

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [38]

The Premier League is now over, with the final round of matches having been played last weekend. It was an exciting competition, with the team captained by Julian Pottage (Tony Ratcliff, Simon and Jonny Richards, Mark Roderick and Paddy Murphy) overtaking John Salisbury's team on the final Sunday.

The Premier League is now well established, both as a selection tool and as a competition in its own right. It almost certainly offers the best bridge in Wales. It helps too that the event has a first class director in Sarah Amos. Having a director who is skilled in all aspects of the role adds considerably to the enjoyment of the players. The Welsh Bridge Union is not overstocked with competent performers in key roles, so it's good to acknowledge excellence where it exists.

Speaking of excellence, my team (Sue Ingham, Chris Rochelle and Simon Gottschalk) actually won the second weekend, a performance that will go unremarked unless I remark upon it. Here are a couple of hands. The first is from our match against the North Wales team captained by Bob Pitts.

Match 2; Board 16; Dealer West; East/West vulnerable

	♠J6	
	♥AJ72	
	♦J10	
	♣108742	
♠AK3		♠Q1095
♥108		♥63
♦Q765		♦K983
♣KQ96		♣J53
	♠8742	
	♥KQ954	
	♦A42	
	♣A	

We owe this one to Mark Roderick. A few years ago Mark introduced Sue and me to his own personal modification of the standard major/minor overcall of the opponents' weak no trump opening. We have introduced several modifications over the years, but have retained Mark's basic idea which was that a bid of a major suit should promise just four cards in that suit along with - at least - a five card minor. (I think Mark may have favoured a six card minor for this bid, but then he's a cautious soul.) It makes sense, I think, to require just four cards at the two level, but to have a backstop of the five card minor for the three level. If you're prepared to use the method on 5/4 distribution it comes up *a lot*, which is a key test for any system, and overall is a big winner for us.

This was our auction, Sue and I sitting North/South.

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

My Two Heart overcall was towards the bottom of our range, but the vulnerability was in

our favour. Sue quite rightly had no hesitation in bidding the heart game.

Four Hearts should go down. I received a spade lead and continuation. As you can see, in order to make my contract I need to ruff three losers in my own (the North) hand – two spades and a diamond. If trumps are drawn I cannot manage it. East/West need either to lead a trump, or to switch to a trump having cashed their spade winners. They did find the trump switch when I gave up a diamond, as I had to, but that was too late. So I was able to make my contract with the aid of three ruffs, five trumps, and the minor suit Aces.

You might ask whether it's desirable to bid a game that only makes on a misdefence. Well, it depends on the likelihood of the misdefence. We were as it happens the only pair to bid game on the North/South cards. The remaining seven pairs contented themselves with a heart part-score. Of those, four made ten tricks and three made nine. So ten tricks were made at five of the eight tables in play. Those are good odds.

The Premier League had a tense conclusion, with three teams in contention for the top spot and the certain Camrose berth that goes with it. As it happens they all lost. There were several dramatic hands, giving rise to big swings. This was one of them.

Match 7; Board 5; Dealer North; North/South vulnerable

	♠107643	
	♥53	
	♦9542	
	♣63	
♠AK		♠J952
♥QJ96		♥2
♦AKQ73		♦8
♣A4		♣QJ109752
	♠Q8	
	♥AK10874	
	♦J106	
	♣K8	

My team's final match was against one of the leading contenders (and eventual winners), the Pottage team. Sue and I sat East/West against Julian and Tony. We bid as follows.

W	N	E	S
X	P	3C	3H
	P	P	P

Julian had little option than to try Three Hearts over my club pre-empt. And of course Sue knew what to do with that (Double is unambiguously for penalties on this auction). Unlucky for declarer, who went four down vulnerable. That was 1100 away. It would have been 1400 were it not for a defensive slip, Sue finding herself endplayed at trick twelve to gift declarer a winner with his club King. That was still a hefty gain when at the other table in our match East didn't open the bidding. He eventually played in a rather ungainly Four Spades, which went one down.

The decision to open pre-emptively with the East hand is one that divides opinion. Well, I know where I stand. Practical bridge players open Three Clubs with that hand. Yes, there is a potential downside, but the upside is huge. Of the eight tables in play, six Easts opened Three Clubs, and South at all those table was doubled by West in a heart contract (5 x 3H; 1 x 4H). The penalty was 1100 or 1400 in each case. Two Easts failed to open (“I had a four card spade suit, partner”), one eventually making 3NT for a score of 400, and the other going down in 4S. Whether or not East made his game was insignificant – he was booked for a double figure minus score.

The bridge world eagerly awaits my *Practical Bridge Bidding for Practical Players* (cover price: 50p). There is a chapter devoted to pre-emptive openings with a four card major on the side. I haven't written it yet, but I'm gathering material. A related work, the challenging *Expert Systems for Novice Players*, is nearly finished. There's no actual content – just blank pages – but I'll charge 50p for that one as well for the implicit sound advice.

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