

Helpful Hints for Happier Partnerships and Higher Scores

I intend to cover five different situations that come up often. The keywords that I would like to have you consider are patience and logical inferences.

1. Avoiding bad overcalls

All of us have heard the axiom that “bridge belongs to the bidders.” This is certainly true most of the time. Bridge also belongs to the passers. Learning the difference can be a relatively complex and nuanced process. Example:

RHO opens 1D (no one vulnerable). You hold KQ6 of spades, 98xxx of hearts, KJx of diamonds, and Ax of Clubs. You have 13 points, an opener. Do you bid? If so, what? Your heart suit is on life support. Bidding at this point will likely encourage partner to make an unfortunate lead if your opponents get the bid. You are too skinny to bid 1NT. You have the wrong shape for a takeout double. Logical inference should encourage you to be patient and to pass. Passing puts you in a much better bidding position. If LHO passes, partner can take some action on very little. He must not forget that I could have values with unattractive distribution. If partner doubles, I will be comfortable with bidding 1H. The partnership will know this fact--If I had a solid 5-card heart suit, I would have overcalled it at my first opportunity to bid. Therefore, my partner will know that I probably have only four hearts, or a very bad five hearts. [NOTE: If I had one less heart and one more spade, I could bid 2D if partner doubles. This would suggest 4/4 in the majors.]

There is no need to jump with your 13 points. Partner will be able to judge how poor the 3rd hand is and how strong the opening bidder is. If 2nd hand now bids, we can probably give him 4-5 points and some distribution. This would become a crucial point in the auction. If 3rd hand takes action, partner can send a clear signal by passing. This should say that partner believes that he has fulfilled his total responsibility and has nothing more to add to the conversation. To bid at this point would say to me that partner has enough (or more) to have responded to an opening bid. Now, opening

bidder will probably give up and we will be in a position to select a makeable contract.

2. Avoiding poor preemptive openers

In 1st or 2nd seat, I would suggest that you take a second look before you open 3 of a suit, just because you have 7 pieces. I realize that the purpose of a preempt is to make it more difficult for you opponents to find their ideal contract at a lower level. My rule of thumb is that the preemptive suit should have some redeeming characteristics (A, KQ, QJT) so when partner rightly leads the suit, you don't give up a trick. Hopefully, if the suit is led, it will produce at least one winner. Obviously, bad preempts by partner also preempt you. Frequently, the reality is that I may have a very good hand with a self-sustaining suit that I will not be able to introduce after partner has preempted. If you play that bidding another suit is forcing, you may be too high to recover. What would be wrong with passing a long, bad suit in 1st or 2nd seat and introducing it later when you find that partner doesn't have much and the vulnerability is favorable. Partner will know that you have length, but not great strength. This may be the perfect time for a sacrifice. Another consideration would be that if, in 1st or 2nd seat, you open a bad preemptive suit at unfavorable vulnerability and partner has little, opponents may double and you're looking at a telephone number result. What I am suggesting is that you look further down the road and not open robotically with a long suit. I've had it happen many times that it was not wise to preempt with a bad 8-card suit. I can already hear some people saying "There's no such thing as a bad 8-card suit." It's painful, but can be appropriate.

3. Helping partner make informed decisions

One of the most critical points in the auction occurs when you are forced to make the decision whether or not to raise your partner's overcall. It's obvious that we are often dealt less-than-perfect hands with values, but awkward distributions. If we have three or more of partner's suit, we have no problem raising a level. With only a doubleton, you may be hesitant to raise. This becomes a matter of partnership trust. If partner has made an overcall on a bad suit, you may be in trouble. We should be

able to trust that you're on at least a 5/2 fit with good tickets in the suit, or a 6/2 fit with some good texture. If you have honor/doubleton in partner's suit, you may have a good chance for a ruff or a possible trump promotion. As always, vulnerability plays an important role. Don't be afraid to raise partner's suit with a doubleton, because you **trust** that partner has not overcalled on air!

4. Balancing Responsibilities

One element that builds trust in a partnership is when one partner knows that the other will not let an auction die if there is any chance that they should be in the ring, slugging it out. I am not advocating that we should bid on every hand. The trick is taking inferences from the bidding that can guide the level to which it may be safe to push. Again, vulnerability must be a prime consideration. There are days which I will call "flat" when it seems that you get your unfair share of 4X3 hands with 8 HCPs.

Example:

RHO opens 1D, nobody vulnerable, you pass with your balanced 8 points, and LHO bids 2D (natural, not inverted). Pass by partner, pass by opener. With 4-4-2-3 distribution, you should give it one shot by doubling. Your **trusted** partner will know that you are merely being a nuisance and not go crazy. Partner will choose a major (if possible) and you will pass. It will be up to the opponents as to whether or not to bid more. A partnership with **trust** will not suddenly decide to double for penalty. Getting a plus score of any description will probably be an above-average result. It's not necessary to double and have to endure the stress of finding the one esoteric defense that will set the contract. The partnership based on **trust** will be able to explore creative bidding without the fear of a bottom board because partner got greedy.

5. Conducting Constructive Postmortems

My first serious bridge partner was a lady named Eunice. She gave me the "duplicate disease" in Fort Worth many years ago. She was a mature college student of mine. When she learned that I had been playing

in a foursome, she invited me to play duplicate at the country club on Tuesday night. That was all that it took. I needed a lot more of that drug! That began a partnership that played an average of three times a week for 30 years. We travelled all over from San Diego to Toronto. During those 30 years we never had a cross word. We respected each other enough to realize that each of us were good enough players to be able to realize what we had done wrong. We didn't need to berate each other in front of our opponents. We made notes on our scoresheets of questions we should discuss away from the table. There are people (no names) who cannot even wait until their cards are back in the board before they begin assigning blame. Frequently, their analysis is flawed. All they have accomplished is to damage partner's self-esteem. True, bridge players cannot be thin-skinned and survive. However, lasting partnerships depend on finding a way to learn together. Unfortunately, Eunice passed away about 5 years ago. I will miss the many hours that we amicably spent at the bridge table.