



Mr. Bridge

THE GREATEST PLAYER
IN THE WORLD—PERHAPS THE GREATEST PLAYER
OF ALL TIME—IS A SEEMINGLY UNREMARKABLE,
QUIETLY INTENSE SEPTUAGENARIAN

FROM DALLAS NAMED **BOB HAMMAN**.

HOW DO I KNOW HE'S SO GOOD? BECAUSE EVERY
TIME I'VE PLAYED HIM, HE'S INSPIRED THE
SAME EMOTION: FEAR.

by Paul Burka

portraits by Wyatt McSpadden



think there are four great mind games,” Bob Hamman tells me. “Chess, backgammon, poker, and bridge.” He has played them all, and he proceeds to lecture on the subject. “The trouble with chess is that a small difference in skill is a huge difference on the scoreboard. If the other player is better, you lose. You either have to get better or quit the game. As soon as I figured that out, I quit. It’s like being the second-best sprinter in the world. You’re still never going to beat Usain Bolt. Poker

is not about cards; it’s about reading psychological situations. There’s no complex card play. Backgammon is a matter of positional evaluation and math. It’s a gambling game.” ¶ That leaves bridge, the subject that I have come here to discuss with Hamman. We are sitting in his office in North Dallas, but nothing in the headquarters of SCA Promotions, which he founded in 1986, would offer you a clue that he is one of the great games players in the world. Unless, that is, you happen to be, as I am, a bridge player. On the bottom shelf of a metal bookcase, surrounded by works on statistics and other arcana, I recognize a collection of paperbacks that provide a deal-by-deal description of world bridge team competitions. They are not here because Hamman likes to read about world championships.

They are here because Hamman likes to win world championships. He has, in fact, won twelve of them, most recently last September, when he led the United States to victory over Italy, its longtime nemesis in international competition. He began his career in 1962, and he has won fifty North American Bridge Championships. This record is to bridge what Joe DiMaggio’s hitting streak is to baseball—unassailable. It’s why Hamman is widely recognized as the best bridge player on the planet.

On second thought, no bridge player is “widely” recognized these days. There was a

time, back in the thirties, when bridge challenge matches were front-page news and the names of experts like Ely Culbertson were known to the most casual of players. Evening bridge parties were the entertainment of choice for couples. One such social gathering, in Kansas City, ended in tragedy when an argument over a misplayed bridge hand led to the fatal shooting of John Bennett by his wife, Myrtle (she was acquitted). But the days of bridge being front-page news are long gone. The last bridge player who was a household name was Charles Goren, whose books simplified the game for the masses in

the forties and fifties. No bridge champion ever approached the fame of chess savant Bobby Fischer.

The game probably reached its zenith of popularity in the fifties. (Goren made the cover of *Time* in 1958.) The most likely reason for its subsequent decline was television, which became the favorite recreation of Americans in that decade. The sixties brought sex and drugs, activities that not even the intricacies of a trump squeeze could compete with, and the ensuing decades saw opportunities for women in the workplace involving intellectual stimulation, compared with which a game of cards held little fascination. When I offered to teach the game to my own children, my daughter showed some interest, but my two sons fled behind closed doors to their video games.

Beyond this facile sociology lie a couple of hard truths about bridge itself. One: It is not easily mastered. It takes a long time—years, not months—to develop the judgment and the card-play skills to reach a level at which you can win tournaments. Two: Serious bridge players do not read *Dear Abby*. They play bridge because of their competitive natures, and they do not feel compelled to adhere to the rules of etiquette when dealing with newcomers. This attitude has had a predictable effect: There aren’t a lot of newcomers. When

I first started traveling to tournaments around Texas, in the late sixties and the seventies, I was part of a large crowd (fifteen to twenty) of avid players in our late twenties and early thirties. I once won a two-day pairs event at a national tournament in Houston, a victory significant enough to be mentioned in the bridge column of the *New York Times*. But most of us quit playing competitive bridge years ago, and no new group has come along. Almost everyone at a tournament is old enough to qualify for AARP membership.

Meanwhile, bridge has been surpassed by poker, of all things. And not just any kind of poker but Texas Hold 'Em, a variation anyone can learn in five minutes. While bridge competitions are held in venues where the public takes little notice, you can watch poker just about any hour of the day or night on ESPN or Fox Sports. A glamorous high-stakes game of Hold 'Em was central to the remake of the James Bond film *Casino Royale*. The only

Opening spread: Hamman, photographed at the Bridge Academy of North Dallas on March 29, 2010. Right: Hamman (second from right on the back row), in the seventies with the Aces, the team that Dallas businessman Ira Corn assembled to beat the dreaded Italians. Below: His astounding number of tournament victories includes the Bermuda Bowl, the world team championships for contract bridge.

time bridge has gotten publicity on national television was in 1984, when a couple of players from Texas—I had played with one of them—kidnapped the wife of a millionaire Mexican player at a Washington, D.C., tournament. (The news story had it all wrong. It referred to my onetime partner as an expert. Not in my book.)

But crime and punishment are of little consequence to the man sitting across from me. What Hamman cares about is action—the

master. If you became a master, you had to validate the performance in your next tournament. One blip and you weren't a master anymore."

Hamman is burly and broad-shouldered, built to dominate a card table. His most striking feature is the size of his head, considerably larger than normal—a Darwinian accommodation, perhaps, to the need for additional space in which to store his vast aggregation of secrets of the games he plays. His ample supply of gray hair seldom yields to the discipline of a comb.

There is no feeling in bridge worse than drawing your table assignment in a team game and weaving your way through the aisles, wondering who your opponents will be, hoping they will be bozos, and arriving at your destination to see this large gray head lurking there. I have played bridge against Hamman on several occasions and know the feeling well. During one memorable hand, the crucial cards were the queen and the jack of clubs, and I held them. As Hamman contemplated his strategy,

I had a strange feeling, a feeling of being violated. It was Hamman. I could feel the insidious power of his thoughts. He was trying to probe my brain! *Clear your mind, I told myself. Clear your mind. Don't give him any clues.* I was in a panic. I felt that the slightest twitch would reveal my holding. I wanted to look at him out of the corner of my eye, but I didn't dare. That match had a happy ending for our team, but I was completely drained by the experience.

Hamman ascribes his success to what he calls "an inferring state of mind." I know what he means; I call it "seeing through the fog." During a deal of bridge, as rival partnerships describe their holdings and play their cards, a lot of information becomes available to an expert player, who can use it to construct his opponents' holdings. Everyone does this, Hamman just does it better than anyone else. It is a skill, he says, that is also crucial in poker. Then why doesn't he play poker? "There's a limit to how many things I can do at one time."

But something other than an affinity for mental gymnastics drives Hamman. Some people are born with what might be called a games gene—the desire to compete, to conquer, to dominate, to vanquish the other guy. But that is only part of the personality of the games player. There is also a proclivity to challenge fate itself, to take risks, to defy the odds, to search for "action"—in short, to live on the edge. It is a need that seeks fulfillment. Even in his professional life, Hamman lives



match of wits, the test of wills. He often carries a backgammon board to bridge tournaments, lest the hours between sessions pass without competition. How good is he at this diversion? "I'm not world-class, probably top thousand," Hamman said. Chess is a nonfactor. "I played my last tournament in 1963. My high-water mark was provisionally rated



on the edge. You might call him a high-end bookie. His company offers a kind of insurance to promoters of contests, so that if a fan improbably sinks a half-court shot during halftime of a basketball game, his company pays up. Its motto is “Our risk. Your reward.” Hamman is living the life that every bridge bum, every poolroom hustler, every Las Vegas weekend gambler, every racetrack tout—and I myself, in an earlier incarnation—has dreamed of living. I think of him as the man in the Dos Equis commercial brought to life, the most interesting man in the world.



My mother once remarked

that an individual’s true personality reveals itself in two environments: behind the wheel and at the card table. Well, I’m not a very polite driver either. As for cards, I have been playing competitive contract bridge since I was a junior in college. It is a great game, an onion one can peel for a lifetime without uncovering all the layers. I took up the game, reluctantly, at the request of a girlfriend in my hometown of Galveston. I remember making the stupid remark that bridge was a “girls’ game.” But I bought a paperback called *Five Weeks to Winning Bridge* and read it cover to cover. As it happened, I had stumbled upon what is probably the best introductory text to the game that has ever been written.

Which is not to say that I was a quick study. Playing with fellow students at Rice University, I fell for the “Mississippi heart hand,” a prearranged deal that, legend has it, gamblers supposedly concocted on riverboats to fleece travelers. The deck is fixed so that you are dealt very good cards, but when you try to play the hand, nothing goes right, and you suffer a large penalty. One day, a regular in our game suggested to me that we try our luck at duplicate bridge, so named because the cards are dealt at each table, then played, and then the four hands are reassembled and moved to other tables until, at the end of the evening, every pair has played all the deals, usually against total strangers. Your results are compared against the results of other pairs. You get a point for each pair whose score you beat and half a point for a tie. I was hooked for life the first night.

The characters I encountered in the bridge world fascinated me. Serious bridge players are not normal people. They go to tournaments in classy hotels in big cities with sights to see and fine restaurants to dine in—and never leave the premises. They employ a strange vocabulary—“stiff” denotes a single card in a suit; “squeeze” is a play that forces an opponent to discard when he doesn’t want to; “stick” is an ace; “tap” has nothing

to do with beer; “finesse” is not slick; “imp” denotes not a mischievous child but a basic unit of scoring in major team events. Many experts are gamblers—legal or otherwise—at cards or backgammon or sports events or stock options. Before the advent of cell phones, the end of play on Saturdays and Sundays at tournaments was marked by an exodus of experts looking for pay phones so that they could call their bookies to check on their bets.

Before I describe more triumphs and tragedies, I should explain a little bit about the game for the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with it. Contract bridge derived from whist, a popular card game in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like bridge, whist involved two fixed partnerships. All 52 cards are dealt, 13 to each player. The dealer’s final card is turned up. Its suit becomes trumps. The person to the dealer’s left chooses a card to initiate the play. Subsequent players must follow suit if they can do so or discard another suit if they can’t or play a trump. Plays by all four competitors, in order, constitute a trick. The objective is to win the trick, either by playing the highest card or by playing a trump, and ultimately to win the most tricks on each successive deal.

Contract bridge added the element of bidding to the game. The language of bidding allows only fifteen words—“one,” “two,” “three,” “four,” “five,” “six,” “seven,” “clubs,” “diamonds,” “hearts,” “spades,” “no-trump,” “pass,” “double,” “redouble”—to be employed in describing the 635 billion or so possible bridge hands. The bidding conveys to your partner the strength of your cards (that is, how many aces, kings, and other high-ranking cards you have) and the length (that is, how your thirteen cards are distributed into suits). The more high cards your partnership holds and the longer your suits are, the more tricks you should be able to take. A bid of “seven spades,” for example, is a contract to take all thirteen tricks—always add six to the number bid—in this case with spades as the trump suit. Bonus points are awarded for fulfilling a contract; penalties are assessed for failing to fulfill one. Each partnership can bid for the right to name trumps and to contract for the number of tricks it thinks it can take. Unlike whist, what matters is not which side takes the *most* tricks; it is whether the side that outbids the other takes at *least* the precise number of tricks it has contracted for.

Even if you couldn’t follow that explanation, you can understand this: To play bridge well requires a general aptitude for card games, some talent for simple math, the discipline to maintain one’s concentration for several hours at a time, mental and emotional toughness in the face of misfortune, and “table feel,” which is a sixth sense of being

able to know what is going on around you. No one has better table feel than Hamman.

When I have competed against him, I am always reluctant to let go of my cards, because I know that whatever I play, I may be giving him the clue that he needs to achieve success. Once, I was playing for the Texas championship of a nationwide event called the Grand National Teams. Hamman’s team was the opposition. The winner would earn the chance to play against teams from other regions of the country for the national championship. The match was tied with nine deals to go when we sat down to begin the final segment. Hamman walked in, seated himself on my right, and said, “Let’s go.” In that instant, I knew fear. I knew nakedness. Invisible fingers clutched at my innards, constricted my throat, twisted my stomach. Hamman made a daring bid known in bridge lingo as a “psyche,” conveying that he had good hearts, but he actually held only two low hearts. My partner and I were completely fooled. For all practical purposes, the match was over.



By the time Hamman was five

years old, he was already badgering his parents to let him participate in the card games they played with their friends in Los Angeles. He was nine or ten when he took up chess and as a teenager became fascinated by the game. He studied complex positions and read the literature, even books that were written in German. One of his strongest memories is how much his dad hated to lose to him. He played well enough to achieve the rank of provisional master, but in the next tournament after gaining his provisional status, he lost it. (Years later, he struck up a friendship with Oswald Jacoby, a cryptologist during World War II who became one of the greatest bridge players of all time, and they would play chess without a board, stating their moves out loud and keeping track of the game in their heads.)

He also started playing hearts and poker for money in L.A. One day, he got a call from a high school buddy. He was looking for a fourth player for bridge. Was Hamman available to play? As he tells the story, he found a book on the game and read enough to learn the mechanics. He showed up and, as he describes it, “made a complete fool of myself.”

Like most accomplished players, Hamman was never very serious about school. (That’s a story I can tell too: I once skipped a law school final in Austin because it was inconveniently scheduled to interfere with a bridge tournament in Corpus Christi.) On his second day of school at UCLA, he discovered

the bridge game in the student center. He enrolled in classes but passed the days in the student center playing chess and bridge. “I spent five years at UCLA without ever finishing a class,” he tells me. When he wrote *At the Table*, his autobiography, in 1994, he dedicated it to “the chess players who made me realize there had to be an easier game” and “the college professors whose classes were so boring I couldn’t help but focus on bridge.”

“Did you get the game right away?” I asked him.

“You’re assuming I’ve currently got it,” he said. “There is still room for lots of R&D about the game.”

“Have you learned anything new?” I asked.

“All kinds of new stuff!” he said, with obvious enthusiasm. “It’s a matter of keeping an open mind. Here’s a hand I played against Bart [Bramley, an expert player and MIT-trained mathematician who works with Hamman at SCA].”

Uh-oh, I thought to myself. *This is going to be way over my head, and I’m going to reveal myself as a hacker.* “I’m in four spades,” Hamman said. “I had ace king queen fifth of spades, ace queen and a heart, queen and one diamond, jack third of clubs.” I scribbled it down dutifully. “I’m pretty sure that the king of hearts and the king of diamonds are to my left.” *Wait a minute, how can you be so sure of that? . . . I’m never sure.* “I can always fall back on finessing the club nine for my tenth trick.” I should have known better than to ask a question, but I did. Big mistake. Sure enough, I revealed myself as a hacker. In fact, I am staring at the diagram in my notebook as I write these words, and I still can’t figure out what made the hand so fascinating to Hamman.

He attended his first national tournament in 1957, at the then-elegant Ambassador Hotel, on Wilshire Boulevard, in Los Angeles; by 1959, Hamman says, “I was quite an accomplished player.” How does one get to be that good? You can’t learn the game by playing at the local duplicate bridge club for fun. Hamman played at a club where the competition was for money. Money bridge is a study in human nature. Technique is less important than the psychological side of the game. The adversaries ranged from unschooled players with big bankrolls and bigger egos to the best players on the West Coast. “The way to learn any game is to play in a competitive atmosphere for stakes you can’t afford,” Hamman told me. At that time, he worked at Douglas Aircraft, but his life was all about bridge. Today the only cities where bridge is played for serious money are London and New York. It is next to impossible to make a living playing money bridge. As Hamman told me, “You

have to find ten people who are willing to lose twenty-five thousand dollars a year to you.”

By the early sixties, he was one of a West Coast contingent of players who were among the best in the country. In 1963 Hamman and his partner, Don Krauss, stunned the bridge community by winning the right to represent the United States in the World Bridge Olympiad, which was to take place in New York the next year. In those days, the best pairs in the U.S. and Canada competed in a special tournament in which the pairs with the three highest scores would form the international team. Hamman and Krauss had won the tournament, but the team coach designated by the American Contract Bridge League (the ACBL, for short, the governing body for most bridge competition in America) was an East Coast player and bridge politician afflicted with New England chauvinism toward West Coast players. The U.S. and Italy met for the championship, but the coach kept Hamman and Krauss on the bench for the entire match. The Blue Team, as the dreaded Italian squad was known, defeated the Americans again, without Hamman and Krauss ever getting to play a single deal in the championship match. They were furious, but there was nothing they could do about it. After the tournament, the coach turned to Don Krauss and said, “It was really nice to have gotten to know you, Bob.”



In 1969, after the U.S. suffered

yet another defeat at the hands of Italy in international competition—its eleventh consecutive loss—a Dallas businessman named Ira Corn became determined to wrest the world championship from the Blue Team and bring the Bermuda Bowl, emblematic of world bridge supremacy, back to the United States. Corn’s motives were not entirely altruistic; as the president of a conglomerate called Michigan General, he envisioned marketing opportunities that might lure the masses to the game. Corn knew he wasn’t good enough to play for the team, so he recruited five experts, most of them still in the process of building their reputations. He brought them to Dallas and paid them a salary. For his sixth member he wanted Hamman, who was dubious. He knew the players whom Corn had recruited, and he didn’t think a lot of their abilities or their work habits. He said no. Some months later, during the competition to select the U.S. team for the next world championship, he noticed that the Aces, as Corn had named his squad, had become much better players. “I decided if I wanted to win a world championship, methinks I ought to sign up,” he told me.

One reason the Aces had raised the level of their game is that Corn had hired a coach for the team, a former Air Force lieutenant colonel and onetime San Antonio bridge club owner named Joe Musumeci. “Moose,” as he was called, analyzed the game and came up with a list of the bridge player’s seven deadly sins—for example, “unilateral decisions” that excluded one’s partner from the decision-making. He also insisted that the Aces analyze their mistakes and determine who should bear the responsibility for a bad result. At whatever level you play, you cannot get better unless you are able to set aside your ego and look dispassionately at a bid or play that went wrong.

The Aces became a juggernaut, winning world championships. But they never beat the Blue Team, whose top players had retired from championship play by that time. Hamman endured bitter disappointments, none worse than the 1975 world championship match against Italy. Some of the Blue Team members had come out of retirement. An Italian pair—not Blue Team players—were caught cheating, tapping each other’s feet under the table. Astonishingly, the cheaters were merely reprimanded and allowed to continue to play. But barriers were placed under the card tables. “If they were such innocents,” Hamman asked me, still holding the grudge after all these years, “why was that necessary?” Even the card gods were against the Aces; the Italians bid to a poor contract, but the position of the cards allowed them to be successful. That clinched the match for Italy. The large audience who was watching the final few hands of the match included American players who were cheering loudly—for the Italians.

“Look at it this way,” Hamman wrote in his account of the tumultuous climax of the championship. “If you were a bridge player with reasonable expectations for success and another team beat you routinely, wouldn’t it be natural for you to cheer for whoever that other team happened to be playing at the time? In Texas, lots of people say their favorite team is whoever is playing Oklahoma.”



If I did not have to work for a

living, and if I had a regular bridge partner, I would attend the three national tournaments the ACBL holds each year. I did go to Washington, D.C., last summer to play on a team representing Texas against teams from around the country. We didn’t do well—some days the fog never lifts—but we did manage to win a secondary event (thirty master points!). If you get tired of playing, you can grab a chair and sit behind world-class players and see

what makes them better than you (answer: consistency). It is reassuring to see that they make errors too. “Bridge is a game of errors, even at the highest level,” Hamman says.

This spring’s national tournament took place in Reno, Nevada, and I went not to play but to watch Hamman compete in the most prestigious event of the competition, the Vanderbilt Knockout Teams. It took place at a large hotel with several cavernous playing areas, and it drew the best players in the world. There was a Polish squad wearing red shirts with “Polska” on the back, and an all-Netherlands team in orange T-shirts that read “If you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much.” Italian players were sprinkled among several of the best teams, and French and Norwegian internationalists made up yet another squad.

I would have thought I was back in the thirties, so crowded was the playing area. By the end of a week and a half of bridge, 4,000 players and 13,000 tables had been in play. There were morning games, midnight games, and everything in between. Except for an occasional announcement by a tournament director, the rooms would be completely, eerily silent.

As the top seed, Hamman and his partner, Zia Mahmood, didn’t have to play on the first day of the Vanderbilt. Zia is a top player from Pakistan who is noted for his imagination and flair. One night I was sitting behind Zia, having arrived early enough to claim a chair and place it strategically so that I could follow the play and take notes. Tall and lanky, with dark hair that stood straight up, Zia was wearing a white linen jacket, an untucked long-sleeved blue shirt, trousers, and pink socks.

On the second day, they faced a team of unknown Asian players. The match was surprisingly close at the halfway point (32 of 64 deals). It was an omen. Hamman’s team eventually won the match, but they had been under pressure, and they would continue to be under pressure in the following days. In the third round they played a team that included some strong Texas players. I watched Hamman play for four and a half hours, and I bet he didn’t say a hundred words. One of his greatest strengths is his ability to put the last hand out of his mind and move on to the next one. “If you are thinking about the last hand,” he told me during our conversation in his office, “you lose your focus for the next one.” Then he spun a tale, perhaps too good to be true, about a lesson he learned from a birthday card he once received: “It said, ‘Forget about the past. You can’t change it. Forget about the present. I didn’t buy you one.’”

In the third round, Hamman’s team trailed again in the final segment. Late at night, as matches throughout the room were being decided, Hamman played the queen of hearts.

Ira Chorush, of Houston, who is an excellent player, had made up his mind that if Hamman played the queen, he must not play the king. “The next thing I knew,” Chorush told me after the match, “my king of hearts was on the table.” The tension is so great in a close match that your brain shorts out for an instant and you can’t believe what you’ve done. Chorush’s play saved Hamman from a tough guess of what to do next, and the top-seeded team survived to reach the fourth round.

There, Hamman and Zia encountered a formidable team—the French and Norwegian internationalists. I watched the last of the four segments, standing near Hamman. His team had fallen far behind at the halfway mark but rallied in the third segment to trail by a small margin. The deals seemed pretty “flat” to me—that is, not a lot of hands that could lead to big swings of points—and after the last card was played, Hamman and Zia went into the hall to compare their results with their teammates. It was going to be close. Often a loud cheer goes up during these comparisons, indicating that a team has won, but I knew Hamman would never express his emotions that way. I walked up to the huddle where he and his teammates were comparing scores and heard somebody say, “Lose by nine.” Hamman immediately left the huddle to go over to congratulate his opponents.

After the tournament, I called Hamman to ask him about the match. I felt as if I had jinxed the team. “It didn’t seem like there were a lot of opportunities for swings,” I said.

“There were enough,” he said. “We just didn’t get it done.”



The challenge for many bridge

experts is how to make a living by playing cards. Many play professionally; they take on clients and help them amass master points, the basic measure of ability at bridge. The ACBL does not award cash prizes; it awards master points. The initial goal of every player is to gain three hundred points—some of them won in major tournaments—which are necessary to become a life master. I have more than two thousand points—not a lot by today’s standards. I won most of them before 1982, when my wife and I became parents. (And how did I meet my wife, you ask? While teaching beginning bridge at the student union on the UT campus.) It is a measure of Hamman’s stature that he rarely plays for hire. He plays with whomever he wants to play with; in addition to top experts like Zia, his partners have included Bill Gates and Warren Buffett.

He has always had a day job. By the early eighties, Hamman was working as an insur-

ance broker. “It was nothing special,” he said, “just a job.” A few years later, he got a call from a man named John Everhart, who handled the risk on hole-in-one contests. An automobile manufacturer, for example, was offering to give away a car if anyone made a hole in one during a golf tournament. Everhart would be paid a fee, but if anybody made a hole in one, he would have to pay for the car. If nobody made a hole in one, he got to keep the fee. In effect, Everhart was offering insurance to the promoter, and he asked Hamman to come on board. Despite Everhart’s objections however, one of the first ones Hamman took on was a prize in a fishing tournament in South Carolina for anyone who caught a blue marlin that broke the state record. Hamman checked on the size of the biggest marlin ever found in South Carolina and the adjacent states and decided that a bigger catch was unlikely. He was right, and he didn’t have to pay. “Three or four weeks later,” Hamman recalled, “we got a call from a client for a fishing tournament in Idaho with a five-thousand-dollar prize for a promotion. What would we charge? I said eighteen hundred. Then Everhart calls. ‘You agreed to no fishing, and now you’re taking another one. You’re trying to turn this into a casino,’ he said.”

“Now you’ve got the right idea,” Hamman shot back.

Not long afterward, Hamman struck out on his own. He formed SCA Promotions, with SCA standing for Sports Contests Associates, and it wasn’t long before word got out that there was a company in Dallas willing to take risks. The gamesman had found his niche. SCA accepted the risk on a \$1 million horseshoe-pitching contest for a Houston radio station. One of the conditions SCA usually lays down is that contestants must be chosen randomly. On contest day, however, Hamman learned that the radio station had already preselected the contestants—and they had been practicing for a week, in violation of the contract. “We’ve got one million dollars at stake,” Hamman told me, “or we can refund their thirty-thousand-dollar fee and lose business. We said, ‘Let ’em throw.’ One woman got within twelve inches, but it was off to the side.” In a half-court shooting contest at the University of Southern California, the contestant crossed the line by a foot and a half—violating the conditions of the contest—and sank the shot. With the crowd going crazy, SCA covered the prize.

Long John Silver’s wanted to do a promotion when NASA sent two rovers to Mars. Every American would win free giant shrimp if NASA found evidence of an ocean on Mars. “As you can see,” Hamman said,

“the first problem is, we have to decide what constitutes an ocean. It can’t just be evidence of water.” They finally decided that an ocean had to cover at least the same portion of the Martian surface as the smallest ocean on Earth, the Arctic. The odds were against the rovers, of course, but if they actually found something, Hamman was going to be feeding the entire country. SCA checked with NASA to determine the range of the land rovers and covered the promotion. NASA did find evidence of water, but if there was an ocean, the rovers didn’t have the range to find it.

Several of the employees at SCA are well-known bridge players, including Hamman’s son, Chris, from his first marriage, who determines the odds on many of the sporting contests SCA covers. (Hamman’s wife, Petra, has won a World Team Olympiad.)

But SCA’s most famous bet turned out to be a big loser. This was a clash of champions—Hamman versus Lance Armstrong. The owner of Armstrong’s team approached SCA to cover a portion of an incentive bonus if the cyclist won the Tour de France three consecutive times. The company paid Armstrong \$1.5 million for winning the 2002 Tour de France and \$3 million for a victory in 2003. But SCA refused to pay \$5 million when Armstrong won again in 2004. By that time, a book titled *L.A. confidentiel: les secrets de Lance Armstrong* had appeared (though not in English), containing allegations that Armstrong had used performance-enhancing drugs.

Hamman was convinced by the book’s allegations. He called me to talk about stories *Texas Monthly* had written about Armstrong. “It’s a lock,” he said of the allegations. But it wasn’t: A three-member arbitration panel ruled for Armstrong. It was a bitter pill for someone who isn’t used to losing.



Hamman is 71 now, an age by

which most great players have retired gracefully from international competition and moved on to less-demanding events. If there is an heir apparent to Hamman—aside from Zia—it would probably be one of his international teammates, 53-year-old Jeff Meckstroth or 52-year-old Eric Rodwell—or, as they are referred to in the bridge world, “Meckwell.”

It is reasonable, then, to ask whether Hamman is American bridge’s last great champion. The next generation of American bridge enthusiasts has not made an appearance. Chinese bridge received a strong boost when the late Deng Xiaoping became China’s leader in the eighties, and Asian players are much in evidence at national tournaments. Still, Hamman remains an iconic figure in the game. He has a swagger and a style that no one else in the game today can match except Zia, and I wonder whether there is enough room at one bridge table for two swaggers. You can’t open a bridge book about famous hands without coming across at least one example of Hamman’s genius.

One reason that he continues to win is that for someone who lives a high-pressure life—traveling on weekends to tournaments where he engages in tense competition, running a business in which risk is ever-present—he is an extremely disciplined person. When he is competing, he follows the regimen Moose laid down for the Aces forty years ago, with a few refinements: “I get my beauty sleep between sessions. I don’t eat dinner—you can’t want to win if you go to dinner. Two drinks maximum after the session. In your room by two a.m. No more than one visitor in the room.” He grinned. “Two visitors is not in play.”

His enthusiasm for bridge remains bound-

less. Hamman still plays the game for fun; he makes occasional trips to the West Coast to play money bridge with the old L.A. crowd. “The game is an absolutely great game, no two ways about it,” he said. “Anyone who acquires just a modest degree of success will get hooked.” But there are barriers to success that worry him. One is that you have to establish a partnership—find someone with whom you are compatible—and choose a bidding system that suits your style. A lot of people just don’t have the time to do this. Another is that bridge is an intensely competitive activity, and it is not only the opponents who can be downright rude but also your partner and experts whose opinion you seek out. When I was an undergraduate at Rice, I once asked a player at the Houston duplicate club about a problem I had faced, and his response was, “If you keep bidding that way, you’ll make life master in 1999.” (I beat the line by 29 years.)

The ACBL and local clubs have tried to get players to be more welcoming to newcomers, but in such a competitive endeavor, it may be a losing battle. Hamman, who conducts himself impeccably at the table, nevertheless is scornful of this trend. “Bridge is not going to cater to the gardening crowd,” he said. “At the top it’s competition. One thing I don’t like about the way the bridge world has gone is this politeness crap. You’re there to beat ’em. If they get rattled, tough.”

If there is any evidence that Hamman is conscious of his own mortality, it would be his interest in encouraging promising young players. If he spots one, he is likely to issue an invitation to play with him in tournaments. When I asked him why he took on these projects, he said, “If I beat them up enough, they might be persuaded to amount to something other than a bridge player.”

And then, said the greatest player in the world, “You can’t be a king unless you have a kingdom.”