

HAND OF THE WEEK

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Bidding is funny. Everyone is always trying to figure out more ways to ask partner what they have. If any of you join me in the pleasant Sunday morning activity of reading Kit Woolsey's column on www.bridgewinners.com, Kit's Korner, you will see that he has recently been inviting us behind the curtain of his awesome Relay Precision bidding system.

And we mortal pairs content ourselves with ever more and better ways to ask partner what they have. Roman Keycard Blackwood. Oh, we don't have enough room when a minor suit is trump. OK, we'll use Redwood (4♦ is RKC when clubs will be trump and 4♥ when diamonds will be trump). And the list goes on. Jacoby 2NT was invented so responder, with a big fit and a good hand for partner's major suit opening bid could unleash a whole litany of asking bids, which had the unintended consequence of telling the defenders exactly what declarer had before they made their opening lead. So many pairs, including Phil and I, have adopted ever more complex schemes which have the effect of allowing opener to get responder to describe his hand instead. Science marches on.

But good bidding has been around for a long, long time. The essence of good bidding isn't finding out what partner has, it's sharing information with partner until one of you finally realizes that you know what the final contract should be. And that sharing starts from the very beginning of the auction. Here's a hand that illustrates what I mean.

You are the dealer, all vul at matchpoints. You hold ♠3 ♥AKJ1084 ♦Q9832 ♣8. The ACBL has enacted an idiotic set of bidding regulations defining this hand as "Average Strength" because it has 10 points. (Average strength is defined as a hand that has at least 10 points or meets the "Rule of 19" {your points plus the number of cards in your two longest suits add up to 19 or more}.) It's not "Strong" since that means you have to have at least 15 HCP, or at least 14 HCP and meet the "Rule of 24," or have at least 5 Control Points (A=2, K=1) and are within 1 trick of game assuming all the suits are divided relatively evenly in the other hands. (And how often do you think THAT happens?)

Enough of my soap box. Well, for now, anyway. As a good little ACBLbot, since you're allowed to open with "average strength," you sensibly open your hand 1♥ because your hand meets the Rule of 19 with 2 points to spare. That's like having a 4333 hand with 12 points. (Sorry for the delay. I had to pick myself up off the floor, since I fell off my chair laughing at thinking this hand was comparable in strength to a 4333 12 count.) Your LHO overcalls 1♠, and partner doubles (negative, announcing fewer than 3 hearts, 4+ cards in each unbid suit, and enough points (6 or more) to be willing to have you bid again no matter what you opened on. RHO now bids 1NT, announcing a heart stopper and enough points to think that his declaring 1NTX won't be a holocaust.

Now you get to bid again. A lot of pairs faced this situation, and a very large percentage of them rebid 2♥ here. And a few of them even rebid 3♥. Many of those people are better players than me, and many more are about as good. And I think they're all nuts. You are very likely to have a NINE card diamond fit, and your RHO has advertised that he has a heart stopper, while partner has denied 3 hearts. Your hearts aren't going away. If you bid diamonds here, and partner raises diamonds, you can NOW bid your hearts again and partner (unless he thinks you are a blithering idiot who can't tell hearts from diamonds) will know you have 6 good hearts. Instead of you hoping that partner will have a heart or two, why don't you describe your hand and let partner look to see if he has a couple of hearts? Don't you think he will be able to make a better estimate of the length of his heart suit than you can?

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Besides, there is the little matter of, “Spades, Spades. Who’s got the Spades?” Everybody loves to bid spades, since they outrank all the other suits and if you bid them first you are a favorite to be declarer. You have one lonely spade. RHO, unless he is a big-time hand hog, has at most two, since you know his heart stopper is at most Qxxx(x) and showing that heart stopper in preference to raising partner when you have 3 spades is seriously bad bidding. Partner has advertised at least 8 cards in the minors, so he won’t have more than 5 spades. And with 5, or even 4 to an honor, he might/would have bid 1NT rather than looking for a minor suit partial. Conclusion: LHO is very likely to bid spades again, right now.

Since LHO is going to bid spades again, whatever you bid is going to have a great deal of influence on whether partner bids again. Since you have an offensive hand, you want to encourage partner to bid again. So you’re thinking, “Craig, you’ve convinced me. I’m going to bid 2♦ now so partner has choices in the bidding, and knows that the ♦QJ are “good” cards and the ♣QJ, not so good.”

Nope, I’m not done with my soapbox yet. What do you need to make 5♦ here? ♠xxx ♥2 ♦KJxx ♣Axxxx makes it practically laydown. If you just bid 2♦, is partner ever going to dream that we should be in game if he has that hand? Not today, folks.

That’s OK, Craig, I’ll just bid game myself if partner bids again. Hah! I fooled you again. I gave partner a perfect 8 points here. Just think of all the other 8 point hands he might have. ♠Qxx ♥2 ♦Jxxx ♣KQxxx comes to mind. 5♦X goes for 500, or maybe 800 if you guess diamonds poorly. And they can make what, 3♠? Once again, the idea is to tell partner about your hand, and let him look to see if he thinks he has the right cards for you. So I think (and it’s a very strong opinion) that you should bid 3♦ here. Now the auction (looking at all 4 hands) would probably go 3♠, 4♦, Pass back to you. And NOW you can bid your hearts again. Presto! You’re in the best contract because partner will inspect his hand (♠Jxxx ♥3 ♦K10xx ♣AJ10x), see that not only does he have a heart, but also that there might be 3 losers in diamonds (♠A, a diamond, and a club), and that he has those lovely club honors to stand guard over that suit. He will also see that you still might lose those tricks, and a heart too, with hearts trump. But with hearts trump, partner will have time to get a count on the hand and is less likely to lose a diamond.

Just bidding 4♥ and making it gets you 89% on the board. Bidding and making 5♦ would get you 81%, but you have to find the ♦J to do that and if you don’t it’s the teens for you, my friend. Average scores were available for selling out to 3♠ (likely after a pusillanimous 2-level rebid at your first turn) since it’s easy for you to get 2 hearts, a diamond, a club and a ruff, and a spade on defense and many declarers managed only 6 tricks. Undeserved matchpoints, I think. You can make either of two games with your 19 HCP, and unless you realize how much playing strength you have AND TELL PARTNER, you’re never going to get close to either of them.

That’s what good bidding is all about. Both partners working together to allow each to piece together the partnership’s combined assets to find the most likely high scoring contract (or the best chance for the smallest minus if the deal belongs to the opponents).

Another interesting hand, where I don’t know the whole deal, is also instructive. You are in 4th seat, holding ♠x ♥Jx ♦AQxxx ♣Kxxx. LHO opens 1♥, Partner bids 4♠, RHO bids 5♥, and it’s your bid. The opponents are vul and you are not. What’s your call?

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If you've absorbed what I have been trying to say so far, I think you will see the point I am trying to make.

At this vulnerability, partner could have anything for their 4♠ bid. But doing anything but passing here is, once again, trying to guess what partner has. Could you be cold for 6♦? Yes. Could you be getting 800 for doubling 5♥? Yes. Could you be making 5♠? If you are, partner will bid it without your help, since it's far more likely, from his perspective, that you have a trick or two than it is from your perspective to play partner for 9 or 10. Do you have a good save in 5♠? Possibly. Again, if that's right, partner will likely bid again.

But for you to be saving here is crediting the opponents with omniscience. RHO has no idea whether his side can make 8 tricks or 13. And much of the time, when they can make exactly 11, it will be because opener has an unexpectedly good hand and he will huddle for a while and bid 6 a fair percentage of those times. The opponents have to guess not only whether they have enough values to bid more, but also whether they have the right mesh of values.

It's bad bidding to try to guess what partner has, or to make partner try to guess what you have. But if you leave both opponents guessing, you are getting 2:1 odds that you will profit by having someone guess wrong about what to do. That's why it's bad, when partner has forced the opponents to guess, to take the opponents off the hook by bidding when you don't have any reliable information. There is no such thing as an automatic 4♠ bid over an enemy 1♥ opening. So your partner has put the opponents to a 5-level guess that other pairs in their direction may not face. Good bid, partner. Just pass. If they're in the right spot, you'll get 40% or so. If they're wrong, you might be getting all the matchpoints. And for this to be their right spot, they have to make exactly 11 tricks. Why would you want to do anything here to give away the huge advantage partner has given your side with his preempt.