

Inferences at Bridge



Marshall Miles

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Editor

Ray Lee

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Olena S. Sullivan

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	7
PART I BIDS AND OPENING LEADS BASED ON INFERENCES	11
Subtracting from 40	12
Using your Imagination	14
Taking Advantage of the Opponents' Conventions When only you and Partner are Involved	20
Competing Safely (or Fairly Safely)	23
Concealing your Strength	28
Relying on the Opponents' Bidding	32
Other Bidding Solutions	34
Opening Leads	37
	44
	Quiz 49
	My Solutions 51
PART II INFERENCES IN THE PLAY OF THE HAND	57
Inferences from the Opponents' Bidding	58
Play Based on Assumptions	66
Playing Against Potzers	71
Plays Affected by the Distribution	74
Inferences from Defenders' Play	77
Other Inferences	86
	Quiz 93
	My Solutions 98

PART III	INFERENCES ON DEFENSE	107
	The Ethical Hesitation	108
	The Play at Trick 1	116
	Basic Defensive Signals	124
	Logical Exceptions	128
	Granovetter Signals	131
	Concealment	137
	Don't Let Partner Make a Mistake	141
	Inferences from Letting Partner Win a Trick	144
	Negative Inferences	150
	Rescuing Partner	155
	Don't Lead Partner Astray	158
	Helpful Falsecards	159
	Trusting Partner	166
	Trusting the Opponents	173
	<i>Quiz</i>	181
	<i>My Solutions</i>	194
A FINAL COMMENT		205

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INTRODUCTION

What is the main ‘edge’ that top experts have over everyone else? It is not superior technique, like the ability to execute entry-shifting squeezes and defend against them. Hands requiring superior technique don’t come up often enough to make much difference. It is not having a superior bidding system. Of course, it helps to have a good system and to discuss many possible sequences with your regular partner. But whether you play weak or strong notrumps, Precision, 2/1 game forcing (with or without exceptions) or Polish Club makes very little difference in the long run. The main edge the top experts have is that they think in terms of all fifty-two cards. During the bidding, especially when both sides are bidding, they visualize what everyone has. They do the same in the play and on defense, and they plan their actions accordingly.

There are many clues during a bridge hand that most players overlook. For example: you are vulnerable and the opponents are not.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
3♠	pass	pass	??
♠ 8 3 ♥ A ♦ 6 5 3 ♣ A K Q 9 7 5 4			

What action would you take?

At least nine players out of ten would bid 4♣. They would do so either because they lack imagination or because they are unwilling to gamble, even when the odds are in their favor.

Think about it. At favorable vulnerability, would LHO open 3♠ with a solid spade suit? No; he could easily miss a game since with a singleton or void in spades his partner would pass with 15 or 16 HCP. The best suit opener is likely to hold is seven to the ace-queen-jack. In fact, seven to the king-jack is more likely and even seven to the queen is possible.

Then what about RHO? Would he pass with ♠Kxx or ♠Axx? No again. With a good hand he would raise, hoping to make it; with a bad or mediocre hand he would raise preemptively, to make it more difficult for you to get to your game or slam. Yes, he could hold the doubleton ace or king, but even then he might have raised. If LHO doesn’t have a solid suit, partner is as likely as RHO to have the missing high honor(s). When RHO fails to raise, partner is far more likely than RHO to have the missing high honor(s). Even ♠Jxx in partner’s hand may be ‘a stopper’ since the suit is probably blocked.

Do you see where I am going? I think the odds favor a 3NT bid. Of course, it would be nice if you could invite 3NT, but there is no way to invite. You don’t need to find partner with much to make 3NT. He needs a lot more

for you to make 5♣, and the more you play him for, the less likely he is to have it. Of course, if you only consider your own hand, a 3NT bid looks ridiculous. However, if you consider the opponents' bidding (and their failure to bid), 3NT looks very attractive.

Assuming you analyze the hand this way, the remaining question is whether you have enough courage to trust your judgment and take an action that most of the field won't. Suppose you bid 3NT and the opponents do take the first seven tricks. Obviously that could happen. Everyone will hear about the hand and tell you how unlucky you were that your doubleton eight of spades didn't turn out to be a stopper. Can you stand a little razzing? When you have to guess what to do, you won't always guess right, but you should take the percentage action. I think you are squandering your skill if you always try to do what the field will do. Is it less honorable to get good results from your bidding than from your play or defense?

My bidding recommendations are often controversial. Even some experts will disagree with a few of my suggestions -- although I remove them from my list of experts if they disagree too frequently! That might skew the results slightly in my favor. But in this book I have shown many examples from actual play where I think the winning bid or opening lead is marked, provided the proper inferences are drawn. While I argue my case strongly, as though the suggested inferences are clearcut, I'll admit that some are not. However, most of them are. Don't stop reading just because you disagree with a few of my recommendations.

You may find that you and your partner have adopted some special convention that would work well in some of the bidding sequences. When the bidding goes 1NT by LHO, pass, 2♦ (transfer), and it is your call with five spades and six clubs, it is possible that you play 2♥ shows spades and a minor (while others play that 2♥ shows a takeout double of hearts, ideally with 4-1-4-4 distribution). If you have a special convention that describes your hand perfectly, you will naturally use it, but my assumption throughout is that you are playing with a very good partner for the first time with no agreements regarding unusual sequences. Here is another example, which will be discussed more fully later. The bidding, with no interference, goes

You	Partner
1♠	1NT ¹
2♣	4♠
??	

1. Forcing.

♠ A K J 6 3 ♥ 5 ♦ A 4 ♣ Q J 10 8 4

You have a close decision whether to pass or invite a slam. If you make a slam try, I think it should be a natural 5♣ to show a true two-suited hand. That way, when you risk bidding beyond the game level, partner will infer that you don't have two quick losers in the red suits and will look primarily at his holdings in the black suits and aces(s) in the red suits. Other high cards are of doubtful value. But most people don't play that way. They cue-bid their cheapest first round control, so that is what I have you do in the auction as I present it, saving your problem till the next round. In other words, I have used basic, standard bidding as the starting point for what some may consider later flights of fantasy.

I have devoted a few pages to playing against weak or inexperienced players. However, for the most part, your assumption should be that you are playing against players who bid, play, and defend very well. There are many interesting inferential issues in the play. Did LHO make a dangerous lead because every other lead appeared to be more dangerous? If so, you might figure him, among other things, for the missing queen of trumps. Based upon this inference, do you dare to take what would otherwise be a non-percentage play in trumps? Or did LHO simply make a dangerous lead because he didn't know better? That is part of the challenge of the game — to determine, based on your estimate of their skill, when the opponents have probably made a mistake or when they are defending logically. That is why it is easier to play against people you know than against strangers.

There are many good books on the play of the hand, with emphasis on technique. 'Cash your winners in the other suits before starting a crossruff. With lots of trumps in both hands, look for a strip and endplay rather than rely on a finesse. Conserve your entries and use them in the right order. Keep the dangerous hand off lead.' There is little new about the play of the hand in these pages except for additional ways to figure out what everyone has. What I have tried to do is to emphasize drawing inferences from the bidding and the way your opponents defend. Why did they make a particular lead? Why did they lead a trump? Why didn't they try to establish defensive winners before you established a long suit? Why didn't they try for a ruff?

Regarding defense, signaling is a very important subject, but it has been covered extensively in other books. So my emphasis is on inferences based on what partner or declarer didn't do, like why partner let you hold the lead when he could have overtaken or why declarer isn't trying to establish dummy's long suit. I also discuss how to recognize when partner is inviting you to underlead an ace, and how you and partner can help each other by falsecarding (some naïve players think the purpose of falsecarding is to fool the declarer!).

O.K., no more generalities. Let's look at some hands.

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**BIDS AND OPENING
LEADS BASED ON
INFERENCES**

Not everyone bids like me. Not everyone wants to bid like me. So I won't try to sell you on either a system or my favorite conventions. But there are some hands that call for a certain action (a bid, double or opening lead) no matter what system you are playing — provided you can visualize the concealed hands. And you can't take the right action merely by remembering what it said on page 89 of your favorite book. You have to place the cards based upon the bidding.

SUBTRACTING FROM 40

There is a simple procedure which I find helpful in many competitive situations. Estimate the points shown by the opponents' bidding. Then subtract their points and your points from 40 to get an approximation of what partner has. For example, RHO opens 2♥ (weak) and you hold

♠ K Q 8 7 5 4 ♥ 6 5 4 ♦ 9 ♣ A 10 6

The traditional rule from rubber bridge is that when the opponents preempt, you need at least an opening bid to compete. The potential reward must be great enough to justify the risk. Requiring an opening bid is a good general rule, but it shouldn't apply when you can bid at the two-level. The potential reward must still justify the risk, but here the risk is small and the potential reward is great despite not having a standard opening (one-) bid. You have at least as good a hand as RHO, and you have the higher ranking suit. Also, it is a 'pure' hand — much better than

♠ K Q 8 7 5 4 ♥ Q 5 4 ♦ 9 ♣ Q 10 6

for example (not to mention the same high cards with 6-3-2-2 or 5-3-3-2 distribution). RHO will have 8-9 HCP on average and you have nine, which means that LHO and partner, together, will have 22-23 HCP. Why shouldn't partner have his fair share of the remaining high cards? And if he has a good fit, something like

♠ A 9 3 ♥ 8 ♦ Q 7 6 4 3 ♣ K Q 7 2

it is likely that both sides can take ten tricks in their major. It is safer for you to bid 2♠ now than for partner to enter the bidding later with a very dubious takeout double if you pass and LHO bids 4♥ (or even 2NT).

With your higher-ranking suit, if there is a good fit, you may outbid the opponents in a partscore or push them too high — even when they have a majority of the high cards. Or you may have a cheap sacrifice. If partner has four spades, regardless of the rest of his hand (but especially when he is short

in hearts), it will usually be better for you to play the hand than to sell out to the opponents at the game or partscore level. What if partner doesn't have his share of the missing high cards? Or if he doesn't have a fit? Basically, when partner has a weak hand with no fit, the opponents will get to the same contract they were going to get to anyway, and no harm is done.

Here is another hand where the recommended approach tells you what to do. You are playing IMPs with both sides vulnerable.

LHO	Partner	RHO	You
1♦	pass	1NT	??

♠ A J 6 ♥ K Q J 9 6 ♦ A 8 4 ♣ K 10

What action would you take?

If LHO has a balanced hand, it is probably in the 12-14 HCP range. Responder should have 6-10 HCP, which means that the opponents, if both are balanced, have 18-24 HCP — except that they can't have more than 22 since you have 18. That leaves partner somewhere between 0 and 4 HCP. Suppose LHO is unbalanced. He might open 1♦ with less than 12 points, say

♠ K 10 5 4 ♥ 7 ♦ Q J 9 7 5 3 2 ♣ A

but if he does, he will rebid 2♦, which will be passed around to you, and you can bid 2♥ then. Game your way is extremely unlikely and, despite your high cards, you can't count on making anything at the two-level, especially if the opponents' hands are both balanced.

Since you will be on lead, you have a far better chance of setting a 1NT contract than of making something your way. You won't lose any IMPs if you are plus 100 and you could have made 2♥ for +110 your way, and you will gain 5 IMPs if you can set 1NT a trick and couldn't make a two-level contract. (The latter was actually the case.) For that matter, if partner has as much as a queen, you are likely to score +200 defending 1NT, especially if you pass quickly, since declarer won't play you for most of the missing high cards. The final consideration is that if you double, it is primarily for take-out and partner, with something like

♠ 9 7 4 3 ♥ 10 3 2 ♦ Q 3 2 ♣ 8 5 2

will bid 2♠, changing your plus to a minus.

USING YOUR IMAGINATION

Subtracting from 40 is a good way to estimate partner's high-card strength, but it is equally important to visualize the distribution. When you have a distributional hand, the other hands tend to be distributional also. If you have a long suit, another player must be short in that suit. If you have a void, not all of the other players can have 4-3-3-3 or 4-4-3-2 distribution.

Someone has to have five or more of the suit you are void in, and a six- or seven-card suit is more likely than when your hand is balanced. The more unbalanced your hand is, the more likely there will be lots more bidding.

West	North	East	South
pass	1♥	pass	2♥
??			

♠ J 8 6 4 2 ♥ — ♦ Q J 7 ♣ Q J 8 7 2

What action would you take as West?

I didn't state the vulnerability or form of scoring because I don't think it matters. Bidding 2♠ with this hand is wrong under any circumstances. Even if you could make 2♠, there is no way 2♠ will be the final contract. With so many hearts and so many high cards outstanding, there is bound to be more bidding. Then, if partner raises spades or doubles a heart contract, you will probably get a bad result. Even if a bidding disaster doesn't occur, do you want to encourage a spade lead against a heart contract?

In the Life Masters' Pairs West bid 2♠, North bid 3♦, and now East raised to 4♠ with

♠ K Q 3 ♥ A 10 7 4 ♦ 10 9 5 4 ♣ K 10

visualizing a double fit. (How could West have a bid and North have a game try unless both players were quite distributional?) If your hand were

♠ A 10 9 4 2 ♥ 9 ♦ 7 6 ♣ Q J 9 8 5

or

♠ J 9 8 6 4 2 ♥ 9 ♦ 8 7 ♣ A Q 9 2

(not to mention stronger hands with which you would bid game over a 3♥ invitation by partner) you would belong in 4♠. The only way you could possibly play a spade partscore and make it (with a good partner who trusts you), is to pass and hope that partner will reopen with a double. Admittedly

partner, with length in hearts, is unlikely to make a reopening double (although I think he should do so with his actual hand if opener had passed 2♥), but your best strategy is to keep quiet and hope the opponents will bid too much. They would have no clue that their trumps were breaking badly. The 2♠ bidder said afterwards, ‘Did you realize that I had passed originally?’ His partner replied, ‘Yes, but even so, I expected a better suit and more playing strength for a bid at the two-level with an unlimited hand on your left.’

Playing IMPs at OKBridge, you are dealt

♠ A K Q 9 5 4 3 ♥ — ♦ Q ♣ A 7 5 4 2

Neither side is vulnerable, and RHO opens 2♥. What is your call? 4♠?

Partner’s fair share of the missing high cards is eight or nine points. If he holds the ♦A and the ♣KQ, you want to be in 7♠. If he holds

♠ 7 6 2 ♥ 9 8 5 ♦ J 7 5 3 ♣ K Q 9

or

♠ 7 6 ♥ 8 5 3 ♦ A 10 6 5 4 ♣ Q J 6

you would like to play 6♠. With neither hand would it occur to partner to bid over your four spade bid. Indeed, as little as ♣KJ6 and nothing else will give you a fair play for 6♠. You could show your extra values by bidding 3♥ followed by 4♠, but it will be hard for partner to evaluate his hand, since the ace of diamonds and king-jack of clubs will be useful, while the ace of hearts and the king-jack of diamonds will not. So a direct jump to 6♠ is not unreasonable. Partner’s actual hand was

♠ J 10 6 2 ♥ A 8 ♦ A K J 7 6 5 ♣ 6

so *this time*, no matter what you bid, you should get to 7♠. But if LHO held partner’s hand, bidding 6♠ would result in down at least two, doubled.

In my opinion, your best bid is 2♠! Why? Because, with 13 hearts and 12 diamonds outstanding (along with about 17 HCP), *someone* (either LHO or partner) is almost sure to bid. If LHO bids and partner passes, the odds favor a conservative 4♠ bid. In fact, if LHO bids 4♥ and you then bid 4♠, he may double your ‘sacrifice.’ If LHO passes and partner bids (or if both bid), the odds favor insisting upon a small slam while cuebidding to invite seven. I don’t usually like to underbid, gambling that someone will keep the bidding open, but this hand is an exception. There is at least a 95% chance that someone will bid, and you will have a better idea what to do next round. It would be different if RHO had opened 4♥ and not 2♥. In that case, a 4♠

bid would probably end the auction (unless partner has a super hand), so you would be forced to guess what to do.

Suppose you hold

♠ 8 ♥ A 7 6 4 ♦ A 9 7 5 2 ♣ A J 6

on this auction:

Partner	RHO	You	LHO
1♣	4♠	??	

You are vulnerable and the opponents are not. Not everyone (perhaps not anyone!) will agree with me, but I think you should bid 5♣. Actually, 4NT would be a good alternative if you have an agreement it is for takeout — not to play, with a hand such as

♠ K 8 ♥ J 7 ♦ A K Q 9 7 5 2 ♣ 8 6

or

♠ Q 10 8 ♥ Q 7 5 ♦ K 7 ♣ A Q 9 8 5

No one can find serious fault with a double, and that would be the popular choice. Partner could hold a balanced hand with three or four clubs. But the odds change when the opponents preempt. The more spades RHO has, the more clubs partner will usually have. This isn't merely a superstition. It is based on the odds. RHO probably has eight spades, and let's give partner and LHO two spades each. If partner has two spades, he can't have 4-3-3-3 distribution. The worst he can have is 2-4-3-4 distribution, and a five- or six-card club suit is more likely. Also RHO, with his eight-card spade suit, probably has more spade honors than your partner, with his two-card suit, which means that most of partner's honors are in the other three suits. A typical hand for partner is

♠ Q 6 ♥ K J 9 ♦ K Q 3 ♣ K 10 8 5 3

and it could be much better. (Exchange the queen of spades for the queen of clubs!) Perhaps one time out of ten partner will have something like

♠ Q J 6 ♥ K J 9 ♦ K J 4 ♣ Q 10 4 3

or even a three-card club suit, and you will get a terrible result, but you have to play the odds. Nor can you righteously maintain that your double at this

level is primarily for takeout. With a very distributional hand or a long, solid suit, partner may pull the double, but at least 80% of the time he will pass. Incidentally, the doublers were intending to bid six if partner pulled the double. Is there no way to play in game? Must you bid a slam or accept +300 in lieu of a vulnerable game? Nothing in-between?

At matchpoints you are vulnerable and the opponents are not. Partner opens 1♥ and RHO overcalls 1♠. You hold

♠ 10 7 5 4 ♥ — ♦ Q J 10 6 ♣ Q J 7 5 2

What call would you make?

Many players would make a negative double, but, in my opinion, that would be a mistake. Partner may rebid hearts over your negative double with just a good five-card suit – for example, with

♠ 9 8 2 ♥ A K J 9 7 ♦ A 5 ♣ 9 6 3

If he has a six-card heart suit, he will probably rebid hearts at the two-level, no matter what you do. But he is more likely to jump in hearts or compete to the three-level if you double than if you pass. My concept of a negative double is that it shows a somewhat balanced hand with a few high cards, more like

♠ 7 5 ♥ Q 8 ♦ K J 8 3 ♣ Q J 7 5 2

so that no matter what partner bids, he will find your hand useful.

It is very unlikely that if you pass, LHO and partner will also pass, but if they do, isn't your hand as good for defending 1♠ as for playing in something your way? Frequently, when partner passes 1♠, he will have three spades, giving you good defense and poor offense with this misfit. In fact, +50 or +100 may be a good score when most pairs your way are minus. But usually there will be more bidding. If so, you can easily handle the later auction. If partner reopens with a double, you will bid 2♣, and he won't raise without substantial extra values. You haven't misled him regarding your strength. If LHO raises to 2♠, which is passed around to you, you have a clearcut 2NT bid, which can't be natural when you failed to bid 1NT. After the spade raise partner must be short in spades and is bound to fit one of your suits.

What happened at the table after this hand passed? The player holding partner's hand doubled the raise to 2♠ with

♠ A ♥ A K J 9 5 ♦ K 5 4 ♣ K 9 8 3

and your hand bid 3♠, obviously showing the minors and an interest in game, but probably with a misfit for hearts (to account for not having made a negative double on the previous round). Opener then bid 5♣. He knew that your hand couldn't be strong enough to bid again over four of a minor after you had already made a game try. Since (a) you won't mind if everyone passes, and (b) the hand will be easy to bid if you pass originally and there is more bidding, and (c) given any encouragement partner is likely to bid too many hearts, I think an original pass is clearly your winning action.

In a Swiss teams event RHO opens 2♠, which is alerted. It shows five spades and four or more clubs with 8-12 HCP. Your hand is

♠ A ♥ A 7 5 4 ♦ A K J 10 8 5 2 ♣ 10

You have only 3+ defensive tricks against a black suit contract (because RHO is likely to hold a singleton diamond), but a very strong offensive hand. If partner has 3-3-3-4 distribution with a Yarborough you can probably make 3NT (if clubs are not led or if they split 4-4). If partner has a Yarborough with a four-card heart suit, you probably belong in 4♥. If he has ♥KQ832 and nothing else, which is less than his fair share of the high cards, you belong in 6♥. You must insist on game since partner won't know how little help you need for game. You decide on a takeout double, and the auction continues:

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
2♠	dbl	pass	2NT
pass	??		

Not having discussed playing against a two-suited 2♠ bid, you are not sure whether Lebensohl applies. If partner has

♠ K 8 7 5 ♥ J 10 2 ♦ 4 ♣ Q J 7 5 4

3NT will be the best contract since you will make it even if there is a diamond loser. But 4♥ or 5♦ could easily be safer and better. If partner were barred, your best shot would be to bid 3NT for two reasons: (1) partner needs zero points if the diamonds will run (provided the opponents don't take the first five club tricks); (2) LHO's failure to bid either 3♣ or 3♠ suggests that partner has length in the black suits. LHO would tend to show support for a black suit if he had a good holding (including length) in either suit for several reasons: for preemption, to indicate a lead against 3NT, and to suggest a sacrifice against 4♥.

Fortunately, you don't have to choose the final contract yet. You can treat the 2NT bid as though it were Lebensohl and bid 3♣, just in case that

is what partner intended. He won't pass 3♣ and let you play in opener's second suit. If he bids 3♥ you will cuebid 3♠ on the way to 4♥, hoping partner will bid more with a good heart suit. If he bids anything else, you will bid 3NT (rather than 5♦) since LHO's pass suggests that partner has length in both black suits.

I was pleasantly surprised that several players on my bidding panel agreed with me regarding the following hand:

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
4♥	??	2♥	pass

♠ A Q 10 7 ♥ 4 3 ♦ A ♣ K Q 9 7 5 4

What would you do now?

A pass is extremely cowardly. Since you have 15 HCP, RHO's 4♥ bid is probably based more on playing strength and preemption than on lots of high cards. A double might get you a 5♦ response. I suppose most people would bid 5♣, but in my opinion, you need more luck and more values from partner to make 5♣ than to make 4♠. Although you have only a four-card spade suit, the opponents won't be able to force you to ruff right away since partner will be short in hearts also (maybe even shorter than you). Isn't partner just as likely to have spade length as any of the other players? In fact, since he has fewer hearts than either opponent, isn't he more likely? If RHO doubles, you can take the coward's way out and retreat to 5♣.

Partner actually held

♠ J 9 5 2 ♥ 8 ♦ K 10 7 6 5 2 ♣ 10 3

Hands like this are very hard to defend when the opponents know nothing about your six-card side suit. No line of defense would succeed here, but West led a high heart and shifted to a doubleton club upon seeing the dummy, which made the play very easy. By contrast, 5♣ would be defeated by leading to the ace of clubs, followed by playing the jack, either immediately or after a heart lead and a look at the dummy. (The spade finesse works, but you can't get to the dummy to take it, and you are stuck in your hand with a losing heart.) The result: the unimaginative players are down two while you are making game with an overtrick.

To be successful, a bridge player has to think like a detective, tracking down the distribution of the unseen hands. Although many players are oblivious to them, the tell-tale clues are there, just waiting to be noticed. They are there in the auction and in the opening lead. Every time a defender plays a card, declarer receives information. Similarly, everything that declarer does can be turned to advantage by alert defenders. There is even vital intelligence to be gained by thinking about what a player does *not* do!

In this book, you will learn where to look for these clues, and, more importantly, how to draw the correct inferences from them. From there, it is only a short step to making bids and plays based on those inferences, and thereby becoming a much better player.



MARSHALL MILES is the author of seven previous books, including *Competitive Bidding in the 21st Century* and the all-time classic *How to Win at Duplicate Bridge*. He is a WBF World Master and has won several North American Championships. He lives in California.

