Teams Tactics

by Derek Patterson

Advancing the Cause

IMAGINE THAT you are West, at favourable vulnerability, with this hand:

♠ 9 8 2
♥ Q J 10
♦ K 10 7 4
♣ A 6 4

The bidding begins:

West	North	East	South
	1♠	3♦[1]	3♥

[1] Weak

Facing partner's pre-emptive strike, your hand gives you food for thought. Might it be right to make a sacrifice bid of 5♦ at some point in this auction? By agreement, you know that partner will have a strong six- or seven-card suit with virtually no outside strength. This makes it clear that North-South can make a game and also that 5♦ will cost a penalty of either 500 or 800 if doubled (your experience suggesting that 800 is slightly more likely). From that analysis, sacrificing does not seem to be a sensible option.

An immediate leap to 5♦ – an 'advance sacrifice', so called because the sacrifice is made *before* (or *in advance of)* the opponents' game bid – might still have some merit. The point is that an immediate jump will exert considerable pressure on North-South, who have yet to describe their hands fully and, moreover, have not agreed trumps at this point. Under such circumstances, an advance sacrifice should be preferred by far to the ill-conceived strategy of waiting until the opposition find game before making the sacrifice bid.

So it's now or never. Is 5♦ a good bid at this point? To answer this, it is necessary to know the form of scoring. The danger of the bid is in being doubled and conceding an 800 penalty. Good results, however, might be achieved if, due to the pre-emptive barrage, the opponents subsequently misjudge the auction. Whether playing pairs or teams, these desirable outcomes will be rewarded in a similar fashion – a top at pairs will be a game swing at teams and vice versa. Moreover, the frequency of such results should not be affected by the form of the game. The difference will be felt when scoring up minus 800: at pairs this will be a near bottom, while at teams the loss will be minor, perhaps 4 IMPs.

A jump to the five-level will cause the opponents considerable inconvenience. Often, their next action will be made with little certainty of being optimal. For this reason, the opponents are likely to double about half the time (maybe slightly more frequently). Consequently, a jump to 5♦ at pairs is a high-risk strategy, frequently scoring a zero (or near-zero). In contrast, at teams the bid is virtually risk-free (with just 4 IMPs at stake).

It is probably not a great approach to play top-bottom bridge at pairs, especially in this case when you consider that many other pairs will not have overcalled 3♦ and so will not even be contemplating a sacrifice. Perhaps your partnership is ahead of the field already. At pairs, advance sacrifices should be made only when the sacrifice will be 'cheap'.

At teams, however, the advance sacrifice is a free shot, even when the sacrifice is marginal. ***This is true as long as you are sure that the opponents can make a game contract.***

Here is what happened when the deal occurred at the table:

N/S Game. Dealer North.

North: ♠ A Q J 7 6 5 ♥ K 6 4 2 ♦ 3 ♣ K 7

West: ♠ 9 8 2 ♥ Q J 10 ♦ K 10 7 4 ♣ A 6 4

East: ♠ 10 4 3 ♥ 5 ♦ A Q J 9 6 5 ♣ 10 5 3

South: ♠ K ♥ A 9 8 7 3 ♦ 8 2 ♣ Q J 9 8 2

West	North	East	South
	1♠	3♦	3♥
5♦	5♥	All Pass	

The play did not take long and 5♥ failed by one trick. You might not agree with the North-South bidding, South's 3♥ in particular being slightly light – but this is the sort of thing that happens when players are put under pressure. Can North really be blamed for stretching to 5♥?

Note that if West passes over 3♥, the North hand can be described by a 4♦ cue-bid, or maybe by a raise to 4♥. Then, if West sacrifices belatedly, North, with the heart support already shown, should not feel compelled to bid 5♥, enabling South to double with confidence. On this occasion, credit should be given to West for a well-timed pre-emptive strike.

CONCLUSION: it is not always easy to evaluate the risk and reward of a prospective pre-emptive bid. Nevertheless, especially when playing teams, a good player will be on the look-out for opportunities to make an advance sacrifice, realising that the risks are often smaller than those of the corresponding action when playing pairs. ❐

DIARY OVERSIGHT

Apologies to Peter Stocken for omitting his name from the list of EBU Vice-Presidents on page 2 of the 2012-2013 Diary.