# WORLD CLASS

FOREWORD BY GABRIEL CHAGAS

*Conversations with the Bridge Masters*

*by Marc Smith*

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# Foreword

In 1967, Victor Mollo wrote *The Bridge Immortals*, in which he outlined the playing careers of some of the greatest players of his day. Six years later, Alan Truscott, Pierre Jaïs and José Le Dentu published a book called *L'Aristocratie du Bridge* (The Bridge Aristocracy). To my utter surprise and delight they inserted my short bridge curriculum among those few chosen. Well, a bridge lifetime later, Marc Smith has decided to honor another small group of bridge players by naming us *World Class*, and I am once again privileged to be included in this select group.

'World Class', 'Bridge Aristocracy', 'Immortals' — all of the players included in this book certainly fall into the first two categories, and some of us have been hanging around for such a long time that people may wonder whether we could indeed be immortal too. All kidding aside, there is no doubt that professional and quasi-professional bridge players often wonder whether they chose the right career, especially when they see what their tennis, golf and car-racing peers, among others, make in a year. It is therefore quite comforting when someone puts so much time and effort into helping us ascend to such levels of importance. When handed such glory, it is easier to ignore these mercenary thoughts.

In this book, Marc delivers an in-depth look at the very 'mortal' aspects of all of us included here. Many of the players share not only their best bridge memories, but also their worst! Yes, multiple World Champions do plenty of stupid things at the table too. I am sure that readers will find the experiences of these great players both interesting and enlightening, and there is also plenty of humor in their tales. In addition, the book contains numerous super hands to illustrate just what makes this group of players 'world class'.

Undoubtedly, every member of this group of players has dedicated a very important part of their lives to this game for the mere love of it. I believe we can all thank Marc for making us proud of what we are.

***Gabriel Chagas***

# Acknowledgements


## Author's Note

I would like to thank my wife, Charlotte, for her help and support and love. I would also like to express my gratitude to Ray Lee and Deanna Bourassa of Master Point Press for their invaluable work on this book.

*Marc Smith*


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## Section 5 — Star Writers

# Introduction

Many years ago, Victor Mollo brought the world's top players to life in his *The Bridge Immortals*; those profiles, however, were written from the author's perspective. This book also features the *crème de la crème* of the world of bridge, but this time we hear from the players themselves. What does it feel like to lose a World Championship final? How did certain partners or authors influence their style? What were their best and worst moments at the bridge table? Who were their toughest opponents? Who would they most like to partner if they were given the chance? How do they see the future of the game, and what changes would they like to see made?

In this book, you will get to meet the human beings behind the familiar names that you see regularly in your bridge magazine or newspaper column — human beings with all-too-familiar strengths and weaknesses. You will also hear numerous amusing stories, see some amazing hands and I hope, gain an insight into what it is really like to play, to win, and to lose major events.

The material for this book came from lengthy personal interviews with each of the subjects, but it is presented as if the person is speaking directly to you, the reader. If it ever seems that our stars are perhaps too immodest at any point, please remember that often it is because they were answering a direct question during an interview, although I have omitted the questions from the text.

The champions whose stories appear in these pages were selected to provide an insight into bridge at the top from many different perspectives, rather than as a definitive list of the world's best twenty-five players. I have no desire to enter into a debate on which names *that* list should include! Having said that, many of those who are included would be in everyone's 'Top 25'. I have also tried to include players from around the world, and thirteen different countries are represented here.

There are some notable absentees, of course. One reason for this is that to avoid duplication of experiences and views I elected to feature only one member of a regular partnership. Hence you will not find Michael Rosenberg, Bobby Wolff, Tony Forrester or Eric Rodwell. Others I very much wanted to get in, such as Lynn Deas and Paul Chemla, are missing for purely practical reasons, in that

conflicting schedules made it impossible to get together for a lengthy interview. If anyone feels slighted because their name is missing, I apologize — but I had only so many pages with which to work.

The book is divided into five broad sections, and it will be immediately obvious that many of the placements are arbitrary. Both Eddie Kantar and Mike Lawrence could easily have made it in a 'player' category rather than as a 'writer', for example. One thing is certain though — every one of the players who appear in this book can truly claim to be 'world class'.

Finally, the author and publisher wish to thank all of the great players who are featured here. Most of the interviews were extensive, and we are enormously grateful to them for taking part. Perhaps they will be able to show this book some time in the future to some non-bridge-playing grandchild and tell them proudly, "Look, I really was one of the best."

*Marc Smith*
*October 1999*

# World Class

*Conversations with the Bridge Masters*

*by Marc Smith*

SECTION 1

# All-Time Greats

# Bob Hamman

## SIGNIFICANT PARTNERSHIPS

***1961-1964***
Don Krauss

***1964-1967***
Lew Mathe

***1968-1970***
Eddie Kantar

***1972-1997***
Bobby Wolff

***1997-***
Paul Soloway

## BORN

August 6, 1938 in Pasadena, California, USA

## CURRENT HOME

Dallas, Texas, USA

## PROFESSION

- President of prize promotion company
- Professional bridge player

*Robert D. Hamman is widely regarded as the best player in the world, and he has been on that pedestal for more than a decade. An ACBL Grand Life Master and WBF World Grand Master, he has been #1 in the world rankings since 1985. He has played in seventeen World Championship team finals, just one short of the late, great Giorgio Belladonna's record. He has been on the winning side in seven of his twelve Bermuda Bowl finals, but only once in five appearances in the World Team Olympiad final. Bob has also collected a gold and a silver medal in the World Open Pairs and two silver medals from the World Mixed Pairs. He is one of only eight players in the history of the game to have achieved the Triple Crown — winning each of the World Open Pairs, the World Team Olympiad and the Bermuda Bowl. What's more, his relentless drive to accumulate more titles than anyone before him shows little sign of diminishing.*

*Bob's record in North American events is unsurpassed. His total of national titles currently stands at a record thirty-eight, one more than John Crawford's previous long-standing best. He has won the three major teams events a staggering twenty-four times — the Spingold a record twelve times, the Reisinger eight and the Vanderbilt four. He has also won the prestigious Blue Ribbon Pairs a record four times, each time with a different partner (although Larry Cohen has since equaled his four wins).*

*What's more, unlike most of the top American players, Bob has a job away from bridge, too — he is the President of S.C.A. Promotions Inc., a prize promotion company in Dallas, Texas. He also enjoys playing backgammon. His wife, Petra, has won North American bridge titles, while his son, Chris, is also a promising player.*

## Getting Started

It all started harmlessly enough. A friend of mine said, "Do you play bridge?" I said, "No, but I've seen you play hearts and other games, and chances are I can beat you at bridge too, so just tell me the rules." So I played and made a fool of myself, and thought, "Damn, there's a lot to this game."

I was about eighteen, and right away I wanted to find out everything I could about this game that was so tough. I read as many bridge books as I could find. I really enjoyed Reese's books. I was later to discover that he was a real jerk as a person, but there is no doubt that he was a great writer. A year later, in the fall of 1957, I played in my first National tournament, in the side games. Five years later, I won my first national title and the rest, as they say, is history.

Lew Mathe was one of my first serious partners, and I learned an enormous amount from him. I started playing with Lew in 1964, when Don Krauss, who had taken a new job, couldn't make it to the Nationals. We lost the Trials — in fact, we finished fourth (the top three pairs made the team) — but we did win the Blue Ribbon Pairs that year. We then won the Vanderbilt and from then on we were always in the international reckoning.

I will always remember a hand that I was involved in when playing with Mathe in a Vanderbilt, sometime around 1965. I don't recall all of the details, but the club suit was:

A Q 10 x

□

x x x

RHO had done a lot of bidding but was known to be short in clubs — either one or two was likely. I needed three club tricks but I couldn't afford to have LHO on lead. I thought the king was on my right, so I played the ace off the dummy and RHO, who was John Lowenthal, a very smart man, dropped the king.

So, I crossed to my hand and played a club. Lefty followed with the nine and I thought for a while and then put in the ten. The moment I called for the ten, Mathe said, "I can't believe you're so stupid." And he was right, because the ten was duly sawn off by the jack. Lew knew exactly what was happening. Of course, the suit was 4-2, as I knew it would be, and the contract went down. That's a hand I will not soon forget.

Alvin Roth had a huge influence on all the players from my generation. Most of the players in America during the era preceding the likes of Meckstroth and Rodwell ended up playing some variation of Roth-Stone. Of course, as time went on, the bidding got lighter and lighter and slowly it changed.

Of course, Meckstroth and Rodwell came up with a very well-worked-out version of Precision. My opinion on Precision is that combining five-card majors with a forcing club is like trying to mix oil and water, and it has serious structural defects. However, as they have proved, by working hard enough you can come up with a very good system. Work is a large part of it, but there are certain structural designs that energy alone cannot solve. You'd have to put pretty good wings on an elephant before you could get it to fly, but that's what I think Meckwell have achieved.

I started off playing five-card majors. In the early 60s, before I started playing with Krauss, I played with a guy called Ralph Clarke and we tried five-card majors and Kaplan-Sheinwold. Somebody found a book by Norman Squire and

his ideas seemed kind of interesting so we patterned our early ideas from that. Now, I think four-card majors and a forcing club is right. Even if you're playing a standard-type system, I think the method of opening four-card majors on poor hands and five-card majors on good hands is very playable. (What I mean by that is that when your subsequent bidding reveals that you have a good hand, then you should have a five-card suit.) That's what I play with Zia.

There are two basic philosophies of playing — one is very aggressive and entails taking chances to push the opponents around, while if you follow the other philosophy the idea is that you just sit there and try to avoid giving anything away. However, it's a popular misconception that Bobby Wolff and I were at the opposite end of this spectrum to a pair such as Meckstroth-Rodwell. For a start, we made lots of mistakes. We also bid a lot. We were in a lot of auctions — as many auctions as Meckstroth-Rodwell. We didn't open as light as they do, but we bid freely.

## Playing with the Best

Ira Corn decided in the mid-60s that he wanted to bring the World Championship back to America. He had his own reasons, and some commercial aspirations, but I will always be grateful to Ira for what he did. Ira decided to recruit a team of what he considered to be reasonably talented players. He felt that if he could provide those players with an environment in which they could work together, they would turn into a good team.

The organization of the Dallas Aces took place in 1967 and they began operations in early 1968. I joined them in early 1969. At the time, I was playing with Eddie Kantar, but during my time with the Aces I played with each of the other members of the team for a period of time — Mike Lawrence, Eddie Kantar, Paul Soloway, Billy Eisenberg, Lew Mathe and Don Krauss. Finally, I teamed up with Bobby Wolff and we stayed together as partners for the next twenty-five years.

Of all the teams I've played on, it would be hard to pick out better teammates than Meckstroth-Rodwell and Nickell-Freeman. We haven't been unbeatable during the time that team has been together, but we've certainly had our share of success.

I've certainly played against some great players over the years. I really like Helgemo's game — I like the way he plays and his attitude. I like Zia's game, too. They're essentially 'no bullshit' players who don't need to play a menu from A-Z. The game's really fun when those guys are playing.

***Bobby Wolff***

## Good and Bad

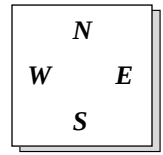
My worst bridge experience was certainly Bermuda in 1975, which was the year of the Italian 'foot soldiers'. Not only did we have a big lead in the final that we blew, but the third Italian pair was clearly cheating and the whole team should have been thrown out of the event. They should never have been allowed to get away with what they did, and the whole experience left a really bad taste in my mouth for a long time afterwards.

The best of all the wins was Stockholm in 1983. The main reason that one stands out from the others is that it was the first time we had beaten the Italians. The way it unfolded, it was a 176-board match and it was a dogfight throughout. Finally, it came down to the last four hands, and when the music stopped, we were ahead.

Curiously, my first World Championship win, in 1970 with the Aces, was something of an anticlimax. I had played in 1964, and lost. I had played in 1966 and lost, and again in 1969. Indeed, I've been on the losing side a lot of times. That first win was very sweet, except we were so much better than the competition in that particular World Championship. There was no Italian team that year, and not really any adequate opposition. We could have played that World Championship twenty times and we would have won at least nineteen.

There was a hand in the 1986 Grand National Teams in Toronto that I got a lot of fun out of. This hand was a major contributing factor to Seymon Deutsch's two World Championships. We had been down 38 IMPs with sixteen boards to play, and I think this was the last hand at our table.

**NORTH**
♠ 10 9 4
♥ 5
♦ A Q J 7 2
♣ A 10 7 4




**SOUTH**
♠ A 7 2
♥ A K 10 3
♦ 5
♣ Q J 9 8 5

| WEST | NORTH | EAST | SOUTH |
|---|---|---|---|
| | ***Seymon*** | | ***Me*** |
| pass | 1♦ | pass | 2♣ |
| pass | 3♣ | pass | 3♥ |
| pass | 4♣ | pass | 4♠ |
| dbl | 6♣ | all pass | |

West's double of 4♠ could only be described as savage, and he continued by leading a thundering ♠K. There was no doubt that this was a serious ♠K. I also knew the guy was a fairly aggressive bidder, but he had passed as dealer.

I gathered in the ♠A and decided to get rid of one spade from dummy. I cashed the two top hearts, and the jack appeared on my left on the second round. Clearly lefty could not have both the ♣K and the ♦K. So, I ruffed a heart and the queen appeared on my left. I was sure that LHO had the ♠KQJ, so once he showed up with the queen and jack of hearts, I was convinced he didn't have either minor-suit king.

I cashed the ace of diamonds and led the queen, throwing a spade when it wasn't covered. I then ruffed a diamond high. Now came a club to the ace and a fourth diamond ruff, bringing down the king and setting up dummy's long card in the suit. Now I led the ♥10. LHO had to ruff with his last trump to prevent me throwing dummy's last spade. I overruffed with the ♣10, and now the only trump outstanding was the king, so I led dummy's diamond winner and threw my last spade from hand as RHO ruffed.

We won the match by just 1 IMP; that qualified us for the Trials, which we won, and that took us to Venice for the 1988 Olympiad, which we also won.

***Dick Freeman***
***and***
***Nick Nickell***

## Trials

I have been involved in some great matches in US Trials. The 1985 match against Larry Cohen's team was one of the best ever. It went all over the place. We had a huge lead, then we blew it and we were down 44 IMPs. Eventually, we came back to win the match by 5 IMPs. Somehow, it seems inconceivable that you can play 48 boards against a team and be 100 IMPs better than them, and then play another 48 hands and now have them be 100 IMPs better than you. The only explanation for this apparent contradiction is that one of the strengths Wolffie and I had when we were going well was that we could take a punch well. We'd have bad sets, but usually they'd be 35-IMP bad sets rather than 70-IMP bad sets. Each hand would stand-alone. We weren't stupid on a hand because of a previous hand, but just stupid because we were stupid!

In that 1985 match, we had a big lead, and the opponents had nibbled on us a little. Wolff and I decided to take the evening off in our normal rotation, even though one of our other pairs had been a little shaky in the afternoon. We should have said, "Hell, let's get this thing back under control," but we didn't. Had we done so though, it would have deprived everybody of a great story.

The final of the 1998 Trials was another humdinger, and again poor Larry Cohen came out on the short end of it. It was another total dogfight though. Rodwell-Meckstroth were great and the opponents totally outplayed us, but we had the better of the luck. I don't know how much better luck, but it was just enough to win the event. When you're playing out of luck, you need very inept opponents.

## The Future

I hate to get on a soapbox, but the powers that be are making a big mistake. They are allowing bridge to turn into a game of language instead of a game of logic. Too much of the emphasis at the moment is on devising methods that the opponents cannot possibly prepare to deal with. Multi 2♦ is a perfect example of the type of convention that causes problems. The reason is that each implementation of Multi, and the way that the opponents play it and their styles, requires a different defense. It is, therefore, not possible to prepare properly, so my opinion is that Multi and other methods of that ilk are going to lead to what I'll call 'induced revokes' on the part of the opponents.

You're dealing with imperfect information. If you are playing chess and someone plays an unusual variation against you, at least you have the whole board in front of you — you have a sporting chance of competing. In the bridge equivalent, you are at a distinct, and I would say unfair, disadvantage. If I were emperor, I would restrict defensive, obstructive bidding methods to showing a known suit. Here is an example of why. Your hand is:

♠ A 10 9 4 ♥ 7 5 ♦ 9 6 3 ♣ Q 9 6 2

| WEST | NORTH | EAST | SOUTH |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2♦[1] | dbl | 2♥ | ? |

1. Weak Two in either hearts or spades

You're playing matchpoints. You are at favorable vulnerability and your agreement is that double may be very strong but is most often a moderate balanced hand. It is reasonable to assume that LHO has hearts and that RHO's 2♥ bid is 'pass or correct'. That is the standard meaning. At matchpoint scoring, it is fairly conservative to pass, and most people would bid.

It turned out later that 2♥ was natural, and not pass or correct. If you knew that, then you would have to be a lunatic to bid. The alert was there but I carelessly didn't ask the question. I bid 2♠ and got slaughtered. That's not the point — I should be able to protect myself — but this pair is not entitled to a top score because of an 'induced revoke'. I submit that if they got *me* on this hand, probably the most experienced player in the world, then they are going to get a lot of people.

I think you are entitled to an edge because you have a greater level of skill, or because you work out more refinements with your partner, or for any number of reasons. Maybe you have more energy and can hang in there for longer. However, you are not entitled to good results because your methods put the opponents in a position where they don't know what is happening, and they are

left with a choice of asking lots of questions (and thus giving their hand away) or guessing what your bids might mean.

You have a game that is suffering from a lack of new recruits. If you make the game so incomprehensible that the novice player has no idea what is happening, then you accentuate that problem. The beauty of most successful games and sports is that they are simple to understand. You don't have to be Freddie Couples to be able to watch golf on TV — everyone can easily understand the objective and can tell the difference between a good shot and a bad one. This game can be plenty tough enough for anybody. I like what the *Macallan* has done in terms of restricting systems, although I would go even further. I say you have no game if you have no public.

I'd really like to see the World Championship go to a vanilla format, with no conventions at all. Let's play every man for himself and see what happens. If you want to go the other way, and allow anything, then let's do it properly, with no disclosure, since that's what we really have now anyway... oh, and let's do away with fixed partnerships too. We could rename the WBF the WWF (World Wrestling Federation) and call it 'All-In Bridge'.

On a personal level, I love to compete, and of course, I love to win, and I want to keep on competing for as long as I can.

## Bob Hamman — Major Achievements

| | |
|---|---|
| ***1962*** | Won Reisinger Teams |
| ***1964*** | 2nd in World Team Olympiad |
| | Won Vanderbilt Teams |
| | Won Blue Ribbon Pairs *(with Lew Mathe)* |
| ***1966*** | 2nd in Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won the Vanderbilt Teams |
| ***1969*** | Won Spingold Teams |
| | 3rd in Bermuda Bowl |
| ***1970*** | Won Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won Reisinger Teams |
| ***1971*** | Won Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won Vanderbilt Teams |
| ***1972*** | 2nd in World Team Olympiad |
| ***1973*** | 2nd in Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won Vanderbilt Teams |
| ***1974*** | Won World Open Pairs *(with Bobby Wolff)* |
| | 2nd in Bermuda Bowl |
| ***1975*** | 2nd in Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won Grand National Teams |

*(continued)*

## Bob Hamman —Major Achievements (cont.)

| | |
|---|---|
| ***1977*** | Won Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won Grand National Teams |
| ***1978*** | Won Reisinger Teams |
| ***1979*** | Won Reisinger and Spingold Teams |
| ***1982*** | Won Spingold Teams |
| ***1983*** | Won Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won Spingold Teams |
| | Won Life Masters Pairs *(with Eddie Kantar*) |
| ***1985*** | Won Bermuda Bowl |
| ***1986*** | 2nd in World Mixed Pairs *(with Kerri Shuman)* |
| | Won Blue Ribbon Pairs *(with Ron von der Porten)* |
| | Won Grand National Teams |
| | Won North American Men's Pairs *(with Paul Swanson*) |
| ***1987*** | Won Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won North American Mixed Teams |
| ***1988*** | Won World Team Olympiad |
| | Won Reisinger Teams |
| | Won North American Men's Board-A-Match Teams |
| ***1989*** | Won Spingold Teams |
| ***1990*** | 2nd in World Par Contest |
| | Won Spingold Teams and North American Swiss Teams |
| ***1991*** | Won Blue Ribbon Pairs *(with Nick Nickell)* |
| ***1992*** | 2nd in World Team Olympiad |
| | Won North American Life Masters Pairs |
| ***1993*** | Won Reisinger and Spingold Teams |
| | Won Blue Ribbon Pairs *(with Michael Rosenberg)* |
| ***1994*** | 2nd in World Open Pairs *(with Michael Rosenberg)* |
| | 2nd in World Mixed Pairs *(with Sabine Zenkel)* |
| | Won Reisinger and Spingold Teams |
| ***1995*** | Won Bermuda Bowl |
| | Won Reisinger and Spingold Teams |
| ***1996*** | Won Spingold Teams |
| ***1997*** | 2nd in Bermuda Bowl |
| ***1998*** | Won Spingold Teams |
| | Won Cavendish Invitational Pairs *(with Nick Nickell)* |
| | 6th in World Par Contest |
| ***1999*** | Won Spingold Teams |

***PLUS***

2nd in North American Championship events 14 times.