

Winning Ways to Work with Your Partner

by Steve Wood

“Bridge is a partnership game.”

How many times have you heard this old and very true cliché? The more you and your partner can work together to solve problems, the more fun you both are going to have..... and you will get better results, too.

When a bridge hand presents a decision to be made, your partnership will make better choices if both players are involved, whenever possible..... rather than one player taking it upon himself to decide. Here are just a few ways to enable partners to collaborate to improve their scores.

#1 – Learn to use “control bids” to explore for slams.

The bidding starts 1♥-3♥ or 1♠-2NT, 3♦ or some similar sequence that shows a good fit. How often have you heard that auction then proceed with 4NT, asking for key cards?

Sometimes the 4NT bid is justified, because the asker has a very strong hand and knows that the partnership has at least second-round control in every suit. But more often, there are problems.

Problem 1 -- What if the 4NT bidder has a holding like Jx or xxx in an unbid suit? Even if the partnership is only missing one key card, how does the asker know that the opponents can't cash the AK in that unbid suit?

Problem 2 -- What if the 4NT bidder thinks the combined partnership assets probably are enough for slam but really isn't sure? Wouldn't it be nice to be able to ask your partner whether he likes his hand for slam purposes?

“Control bids” solve these two problems.¹

¹ We used to refer to these bids as “cue bids” – but because the purpose of the bid is to show a control, bridge terminology has improved to call them “control bids.”

In slam auctions, “control bids” may include the following:

- Ace
- King
- Void
- Singleton (but not in partner’s known side suit)

When players first learn about control bids, they tend to limit them to aces and maybe voids. As we learn more, I hope you will see that it’s better to allow all four types of controls listed above.

Let’s look at an example. Your partner opens 1♠, you jump to 2NT (Jacoby, asking for shortness), and he rebids 3♥, showing a singleton or void in hearts. Here is your hand:

♠ KQ53	1♠-2NT
♥ A84	3♥*- ??
♦ AJ84	
♣ J9	*shortness in hearts

Now what? You have a pretty good hand with good trumps, and the news that partner is short in hearts has improved things. But you don’t know whether partner has a minimum hand or some extra values..... and you don’t know whether he has a control in clubs. If you were to jump to 4NT at this point, you basically would be hoping it’s your lucky day. Rather than wish and hope, why not ask partner for some input?

Make a control bid of 4♦. Partner knows you aren’t suggesting diamonds as trumps.... you are showing a control in diamonds. Notice also that you are denying a control in clubs. We bid controls up the line, so if you skip over 4♣, it means you don’t have a control in that suit.

What will your partner do over 4♣?

First, if he doesn’t have a club control either, partner will sign off in 4♠, because he realizes that the opponents can cash the AK of clubs off the top (maybe his hand is something like ♠ AJT84 ♥ Q ♦ KQ6 ♣ QT42). “Problem 1” is solved..... disaster averted.

Second, if partner does have a club control, he now can let you know whether he has a minimum hand or something better. He knows you have a promising hand, or you would not be making a control bid in the first place. You already know he has at least a singleton heart because of his response to Jacoby 2NT. If he has something better – void or singleton A – he will control bid 4♥, and you will bid 4♠, leaving it up to him to decide about slam. If partner has just a singleton heart, he will bid 4♠ to show a minimum hand.... but with extra values, he will do something stronger (either 4NT or a control bid at the 5-level).

All of this back and forth is like a conversation between you and your partner to exchange information and make a collaborative decision. If you use control bidding, you will get to the slams that are worth bidding.... and you will avoid the poor slams that hurt your score.

There is a lot more to know about control bids.... but this is your introduction to how they work.

#2 – Don't just jump to game – tell partner you have a good hand

Here are some auctions that I see all the time.

- A. 1♥ - P - 4♥
- B. 1♥ - 2♦ - 4♥
- C. 1♠ - P - 2♣ - P, 2♠ - P - 4♠
- D. 1♥ - 3♦ - 4♥

What do all of these jumps to game have in common? None of them show a strong hand.

Sequence A is preemptive and denies slam interest. Yet I often see players jump to 4♥ with an opening hand and 3-card heart support. What difference does it make? What if partner has a very strong hand and passes 4♥ when you can make slam? He trusted your preempt, and now a making slam is down the drain. What if the opponents bid 4♠ over 4♥? How can you and your partner decide what to do over that if partner has the wrong picture of your hand?

Sequence B is preemptive, too. If you have a good hand – limit raise or better with 3+ hearts – your first bid should be 3♦. Now your partner knows

you have a good hand. He can bid game, try for slam, or even show you a minimum opening hand (3♥). If the opponents jump to 5♦ or bid 3♠ or 4♠, partner is in a position to decide what to do. That's because you worked with him by cue-bidding to give a helpful description of your hand. If you blast to 4♥ with a good hand, you are setting the stage for your partner to make a bad decision.

Sequence C shows something very specific – a dead minimum 2/1 hand with only three spades. With a better 2/1 hand, don't cut off the conversation with your partner. Just bid 3♠ and see what happens. Your partner will not pass! You are in a game-forcing 2/1 auction. If your partner has a routine hand, he will go to 4♠. If he has a better hand, he can suggest slam by make a control bid, and you will take it from there.

Sequence D shows a reasonable hand – “there are no preempts over a preempt” – but it doesn't encourage slam. To do that, you would bid 4♦ over 3♦. If partner wants to think about slam, he has a good idea what you have and can make a good decision.

#3 – Play “Smith Echo”

What if partner made an opening lead against 3NT, and you could say out loud, “Nice lead, partner! Let's keep going in that suit.”

Or maybe you could say, “Not a good lead, partner. Let's try another suit.”

It's a sweet idea..... but, of course, it's against the rules. However, there is a defensive tool – the “Smith Echo”² – that allows you to send these messages to partner – legally!

Let's say you have JT4 of diamonds and partner leads a low diamond against 3NT. Dummy has 852 of diamonds and plays low. You play the 10 diamonds, and declarer wins the K. How do you tell partner that you really like her diamond lead and you have another good card in that suit for her?

² An “echo” is when you play a high spot and then a low spot in the same suit. Curtis Smith was a top-level expert who played in Houston back in the day. He invented this defensive convention – voila! “Smith Echo.”

On the other hand, let's say you have AQ842 of diamonds and you lead the 4 of diamonds against 3NT. The dummy has J73 of diamonds and plays low. Partner plays the 9, and declarer wins with the 10. To your partner, it looks like your opening lead has been a dud..... but you know otherwise. If partner wins a trick and leads another diamond, you are going to take a bunch of tricks and set 3NT. How do you tell him that?

The answer to both problems is Smith Echo.

When declarer wins the opening lead and leads another suit. Smith Echo kicks in. If a defender plays high-low in that side suit – an “echo” -- it means that he/she likes the opening lead and would like to see that suit continued, when possible. If a defender play low-high, it shows a negative opinion about the suit of the opening lead.

So, if the opening leader plays low-then-high on declarer's side suit, it says, “I'm not too excited about the way my opening lead turned out. Feel free to consider other suits.” But if the opening leader plays high-then-low on declarer's side suit, it says, “Return my suit, please. It may not look right to you, but trust me on this one!”

Similarly, if third hand plays low-then-high on declarer's side suit, it says, “I'm not excited about the opening lead, and I don't have anything left to help in that suit.” But if third hand plays high-then-low on declarer's side suit, it says, “I liked your opening lead, and I have another card or two in that suit to help you out.”

Here are the basic rules for Smith Echo:

- Applies only in NT contracts.
- The “echo” or failure to echo starts on the first round of the first suit that declarer leads.
- “Echo” by either player is an encouraging signal about the opening lead. If you can tell that partner didn't play his lowest spot on the first round of declarer's suit, then you know he started an “echo.”
- Low-high by either player is a discouraging signal about the opening lead. If you can tell that partner played his lowest spot on the first round of declarer's suit, then you know he didn't start an “echo.”

- Exception: If dummy has a long suit and no entry, then spot cards played on the first round of that suit show count so we can hold up a top card in that suit until the proper time. In this situation, count is the priority (and Smith Echo is out the window).

Once you get accustomed to the thinking behind Smith Echo – and this will happen fast – you will be amazed at how many “problem” defenses become easy. You and your partner will be using Smith Echo to work together and win.

I’m astonished by the number of players who don’t use Smith Echo. Some of them even turn up their noses at it.... but they are wrong. Add it to your defensive arsenal, and you will be glad you did.

#4 – Play “Suit Preference in the Trump Suit”

When declarer is drawing trumps and we are just following suit with low cards, it’s a boring situation.

Let’s spice it up and turn into a useful signal.

“Suit Preference in the Trump Suit” means that playing high-low spot cards in trumps indicates a preference for the higher suit.

Let’s say declarer is pulling trumps (hearts) and dummy has the Axx in spades and the Kxx in clubs. You are sitting behind dummy. You happen to have the K of spades, and in the overall context of the hand, you think it would be good for partner to play a spade when she gets the lead. If your trump holding is 63, then you would play the 6 first to show interest in the higher suit (in context). Of course, partner is watching your spot cards very diligently and will get the message sent by playing those spots in an unusual order. This bit of information you are telling partner about spades may enable her to make a very good play, when she gets the chance.

Be careful, though. Playing low-high in trumps does not show suit preference for the lower suit. Playing the spot cards in normal order merely means that you do not want to encourage the higher suit. That information – and the inference that partner can draw from it – might prove to be very useful in its own way.

Sometimes, partner doesn't have the luxury of playing high-low in trumps. If she has Qx, for example, it would be suicidal to waste the Q on the first round just to start a high-low. In these situations, the trump suit preference play is not "on." Same if partner has a singleton trump.

Trump suit preference is one of those plays that comes up from time to time, and it can be highly effective when it does. It costs nothing to use it, and the rewards can be great. It's another way that you and your partner can work together to solve problems.

#5 – Whenever possible, bid descriptively to help partner

When you and your partner are bidding toward a final contract, there are many, many times when both partners should be bidding as descriptively as possible..... to collaborate in the decision about what contract to choose.

Yes, there are times to bid tactically..... and there are times when one partner has enough information to place the contract ("the one who knows, goes"). But there are lots of times when two or more possible final contracts are under consideration. Careful bidding by both partners will increase the chances of reaching the right spot.

Consider this hand:

♠ AKJ94
♥ QT5
♦ 6
♣ AT54

Partner passes as dealer, you open 1♠, and partner responds 1NT (not 100% forcing by a passed hand). You bid 2♣, and partner raises to 3♣. The bidding has been:

P - 1♠
1NT - 2♣
3♣ - ??

There are a number of possibilities at this point. Should you bid a game or stop in a part-score? If you bid a game, which one do you choose – 3NT? 5♣? 4♠?

Clearly, you need more information from partner..... but how do you get it?

Some players would just bid 3NT, because they think all minor-suit fits should be played in NT. Others would jump to 5♣. Still others would pull in and pass 3♣. Any of these actions could be right on any given day, but all of them essentially are guesses.

Why guess when you can work with your partner to figure it out together?

For my money, the correct bid is 3♥.... forcing and descriptive.

What does 3♥ show? First, it shows some cards and values in hearts (but not a true 4-card heart suit, because you would have rebid 2♥, not 2♣). Second, it shows that you are interested in game. Third, by implication, it shows shortness in diamonds.

With the information conveyed by 3♥, partner is in a great position to help you.

If she has strong diamonds – something like KT9x or better that will provide two stoppers -- she will bid 3NT. Example: ♠ 6 ♥ K96 ♦ KT95 ♣ QJ932.

With a minimum 3♣ raise and a wasted honor in diamonds – something like Qxx – she will retreat to 4♣, and you will pass (if you had a very nice hand with maybe one more K, you would carry on to 5♣). Example: ♠ 6 ♥ A96 ♦ Q542 ♣ Q9732.

With secondary spade support – something like Qx, maybe even Tx – she will suggest spades via 3♠, and you will raise to 4♠ because your spades are so strong. Example: ♠ Q6 ♥ K43 ♦ J95 ♣ KJ932.

With a relatively good hand that lacks secondary spades, she will jump to 5♣. Example: See footnote on next page.

Finally, every once in a great while, partner will have a 5-card heart suit that she has been unable to show yet – a hand such as ♠ 6 ♥ KJ932 ♦ Ax ♣ Q9862 – and all of sudden you will land in 4♥!

Do you see all of the good things that can happen when you describe your hand to partner and work together to find the best contract?³ Why guess to put all of your eggs in one basket, when you can give partner more information and let her pick the right basket?

Conclusion

We have just scratched the surface of the many ways that partners can work together to have more fun and achieve better results at the bridge table. For me, the challenge of the game is to collaborate with my partner to solve problems that our opponents throw at us. If you can keep working together whenever possible, and your improved scores will show it.

³ In actual play, responder's hand was ♠ 6 ♥ K863 ♦ A85 ♣ QJ963. When opener bid 3♥ over the 3♣ raise, responder that his Axx of diamonds was not enough for 3NT but was perfect to 5♣..... so she jumped to 5♣ and made it. The players who guessed to bid 3NT never had a chance.