

Tour de Bridge by Derrick Browne

Bob Hamman was the world's top ranked player from 1985 to 2004 and will represent the USA this month at the World Championships in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Lance Armstrong won the Tour de France more times than anyone else – every year from 1999 to 2005 – and made his comeback this year, finishing third. Here is a tale of two fierce competitors, and their legal battle over contested millions.

Hamman moved to Dallas in 1969 to join the Aces, formed to wrest domination of the world bridge scene out of the hands of the mighty Italian Blue Team. They won the 1970 World Bridge Championships.

In 1986, Hamman founded SCA Promotions. "We help companies offer a prize that would be beyond a sponsor's ability or desire to pay," says Hamman. For example, when Pepsi ran a competition offering a (tiny) chance of winning a billion dollar prize, they turned to SCA. Hamman in turn asked fellow bridge player Warren Buffet to get his Berkshire Hathaway company to underwrite it, in return for a premium of about ten million dollars.

Armstrong and his backers bought a US\$420 000 contract from SCA before the 2001 Tour de France for another odds-against event – a series of consecutive wins by Armstrong in the Tour de France. Hamman paid \$1.5 million to Armstrong for his 2002 win, and another \$3 million in 2003. But by the time another \$5 million was due for winning in 2004, a book had been published alleging Armstrong had used performance-enhancing drugs, and Hamman refused to pay.

The case went to court, fees and interest were added, and Hamman eventually paid out \$7.5 million. "Competition is an innocent framework for carrying out one's aggressions... and hardly anyone dies," he says.

Arguably the most dramatic and controversial world championship was that of 2003, in Monte Carlo. In the final between Italy and Hamman's USA1 team, USA were down heavily with just two boards to go. On the second last board, Hamman's partner made 4H whereas the Italians had got too high at the other table. Although the players didn't yet know it, USA were still down 500 points going onto this, the last board:

Dealer West, EW vul.

	NORTH		
	S 2		
	H AJ93		
	D KQT9865		
	C 5		
WEST		EAST	
S JT		S A6543	
H 542		H KQT86	
D A7		D 42	
C KT7642		C A	
	SOUTH		
	S KQ987		
	H 7		
	D J3		
	C QJ983		
WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
<i>Hamman</i>	<i>Lauria</i>	<i>Soloway</i>	<i>Versace</i>
Pass	1D	2D	Dble
2H	3D	Pass	Pass
3H	5D	Dble	All pass

Soloway's 2D was Michaels, showing 5-5 in the majors. Versace's double was explained as negative. Hamman expressed his preference for hearts, and competed with 3H on the next round. At the other table, the Italian East had gone on to 4H, four down for -400 points. Now Lauria compounded that disastrous result by bidding 5D, doubled.

Soloway led the CA. After putting down his dummy, Versace left the table, reportedly muttering that partner's bid would lose them the event. And so it would, if Soloway led a diamond at trick two, to stop declarer from ruffing heart losers. But no – out came a top heart, won by the ace.

Now Lauria could escape for one light, tying the match, by leading a spade towards dummy's honours. Soloway would take the SA, but dummy's trumps would provide an entry to the spades for discards. But instead Lauria opted to twice ruff clubs (high) and hearts. He then led the SK.

Soloway won the SA then paused. All he needed to do was cash his top heart... but instead, he led a spade, allowing dummy to make the SQ for a tie!

But no! Lauria, distracted by having to play dummy's cards because his partner had left the table, accidentally grabbed the S7 instead of the SQ. Hamman quickly won the S10 and refused to allow Lauria to correct his card. Lauria threw down his hand in disgust. USA had won another world championship.