

A close-up photograph of a person's hands balancing a pyramid of playing cards. The pyramid is composed of several layers of cards, with the top layer being a single card. The hands are positioned at the top corners of the pyramid, supporting it. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

BUILDING **A**
BIDDING SYSTEM

ROY HUGHES

FOREWORDS BY
FRED GITELMAN
AND ERIC KOKISH

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Master Point Press

331 Douglas Ave.

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

M5M 1H2

(416) 781-0351

Websites: <http://www.masterpointpress.com>

<http://www.masteringbridge.com>

<http://www.ebooksbridge.com>

<http://www.bridgeblogging.com>

Email: info@masterpointpress.com

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Hughes, Roy, 1954-

Building a bidding system / by Roy Hughes.

ISBN 978-1-55494-126-1

1. Contract bridge--Bidding. I. Title.

GV1282.4.H84 2005

795.41'52

C2005-902500-X

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

Editor

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Cover and interior design

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Interior format

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Copy editing

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Printed in Canada by Webcom Ltd.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

09 08 07 06 05

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FOREWORD

BY FRED GITELMAN

I had the good fortune to learn to play bridge in Toronto in the early 1980s. At that time I was a teenager, but there was already a sizable group of experienced players in the Toronto bridge community who were not much older than I was.

The member of this group who impressed me the most was Roy Hughes. After playing against Roy a few times, it became clear to me that he was not only brilliant, but that we shared a deep passion for trying to understand what our very humbling game was really all about. I also learned that we shared an interest in computers. Naturally, we became friends and, over the past 25 years, Roy and I have enjoyed many stimulating conversations about bridge (and non-bridge) ideas.

I have to admit that I am one of those bridge players who derive most of their satisfaction from the game by thinking about the play of the cards. I have studied bridge intensely and read hundreds of bridge books, but almost all of these books have been about declarer play and defense. In general I do not enjoy books about bidding.

This book is different. Roy started sending me drafts of the chapters of his book as he was writing them. I agreed to offer my feedback, mostly because he was my friend. I was pleasantly surprised (since I had little interest in reading a book about bidding) that I found the subject material to be fascinating. This book is about how to go about designing an effective bidding system. Roy approaches this difficult subject with the precise logic of the computer programmer that he is, but his writing and thinking has a clearly artistic element as well (which is perhaps not surprising given that Roy also happens to be a gifted musician). He writes with clarity, but his love of the mysteries of our wonderful game is very much evident in these pages.

I suppose that first and foremost I will always be a card player, but Roy's writing has given me a new appreciation and respect for the bidders out there and the problems that they are intent on solving. Anyone who considers himself to be a serious student of the game will enjoy reading this book and learn plenty in the process.

FOREWORD

BY ERIC KOKISH

All too often, players who begin to take the game seriously adopt a system, conventions and even a style that is popular in their area, typically the general approach of the leading players in their club or circle of influence. As Roy Hughes points out in this long-overdue book on a neglected subject, building a system is one of the most important bridge activities any partnership will ever undertake. It requires cool reflection and a meeting of the minds on not only the objectives of the partnership but also on the boundaries of the partnership's viable database for maximum effectiveness.

Some partnerships can master a complex relay system without sacrificing efficiency in other areas of the game, but others will function best within a simple but aggressive system based on natural bidding. While Roy presents seductive examples of relay and strong club methods at their best, he is careful to point out that earlier partnership decisions are more important — four-versus five-card majors, a light versus conservative opening style, choosing a notrump range compatible with the minimum length for a major-suit opening, to name a few.

This is a provocative book that everyone should read. It provides insights that are easily overlooked, and will raise awareness of important issues without stooping to proselytizing. While the author has his preferences, this is not a system book. Roy is not selling a method, *per se*, but rather the idea that it's worth considering the partnership's objectives before adopting a particular method, and that building a harmonious system that caters well to both constructive and obstructive goals is essential to long-term satisfaction and success at bridge.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Bridge is unlike any other game, and partnership bidding in bridge is unlike anything else in any game. The complexities of determining the best contract could easily fill a hundred books the size of this one, even if bridge were a game for only two players. Add in opponents, intent on harassing us and pursuing their own ends, and the subject approaches the intractable.

That is what this book is about: how to bid correctly to our own contracts while frustrating the aims of the enemy. The themes central to this are the use of bidding space, priorities in passing information, naturalness and artificiality. And as we consider these weighty issues, we will examine a variety of situations that arise in bidding and how we might deal with them.

Most of the illustrative deals arose in world championships or late rounds of important events, and feature the very best players in the world. For the most part, I include names when they may be of interest to the reader. Often I find myself in disagreement with one of the actions taken. That is to be expected; the world of bridge has not achieved consensus about bidding. Look at the bidding panel feature in any bridge magazine and you will find experts disagreeing all the time.

In days when there was more uniformity of style, and fewer specialized partnerships, it was perhaps easier to be critical of a particular call. Now, it is almost impossible for the author and readers to be aware of all the subtle, indirect inferences that abound in a serious partnership's understanding, and almost impossible to criticize a call or auction fairly. The most we can realistically hope for is to report successes and failures, and speculate on the reasons behind them. There are no blunders reported here, only different approaches to the game we all love.

Hand pattern designations that include dashes refer to the suits in order of rank; 4-3-3-3 means four spades and three of everything else. When no dashes are included, the generic pattern is implied; 4333 means any hand with a four-card suit and three tripletons.

High-card strength is calibrated on the familiar 4-3-2-1 point count. No attempt is made to quantify distributional values; it is assumed that the reader will make appropriate allowances. For example, if an opening bid of 1♠ is described as "5+♠, 11-16", it is implied that an average-looking 5332 with 11 high-card points (HCP) qualifies. The total is subject to adjustments up or

down based on honor structure and intermediates. In some situations, particularly when raising, extra distributional values can take the place of high-card values.

On occasion I use masculine pronouns where no gender is implied, as I was taught in school. I ask the indulgence of those who would do otherwise.

Bridge has been a joy for me from a very early age, and I want to thank particularly my parents and grandmother, who got me started. I have been supported in this endeavor by my wife, Erika, who provided much needed help with the manuscript, and by my mother and my sister, Dianne.

Much of my bridge education has come from books, especially those of the great writers Terence Reese and Hugh Kelsey. One of my favorite features in *The Bridge World* is entitled “What’s New in Bridge?”, but on occasion when I reflect on what I have written here I fear the answer may be “very little”. Ideas I thought my own keep showing up when I return to the books of my favorite authors: Ely Culbertson, Albert Dormer, Sam Fry Jr., Benito Garozzo, Charles Goren, Edgar Kaplan, Marshall Miles, Victor Mollo, Albert Morehead, Jeff Rubens, Howard Schenken.

Much of the inspiration for this book came also from partners, teammates, opponents and colleagues. I acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of Ray Lee and Suzanne Hocking of Master Point Press, and all others who helped produce this book. My friend Fred Gitelman assisted through discussion, and by making many of the deals available through the Vugraph at www.bridgebase.com.

Thank you, all.

Roy Hughes
July 2005



At the 1978 World Bridge Championships. Left to right: Ted Horning, Audrey Grant, Sami Kebela, and the author.

A DAY AT THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

1

*So all day long the noise of battle roll'd
Among the mountains by the winter sea*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Idylls of the King'

Historic Istanbul lies on the north shore of the Sea of Marmara, straddling the Straits of Bosphorus, which divide Europe from Asia. Time and again, the mighty have fought for the ancient city and control of the passageway between the two great seas, the Mediterranean in the west, and the Black in the east. In the seventh century B.C. the city's name was Byzantium, after Byzas the Megarian. Later it became Constantinople, the city of Constantine the Great. In 1453 when it fell to Sultan Mehmed II, it became Istanbul, meaning simply "the city".

In October 2004, the battleground would not be the waters, beaches and cliffs, but the green felt of the bridge table. From all over the world, teams converged for the twelfth World Bridge Olympiad. Seventy-one countries were

represented, including the traditional competitors, England, France, the United States, and ever-powerful Italy. Newer to the world bridge stage, but now firmly established, China would also be in contention. And Russia and the countries of eastern Europe, dormant for years under the Soviet suppression of card games, were also ready to make their presence felt.

The long tournament is well into its late stages. Bridge war has been waged for over a week now, and only two countries remain in the hunt for world bridge supremacy. You think back over that fateful week, so full of drama, triumphs and disasters. The role of a bridge journalist rather than a player has been a new one for you. It has been a week of watching, studying, looking for things that might be of interest to readers.

Bidding has always been a fascination for you, and particularly systems, the language of bidding. So much has been learned about the game over the decades of its existence, and much of the game is well understood. But bidding systems continue to provoke controversy.

Over the past week you have made a study of the competitors' bidding methods. There are quite a few five-card major systems, mostly with the strong two-over-one approach favored today. Numerous strong club systems. Some "multi" club systems, where an opening of one club is usually a balanced minimum, but could be long clubs or a number of less likely alternatives. Some extremely artificial systems, where none of the bids bears any relation to the suit named. Two- and three-level openings come in a complex assortment of multiple meanings, clearly meant to bewilder.

Now the start of the final is just minutes away, and you walk into the auditorium to find a seat. The game has changed over the years — how it is played, how it is watched. You remember a photograph in a book from the library: another world championship, half a world away, forty years ago. Terence Reese fans his cards, held high over his head, for the spectators seated on risers behind. A hush pervades the room. Everyone watches intently, not wanting to miss a bid and never knowing what moment might prove to be the crucial one.

Today's crowd is raucous. Members of the audience cheer, groan, offer opinions, make bets. The action is displayed on Vugraph — four giant screens at the front of the hall. All the bids and plays from both tables in the match are shown, along with big-screen close-ups of the players' expressions as the drama of each deal unfolds. All four hands are visible to the audience, making everyone an instant expert, impatient with the pace of play. Over the din, the expert panel is trying to keep the crowd entertained with their analyses and stories.

The players are safely off in another room, far from the crowd. Officials armed with laptop computers type in the players' bids and plays, which are

transmitted both to the Vugraph theater and off into cyberspace for the enjoyment of thousands sitting at home in front of their personal computers.

The East-West pair plays a complex strong club system, with five-card majors, a nebulous diamond and lots of relays. The system description of the North-South pair is extensive also, but their opening bids are old-fashioned: a strong notrump and four-card majors.

Three unremarkable deals serve to build the anticipation. Then you see that the slam bidding of the East-West pairs is about to be tested.

<i>Board 4</i>	♠ 10				
<i>Dealer West</i>	♥ K 7 5 4 3				
<i>Both vul.</i>	♦ 10 7 5				
	♣ 9 8 6 5				
♠ K 9 7 4 2 ♥ 8 ♦ A J 6 2 ♣ K Q 4	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ A J 5 3 ♥ A 9 6 ♦ K Q ♣ A J 10 2
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ Q 8 6				
	♥ Q J 10 2				
	♦ 9 8 4 3				
	♣ 7 3				

One of the commentators sets the scene: “A slam for East-West. They should stop in 6♠, missing four trumps to the queen. Seven could actually be made with a lucky guess. Let’s see — the result is in from the other room.” A box pops up on the screen, showing what happened moments earlier when Board 4 was played in the Closed Room:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1 ♠	pass	2NT ¹	pass
3 ♥ ²	pass	4NT ³	pass
5 ♥ ⁴	pass	6♠	all pass

1. Game forcing spade raise.
2. Singleton or void in hearts.
3. Roman Keycard Blackwood.
4. Two keycards, no trump queen or extra length.

“Should be duplicated. North-South can’t get in, so our relay bidders will have a free run. Actually, 7♣ is a good contract. Impossible to bid, really.”

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♠ ¹	pass	1NT ²	pass
2♦ ³	pass	2♥ ²	pass
2NT ⁴	pass	3♣ ²	pass
3♦ ⁵	pass	3♥ ²	pass
4♦ ⁶	pass	4♥ ²	pass
5♥ ⁷	pass	5♠ ²	pass
6♣ ⁸	pass	7♣	all pass

One of the commentators is busy leafing through a thick stack of sheets, trying to come up with explanations for the audience. The 5♥ bid is particularly difficult.

1. Five or more spades, 11-16.
2. Tell me more.
3. Four or more diamonds.
4. Three or four clubs.
5. 5-1-4-3.
6. 1 or 3 aces, plus the ♦K or both black kings.
7. (♣Q or ♠Q♦Q) and no ♥K.
8. ♦J or ♠J♣J.

There is a buzz through the hall as the auction slowly proceeds. Some cheering breaks out when 7♣ appears. The play is a little faster — had East planned it during the auction? Declarer wins the ♥Q lead in hand and ruffs a heart. He crosses to a diamond and ruffs the last heart. Then dummy's last trump, cross to a diamond, draw trumps. You see the players lean forward, peering under the screen at declarer's remaining cards, now face up. Then the recorder announces "East-West +2140" over the audio feed.

The excited chatter continues through the next deal, which is uneventful. Then:

<i>Board 6</i>	♠ Q 8 7 3											
<i>Dealer East</i>	♥ J 9											
<i>E-W vul.</i>	♦ J 4											
	♣ J 10 6 3 2											
♠ 6 4 2			♠ J 9									
♥ A K 2			♥ Q 10 8 6 3									
♦ K 8 6 3			♦ A Q 9 5									
♣ A 7 4			♣ 9 8									
		<table border="1" style="text-align: center; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: 0 auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	♠ A K 10 5											
	♥ 7 5 4											
	♦ 10 7 2											
	♣ K Q 5											

East deals and passes, and South opens 1♠. You consider the West hand — surely too dangerous to double, isn't it? Game is unlikely opposite a passed hand, and if North has the balance of power and is able to redouble, any runout could be doubled and massacred. West apparently thinks along the same lines, as a "pass" is posted on the screen. Your eyes drift over to the East hand. Wait a minute: it looks like we can make something here. Let's see, everything is splitting... we lose two spades and a club... why, we can make 4♥! We can't let ourselves be shut out like this! In the modern game, people are always stealing. East will reopen 2♥, though, so perhaps everything will be alright. Responder isn't going to bid on that garbage, surely? Wrong: you see North place a 2♠ card in the bidding tray, and East and South pass. West is taking some time, giving the commentators a chance to discuss his problem. North-South open 1♠ on four, and raise freely with three, so there is a real chance that East has three spades. There could easily be no eight-card fit for anyone, and clearly North-South are in a superior competitive position should West reopen with a double. Eventually West passes and leads the ♥K. East-West defend accurately to get their five tricks and North-South score +110.

Back at the hotel, you lie down on the bed and mentally replay the hands you saw. Your mind wanders to the question that has perplexed you ever since you took up bridge: what are the perfect bidding methods? You suspect that you haven't seen them yet. The relayers looked awfully good on that 4-3 7♣. What a contract. To be able to get to great contracts, all the time, that's what great methods must be about: 100 on Challenge the Champs. And yet bidding is a war, too, and sometimes we need to push the opponents around, or fend off their blows — the perfect methods must be good at that, too. Board 6, where the light four-card major opening and raise kept East-West out, was an example.

Another thought comes to mind. Suppose you knew the perfect methods — would the world see their value? Would anyone play them with you? Methods are a dime a dozen. To be appreciated, they must be compelling, their inner logic so unassailable that your partner will be convinced of their worth, inspired to learn them, and able to execute them. You pull out a notebook and start to describe what you want from a bidding system, your "attributes of good methods".

Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.

William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet'

Bridge is a game of partnership, and it is in the twin realms of bidding and defensive card play that partnership reigns supreme. In these two endeavors, it is seldom that success can be achieved with only thirteen cards. There may be the occasional solo effort, maybe a Merrimac Coup or daring penalty double, but by and large it is through consideration of our combined cards, thirteen seen and thirteen imagined, that we achieve our ends.

And so we need bridge language, or methods, and partnerships to play them. Well-tuned methods are indispensable for consistent success in the game as it is today, yet they can be so demanding, extensive and complex that practiced partnerships are required to master them. Just as well, perhaps, because time is also needed for two people to foster the sharing of trust and support that makes winning more likely and life more enjoyable. Two cheerful optimists who mind their own business could perhaps do that quickly, but these are in sadly short supply. For the rest of us, it takes time.

Early on in any prospective partnership the question arises: what shall we play? The same question will be asked later on, as well, for it is human nature to be dissatisfied, and we learn things about methods throughout our entire lives. Whether or not the question is a pressing one for you right now, I hope you enjoy what follows. The pursuit of excellence in partnership methods makes a fascinating topic for those who truly love bridge, and I hope I can do it justice.

If you are thinking of building your own bidding system, a word of caution is in order. System design can be intriguing, exhilarating, rewarding, but it is not on the critical path for success at bridge. Even if you devote your days to bridge — perhaps in place of reading poetry, making a living, or enjoying the company of others — you should consider that devising a system still takes away time from say, brushing up on your compound squeeze technique. You can work on card play by playing, reading, thinking. Develop your powers of concentration. Get fit! Find and cherish a partner. Work on bidding methods, yes, but use well-documented, successful methods. They are easily available for the cost of a book. Your partnership time can then go to refining, extending and verifying common understandings, things that need to be done in any top-flight partnership.

What should we ask of our methods? Our first two requirements — suggested in the fictional scenario of the opening chapter — are the ability to bid correctly to our own contracts and to make life difficult for the opponents. I'll call these two attributes, which will be discussed throughout the book, accuracy and antagonism. They are the primary concerns of bidding and bidding methods. But before going into depth about them, I would like to suggest two others.

Methods do not bid to great contracts — people do, using methods. Our methods need to be *playable*: easy to learn, if possible, but more importantly, easy to execute. If methods take hundreds of hours to learn, that is a price, but perhaps one we are willing to pay. If, however, we cannot execute the methods flawlessly when it counts, then it is likely that the gains of the methods can never make up for the accidental losses. People often don't like to admit that. They often excuse the system and blame the player, but the reality is that people are fallible, and some systems are simply more error-prone than others.

It is one thing to be asked to recall something when you are sitting comfortably in your living room with all the time in the world. It is a different matter entirely to need to recall something immediately, when you have many other demands on your thinking and composure, and no control over your environment. A parallel from another love of mine is the need for a pianist to play from memory. This is another activity where one doesn't get to take time. The memory must be immediate, fluid, fitted in with everything that is going on. And it must not take all of one's mental resources. There must be something left over for musicality, listening to other players, following the conductor and keeping a watchful eye for potential mishaps. A teacher of mine, referring to a particularly demanding passage, once said, "You have to be able to play this in a hurricane." I think that is a good model for bridge, too. Total familiarity, effortless, unshakable recall, that is what we need for our methods. We want them to spring to mind on demand with no possibility of error, leaving us free

to visualize, hypothesize and calculate. That also allows us to alert the opponents promptly and confidently, to avoid acquiring unauthorized information, and to have plenty of time left to play the cards.

While enabling success at the bridge table may be the primary criterion for the evaluation of bridge methods, it is not the only one. For my part, if I am going to spend hundreds, even thousands of hours with my methods, we have to get along. I want to appreciate them, find them elegant and admire them. I want my time spent at the bridge table to be in the company of beautifully crafted things. Life is too short for second-rate methods.

“Elegant” is a description mathematicians are fond of. They mean “no more complicated than necessary”. My dictionary says “ingeniously simple and pleasing”. Elegant methods are effective, yet simply expressed. They display a logical structure. They have a certain obvious “rightness” to them.

Whether or not you believe in elegance for its own sake, in bridge it has practical advantages. Elegant methods can inspire us when the going is difficult. Elegant methods are easier to remember because they flow from basic principles. They are self-sustaining in that every time we use a sequence that derives from basic principles, those principles are reinforced in our memories.

So we want our methods to be accurate, antagonistic, playable and elegant. Now: do we want them to be natural?

ARTIFICIALITY AND NATURALNESS IN BRIDGE

In the early days of bridge, all bids were “natural”: they suggested a contract or at least related directly to the denomination named. Then along came the take-out double, and there’s been no looking back ever since. Progress, I suppose. Many people prefer the simple game. Some advocate natural methods as being better for the promotion of the game. Of course, people see things differently. Some decry “artificial methods”, but themselves play Stayman, Flannery, Drury and a host of other conventions, and would be horrified if asked to do without. And they find it perfectly normal to open their third-longest suit, something I still find odd.

There are levels of naturalness in bidding. The most natural bid is one that primarily suggests a contract. Natural opening bids do that, as do non-forcing raises. Then come bids that suggest the denomination but not the level, i.e. “forcing” bids. After that come bids that suggest length in the suit named, but are not real attempts to play that strain; long-suit game tries would be an example. Then come bids which refer to the suit named, but show control or some aspect other than length: cuebids, splinters. And finally we have bids that bear no relation at all to the strain named, like Blackwood and Stayman.

Keeping things natural has an inherent appeal to some, myself included. I can admire old-fashioned Acol, even if it can’t duplicate all the results of the

Ultimate Club. Bridge is a game, and the idea of being able to immerse oneself in it without transfers, relays and this-that-and-the-other-thing doubles can be refreshing.

The usual justification for the introduction of a convention is that some new use is of more value than the natural one it replaces. It can certainly be argued that a response of $4\clubsuit$ to one of a major is not needed in the natural sense. It is less clear that the natural double jump to the three-level should be dispensed with, or a jump to 2NT.

Here is an interesting situation where artificial is better, almost *because* it is artificial. The Acol $4NT$ opening was designed for the rare hand that has eleven or twelve tricks, the only losers being aces. The responses are:

$5\clubsuit$	no ace
$5\diamond/5\heartsuit/5\spadesuit/6\clubsuit$	that ace
5NT	two aces

That is simple enough, and works in many cases. But suppose we hold

\spadesuit — \heartsuit K Q J 10 8 7 6 3 \diamond K Q J 10 \clubsuit A

A $4NT$ opening is dangerous here, in that a $5\spadesuit$ reply will get us too high. (A 5NT reply leaves us badly placed also, but for the purposes of the discussion I'm going to ignore the cases where responder has two aces, or the ace of clubs.) An improvement is to rearrange the five-level one-ace responses, so that you bid "over" your ace:

$5\diamond$	\spadesuit A
$5\heartsuit$	\diamond A
$5\spadesuit$	\heartsuit A

Now we can handle any one-ace reply. While there is more to it than this — perhaps we can find a better way to show the club ace, two aces, and maybe key kings — it appears that anything close to optimal will be considerably more artificial than the original, simple idea.

METHODS AND HUMAN PERFORMANCE

One of the costs of artificial methods (and it should not be underestimated) is the potential for error. Myriads of IMPs are tossed away, a dozen or so at a time, when players forget their methods or encounter a situation not considered beforehand. A playful adage from years ago went like this: "To err is human, but to really mess things up, you need a computer." A parallel observation for bridge might be that it is quite normal to get to bad contracts, but to get to horrible ones requires methods.

WEST	EAST
♠ A K 5	♠ J 10 2
♥ A 9 5 3	♥ Q J 8 6 4
♦ A 3	♦ J 10 9 6
♣ A J 9 5	♣ 10
2NT	3♦
3♠	4♦
4♠	pass

Apparently, 3♦ was a transfer, 3♠ a super-accept and 4♦ a re-transfer, but then a wheel fell off. At the other table the bidding was equally mysterious:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♣	pass	1♦	pass
2NT	pass	4♣	dbl
4NT	all pass		

This odd contract was just in; four spades on the 3-3 was less fortunate. The scene of this debacle? A local club game with inexperienced players, perhaps? No, it was the 2004 World Bridge Olympiad.

Natural bids, particularly non-forcing ones, are not only easier on the memory, they also make the rest of the auction simpler. Consider this natural auction:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1NT	pass	2♥	2♠
pass	pass	3♣	

Here 2♥ was natural, to play; therefore 3♣ must be also. If this sequence were to come up in play, it would not matter if your partnership had never discussed the 3♣ bid; the meaning is clear from the context. Contrast that with this auction:

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

1. Transfer to hearts.

I would be willing to wager that half the pairs using Jacoby transfers have not discussed this simple situation. Without the overcall, most pairs play 3♣ as forcing, either to game or for one round. Here, it would also be reasonable for it to be merely competitive.

WEST

1 ♣

dbl

NORTH

pass

EAST

1 ♥

SOUTH

1 ♠

Many partnerships play “support doubles”, so that the double here would show three hearts, as opposed to the four promised by a bid of 2♥. That much everyone who plays the convention knows. How high it applies is usually known also. Whether it applies after a 1♦ response, or if North has overcalled 1♦, is often less clear. The worst accidents, and they have happened to world-class pairs, have to do with later developments. Some pairs use the double only on hands that are in the range of a single raise. That makes double a narrowly defined action and all should be well once you firm up the meanings of East’s below-2♥ rebids. Other pairs agree that opener doubles whenever he holds three hearts. This creates a situation without parallel in standard methods — a completely unlimited raise in what may well be only a seven-card fit. No wonder accidents happen.

We could develop different sets of methods, varying from very natural to extremely artificial. The very natural methods would be easy to remember, could be played everywhere, but would not be optimal. The extremely artificial methods would demand a great deal of work, and might be allowed only in some events.

CONSISTENCY

The meanings of bridge actions are *consistent* when they remain the same over slightly different contexts. For example, it might be considered consistent for a 2♦ overcall of 1NT to mean the same thing regardless of whether it is bid directly or in the balancing position, or whether it is bid over a strong notrump or a weak one, or by a passed hand or an unpassed hand. There are so many situations in bridge that we would go mad if we couldn’t group some of them together, saying, in effect, “These differences do not matter.”

Every time we choose to make distinctions, and have our bids mean something different in slightly different contexts, we create work for ourselves. It is not so bad if the differences are slight, like lowering your standard for an opening bid by a point in third chair. It is large differences that cause difficulties. Suppose you like the weak notrump, but having had a few unfortunate results, you decide to play it only when not vulnerable. You may survive that without accident, but perhaps you feel transfers are not optimal over a weak notrump and you prefer Two-way Stayman instead — except of course in third and fourth, when slam is unlikely. After you get that all sorted out, you start to look at some of your competitive auctions:

YOU	LHO	PARTNER	RHO
1♣	pass	1♠	2♥
?			

Partner likes support doubles, so you play them. But when the weak notrump is on, it is more important to be able to take some action here with a balanced 15-17, so you play that double shows that. It goes on and on. Some of these distinctions are necessary for high-powered partnerships. But they all come at a cost.

Sometimes logic demands structures that, at least on the surface, appear inconsistent. Compare the following two situations.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	<i>and</i>	WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
4♥	pass	pass	4♠		4♥	4♠	pass	pass
dbl					dbl			

Normally, a preemptor does not speak again, uninvited, and if these doubles are forbidden in your partnerships, you can treat the following as a hypothetical discussion. But for the rest of us (and for every player who maintains discipline in these situations, there are a dozen or so who are willing to bend the rules), what should these doubles mean? Should they be “the same”? Pure penalty with trump tricks would be one possible meaning, but suppose that’s not our style. What would tempt you to bid again after 4♠ on your right? Double here could be a courtesy to partner, showing extra offense and short spades. It is the equivalent of a 5♥ bid, shown by means of a double in case that suits him better. What if the 4♠ bid is on the left? On occasion, a double with the same meaning might be of value, but note that partner passed up a chance to double. In any event, there is a more useful purpose. This double, with partner on lead, should suggest a couple of trumps and a side void.

COMPLETENESS

A system is *complete* if it covers every possible situation. This cannot be done by writing down every sequence: the number is immense. We need principles that let us figure out the meaning of unfamiliar actions. The broadest principle, which some would call a meta-principle, gives an answer to the question “What is the meaning of a call in the absence of any agreement?” I like the answer, “It suggests a contract.” Others think that it is safer never to pass an unclear call: “When in doubt, it’s forcing.” Having either agreement is certainly much better than having none. I prefer the non-forcing treatment, because to me, naming a contract is the most basic aspect of bidding, and it always has a

meaning. By contrast, if you treat an undiscussed bid as forcing, the replies are devoid of meaning as well.

A useful exercise for any partnership is to have a look at obscure situations to see whether their methods cover them. For example:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
4♥	4♠	pass	4NT

For many that would be Blackwood. Consideration of the situation might clarify when Blackwood applies, and whether it is Keycard. It is possible, though not popular, to treat the 4NT bid here as natural, in which case one could have a discussion about how strong that should be. It is even possible for it to be a forcing takeout.

Now consider this sequence:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
4♥	4♠	pass	5♣

It is natural for me, and a cuebid for many. For still others, it is a transfer or asking bid. Figure it out.

Then look at the same situations one level lower: a 3♠ overcall of 3♥, and when you are finished with that, a 4♠ overcall of 3♥.

You can also have some more specific agreements, such as “Redouble is never, *ever* for play.” The logic of bridge is tricky and it is easy to have conflicting agreements. You might want to write out your agreements as best you can and ask a friend to look for problems.

BIDDING TO TELL AND BIDDING TO PLAY

At times, we are more concerned with our own cards than with the partnership’s combined holdings. We may wish to name a contract, or to preempt or deceive the opponents, without inviting partner’s well-meaning cooperation. At those times, we would like our system to give us room to do as we wish rather than have it dictate our actions.

Suppose you hold this hand

♠ K 2 ♥ A 4 3 ♦ A 3 2 ♣ K Q J 10 4

and the dealer on your right opens 1♠. Depending on your style and methods, you might consider an overcall of 1NT or 2♣, or a takeout double. All three mean something in our methods and will cause partner to react accordingly. In addition, 1NT and 2♣ name moderately likely final contracts.

The action we take may depend on how much weight we give to naming an immediate, practical contract. A takeout double may lead to a poor 4-3 fit.

It is probable that 1NT will play very well. The opponents are likely to lead spades; we will win and knock out the ♣A; they will run some spades as we throw losers, and then we will claim. On the other hand, 2♣ is less likely to be successful. Assuming we get a spade trick, and there is some danger of having the king ruffed, we still have only seven tricks and need some help in the dummy.

So, as an attempt to name the final contract, bidding 1NT is likely to work out well. However, as a description of our hand, it is less satisfactory. We have much more in the way of controls and trick-taking potential than partner will expect. Responder, with a hand like this one

♠ J 8 4 ♥ K Q 7 ♦ K Q 6 4 ♣ 9 7 3

would raise to 3NT without a second thought and be surprised to find that the correct contract is 5♣. Not that it would be easy to get to 5♣ in any event.

LIMITS TO ACCURACY

Real bidding is too difficult a task — there are too many hands, too many issues, to be perfect all the time. Consider the following game instead, which we can call “Let’s bid 7NT”. You and your partner are given a pair of hands and your sole task is to reach 7NT whenever it is a 70% or better contract, and to stop lower, anywhere, when it isn’t. To make things a little easier, we’ll throw out the board when it is too close, say if 7NT is between 50% and 70%, and we won’t require you to play the contract from the right side. How well can this game be played? If you are allowed to create custom methods and retain a perfect partner, can you get every deal right? If you think so, you are ready for “Let’s bid 7♠”. In this game you have to reach 7NT when it is 70% or more, 7♠ if that is 70% or more, and otherwise stop lower, and we’ll still throw out the 50%-70% deals. If you think this game can be played perfectly, move on to “Let’s bid 7♥”. Now — how low do you think you can go? It is clearly impossible to open all the hands that can make 1♣ and never get overboard, so there has to be a limit somewhere.

As we ponder the thirteen cards dealt to us, it is somewhat daunting to think about how many different hands partner might hold. It is the number of ways to choose thirteen items from thirty-nine, which comes to 8,122,425,444. We can never know exactly what partner has; we need to be content with an approximation. One or two bids yields a rough idea of partner’s hand, and, if we have space to investigate, we can refine our picture, focusing on what is important to us.

As East, you hold

♠ A 4 3 ♥ K J 2 ♦ 8 3 ♣ A 7 4 3 2

Partner opens 1♠, and you are playing a relay system that lets you find out about partner's pattern and high cards without disclosing anything about your hand except that it is of game-going strength. You relay several times and discover that partner is 8-2-2-1 with the ♠KQ, the two red aces, and no other high-card points. Do you need to know anything more? Where would you like to play?

WEST	EAST
♠ K Q 9 8 7 6 5 2	♠ A 4 3
♥ A 5	♥ K J 2
♦ A 4	♦ 8 3
♣ 5	♣ A 7 4 3 2

Say they lead a diamond. You win, cash the ♠K, cross to the ♣A and ruff a club. Now a second trump to dummy, ruff another club as they all follow, cross to the ♥K, ruff the fourth round of clubs. Now back to dummy to cash the fifth club and claim.

Are you working, or just reading along? You are not asked to play many hands in this book; in fact, most of the play problems occur during the auction. Did you notice the need for the deuce of spades?

Without that deuce of spades, the grand slam is inferior. It makes if the queen of hearts is onside or singleton, or if the opening leader is 6-5 or longer in hearts and clubs. The nine or ten of hearts in declarer's hand would improve things a bit. But the presence of the deuce of spades gives us about a 60% chance with clubs alone, and at least the heart finesse in reserve, for over 80%.

This contrived example is meant to show how hard bidding is. Maybe in another hundred years someone will come up with a deuce-asking bid and solve hands like the above. (Let me be more precise. I am almost positive someone already *has* come up with a deuce-asking bid. What I meant was, maybe some system will have solved all the important problems up to and including spot-card entries.) In the meantime, if your system is really good enough to place the West spades at king-queen-eighth, you have the right to play him for the deuce. Relay practitioners call this "a finesse in the bidding".

SYSTEM REGULATION AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP

If you restrict your methods to natural bids and generally accepted conventions and treatments, you won't have any trouble here. If, however, your system uses unusual, artificial bids, you will not be able to play it in all events. This is as it should be. Unfamiliar, difficult to comprehend methods give opponents an unpleasant choice. They can either accept a competitive disadvantage, or spend a lot of time and effort preparing. It isn't fair to have to put up with that all the time.

Even if your system is strictly within the rules, it is fair to ask about the ethics of playing inscrutable methods. Some have taken the position that in

order to promote the game, we should all be ambassadors, and that the public will be more readily drawn to the game when the way it is played is more understandable. System inventors may reply that new methods keep the game fresh and create new interest.

THE GOOD METHODS

The two deals we watched on Vugraph epitomize the twin aims of bidding and bidding systems: accuracy for us and confusion to the enemy. In addition, we have looked at some other desirable traits, and it is time to put pen to paper and set down the characteristics of “good methods”.

1. *Accuracy*

We expect to reach the best contract most of the time, a reasonable contract most of the rest of the time, a bad contract as seldom as possible, and then preferably only on a “small” deal. If we can get to our games and bid the slams accurately, then it doesn’t matter too much if we occasionally overbid to game or land in the second-best partscore.

2. *Antagonism*

Good opponents will become great opponents if we make things easy for them. Whatever is good for our opponents is bad for us. If accuracy is our first goal, then our second, just as important when possible, is to keep our opponents from being accurate. Sometimes this will be achieved by removing their bidding space, by preempting, or by taking light actions. Other times it will mean withholding information, or providing false information, or true but incomplete information, to lead them down the wrong path. We need our methods to support us in being difficult.

3. *Playability*

We want our methods to be (relatively) easy to learn and execute. We need the system to be legal, for whatever arena we intend to play in, and we need to be satisfied that we are playing responsibly.

4. *Elegance*

We want our methods to be elegant and compelling, for our own joy and inspiration, and for the benefits provided to memory and performance.

In the next few chapters, we are going to explore some aspects of bidding, paying particular attention to how they relate to the use of space.

This book discusses the theory of bridge bidding for advanced players, with emphasis on the principles behind an effective bidding system. These include the concepts of Useful Space, Relays, Transfers and Dialogue Bidding, as well as creative ideas about Slam Bidding and Deception. The book addresses the conflicting requirements for a system that is at the same time robust and antagonistic, but also accurate.

“Anyone who considers himself to be a serious student of the game will enjoy reading this book and learn plenty in the process.”

Fred Gitelman

“This is a provocative book that everyone should read. It provides insights that are easily overlooked, and will raise awareness of important issues.”

Eric Kokish



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