

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [35]

Last Sunday twelve teams turned up at Cardiff Bridge Club to do battle in the East Wales Team Championships, otherwise known as the Patrick Jourdain Teams in honour of Patrick. Helen Houston and her helpers deserve enormous credit for having secured such an excellent entry. It was a very enjoyable event, ably directed by Gareth Evans. The team comprising Simon and Debbie Richards, Ceri Pierce and Eric Cummings won comfortably.

In seeking to write up one of their hands I encountered a difficulty in that Simon and Debbie were not at their best against us, but I hope they won't mind my choosing the following hand as containing points of general interest.

Session One; Board 3; Dealer South; East/West vulnerable

	♠A83	
	♥Q753	
	♦KQ73	
	♣97	
♠J54		♠K1062
♥A104		♥K86
♦J10		♦A85
♣Q6543		♣AK10
	♠Q97	
	♥J92	
	♦9642	
	♣J82	

At the table where Sue and I sat North/South against Debbie and Simon, the bidding was as follows.

W	N	E	S
			P
P	1N	X	P
2C	P	P	P

At the other table in our match, with Ceri and Eric sitting North/South, and Chris Rochelle and Simon Gottschalk sitting East/West, they bid as follows.

W	N	E	S
			P
P	1D	1N	2D
X	P	2S	P
P	P		

On Table One Debbie made two overtricks for a score of +130. At Table Two Simon emerged with nine tricks for a score of +140. Flat board.

Neither East/West pair would choose this board as one to have written up, but neither offered the standard fee, so here it is. Let's try to work out what happened.

Of the twelve tables in play, seven East/West pairs bid to Three No Trumps, six of them making and one declarer going down. Two other East/West pairs secured substantial

penalties against North/South: 1NT doubled, down 4, for minus 800; and 2D doubled, down 3, for minus 500. The other three East/West pairs, including the two pairs in our match, stayed low, scoring 130, 140, and 150 respectively.

Do East/West want to be in game on this hand - or, as an alternative, should they aim to secure a hefty penalty for a doubled North/South contract? Well, obviously the penalty is fine, provided it approaches the 600 that East/West would secure for making a vulnerable game. What about Three No Trumps? East/West have a combined 25 count on two flat hands, so game is within range, although not necessarily 'cold'.

Playing in 3NT, declarer has eight top tricks on a diamond lead, and with diamonds dividing 4/4 he can secure a ninth if he guesses correctly in spades. If North has opened the bidding, declarer should play him for the spade Ace. If North has remained silent, and then plays low smoothly when declarer broaches spades (rather than hopping up greedily with the Ace of spades in order to cash diamonds), declarer could well misguess and go down. Still, it's a contract you want to be in at IMP scoring.

So how come our two East/West pairs scored so modestly? For Table One, the answer is simple. There was what is known in technical bridge parlance as 'a mistake'. Debbie should pass Simon's double of my 1NT opening. The partner of the doubler should only bid if very weak. How weak? My personal rule is to pass with a 4 count or better, unless my hand is so distributional as to suggest we can score better in some alternative contract. But in general I reckon 4 points is enough to pass.

Table Two is more interesting in that Chris and Simon had to deal with both opponents bidding, and this in turn gave rise to some ambiguity (or at least, uncertainty). For example, Simon, East, thought that Chris's responsive double showed the values for at least 2NT – so when the bidding came back round to Chris, Simon thought that this is what he should bid, rather than Pass. Simon, being top of range for his initial 1NT overcall, would then have raised to game. Chris for his part took Simon's 2S call (rather than Pass, or 3D, or some level of No Trumps) to show a moderate hand for his initial overcall. So he passed.

One might debate, I suppose, what meaning should attach, on this auction, to the various bids available to Simon at his second go. What exactly is 'Two Spades'? Is it minimum or can it be strong? Is it forcing, or can it be passed? How many spades does it promise? What would a bid of Three Diamonds indicate? My fee for this column is not sufficient to require me to give system advice (or indeed to do anything at all) so I shall not attempt it. But obviously these are matters worth discussing within a partnership.

The only observation I would make is that bidding to the optimum contract becomes more difficult when the opponents are in the auction, and more difficult still when they are both bidding. The range of calls then available will expand, but space may now be limited, and most partnerships will not have agreed the meaning of all their possible calls with anything like the degree of precision that will apply in an uncontested auction.

Anyway, Debbie and Simon needn't worry. They obviously played better than we did, as indeed did Chris and Simon.

GD