

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [13]

The Webber Cup, held last weekend, is the WBU Teams of Four Championship. It is a sadly diminished event these days – something that may unfortunately be said of most of the WBU's tournament programme. It is now direct entry – both a marker of decline and a guarantee of continued descent towards eventual oblivion. Eight teams entered this year. The main loss has been in terms of what might be considered 'club' players who do not expect to do well in tournaments but who nonetheless are happy to participate. For whatever reason, they are happy to participate no longer – at least, not in Wales.

It follows that this year's event was quite challenging, with a field comprised almost exclusively of experienced tournament players. My team performed extremely poorly. We also were not particularly fortunate, although that was incidental. I am the last person to bemoan the influence of fortune (good and bad) on bridge outcomes. I am glad that bridge - unlike for example chess - is not a 'pure' game; it's the only chance I've got. I long ago worked out that my opponents cannot see my cards, and this influences both my bidding and my card play more than perhaps is wise. Still, there are limits, and I am disinclined, for example, to bash slams without first ensuring that the opponents cannot cash two immediate winners.

Consider the following hand – Board 5 from Session 3 on the Sunday.

Dealer North; North/South vul

	♠2	
	♥Q985	
	♦AQ53	
	♣9865	
♠AKJ109743		♠Q86
♥A		♥K1063
♦76		♦42
♣A2		♣KQ73
	♠5	
	♥J742	
	♦KJ1098	
	♣J104	

This was the bidding when Sue and I sat East/West against Helen Houston and Tim Barsby.

W	N	E	S
	P	1N	P
2H*	P	2S	P
4C*	P	4H*	P
4S	P	P	P

The auction was not complicated. We play a 10-13 No Trump at favourable vulnerability, so my opening bid was within range. Sue transferred to spades and then immediately cue bid her club control. Our approach to cue bidding is quite rigid. Below the game level we are obliged to co-operate with partner when s/he initiates a cue bidding sequence. We bid our lowest control, whether this be first or second round. So in this auction, sitting East, I showed a heart control but denied first or second round control in diamonds. It's a good

method. Despite holding a very nice hand, Sue also had no first or second round diamond control, so she signed off in game.

Our opponents would have had to have been sound asleep not to have led and continued diamonds following that auction. This they duly did, and I collected eleven tricks. Even as I did so, I had a sinking feeling.

That sinking feeling arose from what I realised might well transpire at the other table in our match. It was all too likely, I thought, that East/West would drive to slam. And would our team-mates find the diamond lead? I looked across to where Simon Gottschalk, in the North seat, sat with his head in his hands. He'd been looking miserable all weekend - with good reason – and at that moment he looked positively suicidal. It was the look of a man who had made a series of impeccably reasoned but nonetheless uniformly disastrous opening leads. I feared the worst.

And so it came to pass. Our opponents bid the slam. Simon cogitated, then cogitated some more, before leading.....well, whatever he led, it wasn't a diamond.

I shouldn't blame Simon. He was by no means alone. Six spades was bid at four of the eight tables in play – and it made (thirteen tricks) at every single one. Four East/West pairs stopped in game, presumably having located the diamond weakness. Of those, one escaped a diamond lead - not sure why - but the other three were held to eleven tricks.

I find that a rather remarkable outcome. What does it tell us about the utility of a scientific approach, and specifically about cue bidding en route to a possible slam? Is it best just to be a basher, relying on the defence to get it wrong? I wouldn't go that far. I am not going to change my approach to slam bidding. I don't know the auction at the four tables where East/West bid slam, but I'd question whether those defenders who failed to lead a diamond against Six Spades had reasoned correctly. On another day, or in a different field, the 'bashers' might not be so fortunate. Or so I like to think.

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