



365

**WINNING
BRIDGE TIPS**

DANNY KLEINMAN



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INTRODUCTION



Can you learn from the errors of others?

Here is a collection of simple problems that gave a variety of players, mostly “intermediate” but including occasional beginners and experts, some trouble. You won’t find bidding problems here worthy of the Master Solvers’ Club (a monthly *Bridge World* feature) or declarer play problems fit for “Test Your Play” (another *Bridge World* feature) or problems to challenge defensive maven Eddie Kantar. Instead you will find the kinds of “bread and butter” problems that arise several times a session each time you trudge to your local duplicate bridge club or travel to a sectional or regional tournament.

In these problems, you will always be “South” during the auction and for any questions relating to the auction. You will always be South as declarer and either East or West, as indicated, when you are a defender. Distributions are shown as four numbers: 5431 indicates any hand that contains a five-card suit, a four-card suit, a three-card suit and a singleton, but 5-4-3-1 represents a particular hand pattern in the order spades-hearts-diamonds-clubs, with five spades, four hearts, three diamonds and one club.

You can read this book in two ways. You can examine the problems and proceed directly to the analyses and solutions. Alternatively, you can cover the analyses with a sheet of paper or cardboard and try to solve the problems on your own before looking at my solutions.

Happy learning and good luck!

Danny Kleinman



Bridge players sometimes ask, “What is the most important part of the game?”

I’ve heard it said by an expert, “Bidding is 80% of bridge.”

I’ve also heard from a student, “I think I’m an excellent bidder. All I really need to do is improve my card play.”

Who is right?

Neither. The student was mistaken, but the question is inadequately phrased. It’s like asking, “What percentage of skill is genetically determined, and what percentage comes from the environment, that is, education and experience?”

The answer to that question varies with the population in question. Among experts, bidding may account for 80% or more of the variation in matchpoint scores, because card-play skill is largely presumed. Among non-experts, competent handling of most declarer play and defensive problems cannot be presumed, so bidding may be expected to dominate less.

In the process of compiling this book, I inadvertently obtained a rough estimate of the relative importance of various aspects of bridge, as measured by the numbers of problems of each kind found difficult and usually mishandled by ordinary duplicate bridge players.

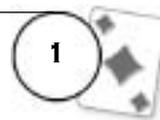
Initially, I estimated that bidding is 60% of bridge and play is 40%. However, there are finer distinctions to be made than simply between bidding and card play. For instance, in which category would you place opening lead problems? I believe that opening lead problems are far more akin to bidding than to play. To my mind, opening lead problems involve, primarily, *listening* to the bidding and drawing appropriate inferences from there. Taking that into account, I estimate the ratio at closer to 65% bidding to 35% play.

Bear in mind that these are rough estimates only. I culled the 365 deals of this book from a larger sample of 500 problems collected from actual play over a period of about a year. Five hundred problems may be too small a sample, and the players who faced these problems may not be representative of duplicate bridge players in general.



365

We'll start off with one of the very easiest kinds of problem.



Matchpoints, Both vul.

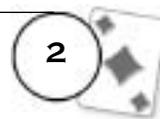
| | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| | NORTH (dummy) |
| | ♦ Q 3 |
| WEST (you) | □ |
| ♦ J 6 | |

You're defending against 3NT. Two rounds of diamonds have been played, with everybody following. Now, with several cards remaining in the other suits, including at least one possible entry to dummy, declarer leads the ♦8, the thirteenth diamond. Which diamond should you play?

Play the jack, which can only gain and can't lose. Then your six will be high. If you play low, you unwisely give declarer a chance to let the eight ride for an extra trick.

Is there anything easier than this? No, yet duplicate bridge players continue to make "can't win" plays like the ♦6, sometimes called *nullo* plays, and wonder why they can't get good partners unless they hire professionals.

Here is another easy problem, but this one has two parts. The first part requires you to ask, "How good is my hand?" The second part requires you to ask, "How good a hand do I need to open?"

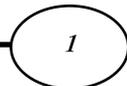


Matchpoints, Both vul.

| | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|
| | ♠ J 6 4 | ♥ A K 3 2 | ♦ J 8 | ♣ K 8 4 3 |
| WEST | NORTH | EAST | SOUTH | |
| | | | ? | |

First, how good is your hand?

The commonly used measure of strength for balanced hands is *high card points* ("HCP"). Other counts than the familiar 4-3-2-1 are more accurate, but even if you use some other formula, you must translate your count into "points" that others, partners and opponents alike, will understand — which means expressing your rating of a hand on a scale in which 10 represents a hand of average high-card strength. If you rate this hand as 12, that's a sensible start, but among



Learn to think in terms of “good” and “bad” HCP. Here are some guidelines for applying this concept.

(a) The 4-3-2-1 count is imprecise (what a fluke it would be if it reflected the values of high cards *exactly!*). It undervalues aces and overvalues jacks (and to an extent queens).

(b) Whereas aces have a constant value (except when partner has a void in the suit), lower honors are worth more together than apart. Queens and jacks combined with other honors of the same suit are worth more than queens and jacks alone.

(c) Honors in short suits pull less weight than honors in long suits. Honors in suits with *no* low cards at all should be discounted a bit. Here’s why. If you’re declarer, and dummy has J54 in the suit, you’ll take four tricks with AKQ2 but only three with AKQ. If dummy has two low cards in the suit, you’ll take three tricks with AKQ, but you have a chance to take four tricks with AKQ2.

(d) Spot cards count for something. Promote hands that have tens and nines; demote hands that do not.

An alternative to thinking “good” and “bad” is to think in terms of *half-points*. You might count

♠ J 6 4 ♥ A K 3 2 ♦ J 8 ♣ K 8 4 3

as only 11½ HCP because of its stray jacks in relatively short suits. However,

♠ 6 4 3 ♥ A K J 2 ♦ 8 3 ♣ K J 8 4

would be worth 12½ HCP because both jacks are working synergistically with honors in longer suits.

12-HCP hands there are significant variations. You can judge some hands as “good” 12-HCP hands, others as ordinary, and still others as “bad” 12-HCP hands. Furthermore, if you see a hand that you count initially as 12, but it *looks stronger* than most 13-HCP hands, you may want to *promote* your rating to 13. By the same token, a hand that you count initially as 12 may *look weaker* than most 11-HCP hands. When that happens, *demote* your rating to 11.

♠ J 6 4 ♥ A K 3 2 ♦ J 8 ♣ K 8 4 3

is only 11 HCP because of its stray jacks in relatively short suits. However,

♠ 6 4 3 ♥ A K J 2 ♦ 8 3 ♣ K J 8 4

would be worth 12 HCP because both jacks are working synergistically with honors in longer suits.

Should you open?

This question is more complex. Before answering, you should decide *what* you will open, and how you plan to rebid if you do. Attractive and unattractive choices of openings and rebids should affect your decision in close cases.

With

♠ J 6 4 ♥ A K 3 2 ♦ J 8 ♣ K 8 4 3

your choice of openings is clear. Playing strong notrumps and generally avoiding opening four-card majors, your bid, if you open, is 1♣. You have no reason to be either proud or ashamed of your club suit. Though it is not strong, it is headed by a high honor. Though it is not long, at least you have four cards in it.

Your rebidding plan is also clear. If partner raises to 2♣ or (playing limit raises) 3♣, you will pass. If partner responds in diamonds, you have a happy rebid in hearts. If partner responds in hearts, you have a happy single raise. If partner responds in spades, you will not be particularly happy to raise on jack-third, but neither will you be embarrassed to do so. If partner responds in notrump, you will pass (or raise a forcing 2NT to 3NT).

Your choice of opening and your plan for rebidding should leave you with only the slightest misgivings, not nearly enough to sway you in either direction. You now have a narrowed question: 1♣ or pass?

In fact, you still do not know enough to decide because I've omitted one crucial question: *What, exactly, is your 1NT range?*

The normal threshold for opening minimum balanced hands is 3 HCP below your threshold for opening 1NT. If any balanced 15-HCP hand qualifies, you *might* open. If you require 16, or at least a *good* 15, HCP for 1NT, you should pass. With a slightly different hand,

♠ K 8 4 3 ♥ A K 3 2 ♦ J 8 ♣ J 6 4

you should certainly pass, as 1♣ on a *weak three-card suit* would be very sorry indeed.

How many points do you need for an overcall?

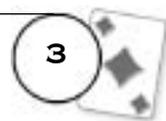
You may as well ask how many credits in Biochemistry a person needs to teach English Composition.

Some unnamed person at the Memphis headquarters of the American Contract Bridge League ("ACBL") devised the ACBL's "Yellow Card" which specifies the range for a one-level overcall as "8 to 16 HCP" — as if "points" were the relevant feature of your hand when contemplating an overcall. I say it's a mistake even to have a space for point-count range in the section of the convention card for overcalls.

An overcall should be based on playing strength, not point-count. When an opponent announces high-card strength by opening, "points" won't help you much to make a contract of your own. What you need for an overcall is a good suit and a desire to have partner lead that suit — or a hand with so many high cards that you have high hopes for game despite opener's promise of high cards of his own. Ordinarily, you need some *shape*. You need *tricks*. And *three small* in the suit bid in front of you is the death holding, presaging three fast losers in the suit.

Above all, you need positive reasons for overcalling. Ask yourself the *Four Questions*:

- (1) Do you think that the hand belongs to your side?
- (2) Do you suspect that you have a profitable sacrifice against an opposing contract?
- (3) Will the overcall you are contemplating keep responder from bidding what he would otherwise want to bid?
- (4) Is it likely that your partner will become the opening leader, and a lead in the suit you're thinking of bidding will be essential to a successful defense?



The more “yes” answers you can give to these questions, the more eager you should be to overcall. Unless you can answer “yes” to at least two of them, you should be very reluctant to enter the auction.

Matchpoints, Neither vul.

(a) ♠ Q 10 ♥ A 7 6 4 3 ♦ Q 8 4 ♣ 8 6 3

| WEST | NORTH | EAST | SOUTH |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| | | 1♣ | ? |

The answer to all four questions is *no*. I want to dwell on (4) a bit, so I’ll show you two other hands:

(b) ♠ 8 4 ♥ A J 10 5 2 ♦ 7 6 3 ♣ 8 7 5

(c) ♠ 8 4 ♥ A 8 6 5 2 ♦ 7 6 3 ♣ 8 7 5

Neither one of them is suitable for a 1♥ overcall, of course, but how would you rank (a), (b) and (c) from “best” to “worst” for purposes of bidding 1♥?

Hand (b) is better than (c), obviously, because it contains three heart honors instead of one. Less obviously, (c) is better than (a). With (c) you would *fear* a lead in any other suit but hearts. In contrast, with (a) you would welcome a spade or diamond lead if either were partner’s best suit (i.e. the suit he will lead against notrump if you *don’t* overcall). So the final order (best to worst) is (b), (c), (a).

Scattered honors in other suits argue *against* overcalling with a marginal hand — a paradox of which few bridge players are aware.



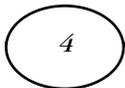
Not one bridge expert in a hundred can define “reverse” accurately. That’s reminiscent of what U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said many years ago about pornography: “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.” (I assume Justice Stewart had enough experience viewing pornography to warrant this claim.)

Matchpoints, E-W vul.

♠ K Q J 8 4 ♥ 7 6 3 ♦ Q J 5 ♣ 10 7

| WEST | NORTH | EAST | SOUTH |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| pass | 1♣ | pass | pass |
| pass | 2♦ | pass | 1♠ |
| | | | ? |

Partner’s 2♦ rebid introduces a new suit while *bypassing* a cheaper rebid in his first suit. Knowledgeable bridge players recognize this rebid and others like it as a “reverse”.



Some bridge players say, “We don’t play reverses.” However, you can’t “not play reverses”, just as you can’t “not speak in prose” — unless, that is, you speak only in poetry or don’t speak at all. By its very nature, partner’s 2♦ bid forces the partnership to 3♣ when you have at least as many clubs as diamonds (though the partnership may be able to stop in 2NT under certain conditions). So 2♦ requires a hand *strong enough* to have jumped to 3♣ (or 2NT). Many years ago, such a 2♦ bid was considered strong but not forcing. Though a few experts still hold out for the old-fashioned treatment, the modern (and superior) treatment of opener’s “reverses” is not only as forcing but as *promising a third bid*. What does that mean for you as responder here?

If you bid 3♣ or 3♦, partner still has to deliver his promised third bid, so you must not bid either of these with a bare minimum responding hand. To bid 2NT, you need more than a stopper in the fourth suit (hearts) — you also need a little extra high-card strength in case the third bid that partner has planned is in notrump. In that case, he’ll be raising 2NT to 3NT. Your only acceptable bids with a bare minimum are a rebid of your first suit (spades), and the fourth suit if you can bid it below three of opener’s suits. In this case, rebidding spades merely requires five cards (though in a pinch a strong four, like ♠KQJx, may have to do). A bid in the fourth suit here is nondescript, saying nothing about that suit. Very strange indeed, and quite the opposite of responder’s procedures in other (non-reverse) auctions, where a fourth-suit bid suggests extra strength. Note that 2♥ or 2♠ here doesn’t deny extras, it merely doesn’t show them at this time.

You do have *modest* extras (9 HCP and a good 5-bagger). After all, your 1♠ response might have been based on 6 or 7 HCP and a poorer suit. You can show your extras with any of three bids — 2NT, 3♣ or 3♦ — but you have none of the right holdings for any of these bids. You lack a heart stopper for 2NT, a third club for a 3♣ preference, and a fourth diamond for a 3♦ raise. Even if you had a hand adequate for one of these three bids, you would be happy to rebid your *strong* five-card major. Bid 2♠.

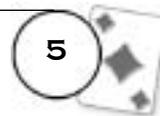
Two general principles apply here. One is well known even to non-experts — avoid raising partner’s *second* suit with fewer than four-card support. (There are rare exceptions which we won’t discuss here.) Except in unusual circumstances, partner’s second suit is presumably a four-bagger, and your goal in the early auction is to find a trump suit with at least *eight* cards in the two hands combined.

The second general principle, known by few expert experts, is that when all else is nearly equal, you should choose the *cheaper* of two plausible alternatives.

Matchpoints, N-S vul.

♠ A K J 10 6 2 ♥ 10 7 4 3 ♦ 5 ♣ J 4

| WEST | NORTH | EAST | SOUTH |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| | 1♣ | pass | 1♠ |
| 2♦ | 3NT | pass | ? |



CAN YOU LEARN FROM THE ERRORS OF OTHERS?



Here is a collection of questions, usually very simple ones, that gave a variety of players, mostly intermediate but including occasional beginners and experts, some trouble. You won't find bidding problems worthy of the "Master Solvers Club" (a monthly *Bridge World* feature), declarer play problems fit for "Test Your Play" (another *Bridge World* feature) or problems to challenge defensive guru Eddie Kantar. Instead, you will find the kinds of "bread and butter" problems that arise several times a session each time you sit down to play.

This is an invaluable collection of advice for the improving player, covering all aspects of the game.



DANNY KLEINMAN (Los Angeles) is a prolific writer on bridge and backgammon, both of which he plays at expert level. He is a bidding panelist and contributor to the *Bridge World* and other magazines, and the author of more than twenty books. His most recent titles are *The Notrump Zone* and *The Principle of Restricted Talent* (with Nick Straguzzi).

