Teams Tactics

by Derek Patterson

A Life of Sacrifice?

IMAGINE THAT you are West with the following cards:

♠ A 10 8 7 5 2
♥ 8 2
♦ A 10 7
♣ 7 6

South opens 1♥, you overcall 1♠, North bids 2♥, partner raises to 2♠ and opener bids 4♥. Given that the opponents are vulnerable and your side is not, what should you do now?

Below is a possible layout of the four hands and by analysing the deal, I hope to identify some salient issues, which can then be generalised to act as a guide in the area of sacrifice bidding at teams.

N/S Game. Dealer South.

	♠ Q 9 4 ♥ J 6 4 3 ♦ 6 3 ♣ K J 5 3	
♠ A 10 8 7 5 2 ♥ 8 2 ♦ A 10 7 ♣ 7 6	N W E S	♠ K 6 3 ♥ 10 9 ♦ J 8 4 2 ♣ Q 9 8 2
	♠ J ♥ A K Q 7 5 ♦ K Q 9 5 ♣ A 10 4	

On this layout, 4♠ would fail by three tricks (-500 when doubled) and 4♥ would make ten or eleven tricks depending upon whether declarer can guess the location of the ♣Q. This illustrates that there is a case for West sacrificing in 4♠ over South's 4♥ call. A poignant question remains, however: is 4♠ a good bid at this point? Much depends on the form of scoring.

If it were my decision, I would imagine a possible hand for partner and work out the likely outcomes of the opponents' current contract (in this case 4♥) and the prospective sacrifice (in this case 4♠). For example, on the current deal I might envisage partner to have ♠K-Q-x and nothing else, in which case 4♠ would be three down (-500 when doubled) and 4H would be certain to make (-620).

At pairs, I might give the matter further consideration but, playing teams, the realisation that -500 is a likely result of bidding 4♠ would, in no uncertain terms, stop me in my tracks – I would pass.

So what difference does the form of scoring make? One issue is that -500 at pairs might be a near top, whereas it rates to gain a mere 3 or 4 IMPs at teams. Furthermore, the opponents know this – imagine South's predicament if West does sacrifice in 4♠. Playing pairs, South would be aware that a 500 penalty might be an insufficient reward. As a result, he or she might try 5♥ and now East-West have a chance of going plus (if declarer loses to the ♣Q). Playing teams, however, very simply, North-South would not be tempted. They would double 4♠.

On the battlefield of competitive bidding, in order to be the last one standing, it helps to provide the opposition with opportunities to fall on their own swords. A 4♠ sacrifice here does provide such an opportunity at pairs, but not at teams. So . . .

One of the ingredients of a good sacrifice bid is that the opponents might be tempted to bid again, thereby giving the sacrificing side a chance of a plus score after all.

What else might happen if West bids 4♠? Try adjusting the deal illustrated above by making the North-South spades divide 2-2. In this case, declarer in 4♥ would have to successfully locate the ♣Q to avoid four losers. In other words, 4♥ might go down thereby making 4♠ a phantom sacrifice.

So at teams, if I know that -500 is a likely result of a potential sacrifice, I know that the possible gain is not great and meanwhile, the potential loss is considerable. Furthermore, the opponents know this and so they are unlikely to misjudge under these circumstances.

At teams, assuming equal vulnerability and that the opponents have just bid game, then to make a sacrifice an attractive proposition, one would like to feel that there is a reasonable chance of going one down (or making even), accepting that the final result might turn out to be two down. *The vast majority of good sacrifices are made on distributional hands.*

If one down seems unlikely, it is prudent to choose to defend, hoping that the opponents' game will fail. At favourable vulnerability, a marginally more relaxed attitude should be assumed and, conversely, at unfavourable, a slightly stricter approach adopted.

In this way, I think that you will find that the opponents will misjudge quite often by bidding on, because they will not be certain of defeating you. When they double, it will often be a good sacrifice and, moreover, most expensive phantom sacrifices will be avoided. You will miss some possible sacrifices but only those that are neither here nor there.

Importantly, you will be a difficult opponent. Remember that players who sacrifice too freely are very easy to play against because, in a competitive auction, you can bid game against them in the sure knowledge that they will sacrifice and when they do, you double – 'Simples!', as they say in the advert.

Please note that both 'advance sacrifices' (so-called because the sacrifice is made *before,* or in advance, of the opponents bidding game) and sacrificing against slams demand a separate discussion.

Conclusion: ***At teams, when the opponents have bid game, sacrifice only in the expectation, not in the hope, that it will be cheap. Random sacrificing is a mug's game!*** ❐