblad. After Greco’s 5S bid, it seemed all was over. No, Rosenberg is thinking. An electronic gasp must have occurred on the internet when Michael Rosenberg bid 6H. The ace of spades lead followed by a diamond shift beats 6H by 500 and gains an imp vs 480 at the other table. And a 6S bid also wins for Ekeblad. Of course, a pass also loses.

Hampson chose to pass 6H, echoing the apparent judgment of all eight players. Unfortunately for Ekeblad, however, Hampson chose to lead the club queen from his sequence. Now Rosenberg was in control. He ducked the queen in dummy, a great play. Hampson cashed a spade and shifted to a diamond but it was too late. Rosenberg won this with dummy’s ace and ruffed a club in hand, dropping Greco’s ace. He led the ace of hearts and a second heart to dummy. Finally, he ruffed one more club, setting up the suit for diamond pitches. He led a third heart to dummy and could claim the rest for down one, gaining 9 Imps for his team.

Jacobs won at the wire by five Imps, coming back from down 22 with four hands to go.