

Board of the Week 79

By Dick Chapman

David C. has introduced me to a new bidding method. Like many methods, one must consider a cost-benefit ratio before adopting it. For almost every conventional call, the benefit is a more accurate auction (getting to the proper strain and level) or an obstruction of the opponents' methods. The costs are multiple. First, you frequently (but not always) must give up a natural meaning. Two examples: (A) If 1 spade – 2NT is "a game forcing spade raise," 2NT can't mean "balanced hand, invitational to 3NT." (B) If you are using a two-over-one game forcing system where an unpassed responder's 1NT over opener's major is "forcing one round," 1NT can't mean "6-9 points and no support for your suit." You get the idea. A second cost is your conventional call might allow defenders to compete in the auction, double to get a lead, or otherwise play more accurate defense. A third cost is the memory load: for many (most?) players there is a limit on how complex the system can be.

But we still like our fancy conventions, so here is one more for your consideration. It deals with very, very strong balanced hands. By that I mean 25 hcp or more. By way of background, many players have a loose "hierarchy of balanced hand bidding" where the strength of the hand is expressed by the introduction of no trump calls:

11-14 1x-1y-1NT
15-17 1NT
18-19 1x-1y-2NT
20-21 2NT
22-24 2C-2y-2NT

Fine, that covers 11 up to 24. In most agreements, systems are on after 2C-2y-2NT. Now we are finally getting around to the monster hand (25+). In my non-expert agreements where we don't play gambling 3NT, we use 3NT as "25+ and I do not have a four card major" and 2C-2D-3NT as "25+ and I do have a four card major." If opener has shown a major, 4C is Stayman and then 4NT by responder is to play if no fit. I didn't say it was a good system; I'm only saying I use it, with all of its flaws. In my partnerships where we do play Gambling 3NT, it's still 2C-2D-3NT and I don't have a clue what the follow-ups are. See how bad my methods are?

Now David proposes this refinement, which I like very much. To keep the z bid at the two level, the auction goes like this: 2C-2D-2H-2S-2NT. What??? Ok, here's a translation, per the late Canadian expert Eric Kokish. 2 clubs is the traditional strong opening call, forcing. 2 diamonds is waiting, or a "king or more" if you want. 2H is alerted as a relay to 2S, both of which are totally artificial. Now 2NT (still at the two level!) is the 25+ balanced hand. And all systems are on. So Stayman (or Puppet if that's your method) and

transfers are still available just as if you had opened 2C-2D-2NT, except that instead of 22-24, it's 25+. Responder will get you to slam if you need to be there.

A couple of additional points. First, if the response is some sort of double negative (many use 2 hearts as "less than a king"), the entire system is off and you go back to whatever methods you use in these cases. Many use 2NT as the only non-forcing bid after 2 hearts, but that's not the subject of this discussion, so onward we go. The second and more critical point is how to deal with a strong hand (but not 25+) with hearts. If 2C-2D-2H is a relay to spades then back to 2NT to show a 25+ balanced hand, how do you show hearts?

The answer depends on the hand. If you have a balanced 22-24 with five hearts, you would revert to "standard" bidding, which actually isn't standard but it's common: bid 2C-2D-2NT with the five card major and let partner use Stayman or Puppet Stayman to sort things out. If you have a six or longer card heart suit, you will pay a cost that I mentioned in the first part of this discussion. It would go 2C-2D-2H*-2S*-3H*, or by agreement (and per Mr. Kokish) it could go 2C*-2D*-3H. If the first method is used, 2H would be alerted as "relay to 2S, to show either a very strong balanced hand or a strong hand with long hearts" and 3H would be alerted as "the latter of those two things... 'long hearts'." If the second method is used, no alert would be required, as 3H is natural.

Shall we see the method in action? Check this hand from a recent club game:

		♠AKJ5 ♥AK84 ♦A6 ♣AQ10	
♠ ♥ ♦ ♣			♠ ♥ ♦ ♣
		♠32 ♥Q10765 ♦K1072 ♣76	
North	East	South	West
2♣	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♥*	Pass	2♠*	Pass
2NT*	Pass	3♦*	Pass
4♥	Pass	4♠	Pass
5♦	Pass	6♥	All pass

*2 hearts is the Kokish relay to 2 spades, 2 spades is the required call, and 2NT shows 25+ balanced. 3 diamonds is a transfer to hearts. 4 hearts is a super-acceptance of the transfer. 4 spades is kickback RKC for hearts. The third step up (5 diamonds) is 2 or 5 key

cards without the trump queen. With 25+ balanced and a super-acceptance, it sure isn't 2.

The full deal:

	♠AKJ5 ♥AK84 ♦A6 ♣AQ10	
♠9 ♥J92 ♦Q85 ♣KJ5432		♠Q108764 ♥3 ♦J943 ♣98
	♠32 ♥Q10765 ♦K1072 ♣76	

As you can see, this makes 13 tricks on two club finesses. But no one can or should bid the grand. Was the small slam bid? Let's look at the traveler:

<i>Bid</i>	<i>By</i>	<i>Ld</i>	<i>Tks</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>MP</i>
6 ♥	N	4 ♠	7	1010	11
6 ♥	S	9 ♠	6	980	10
3NT	N	8 ♠	7	520	8
3NT	N	7 ♠	7	520	8
3NT	N	7 ♠	7	520	8
4 ♥	N	4 ♠	7	510	5.5
4 ♥	N	7 ♠	7	510	5.5
3NT	N	10♣	6	490	3
3NT	N	8 ♣	6	490	3
3NT	N	7 ♠	6	490	3
4 ♥	S	9 ♣	6	480	1
3NT	N	3 ♣	5	460	0

Well, 2 out of 12 got there. Of course we don't know the auctions, but it's probable that in most cases North was not able to convey to South the superior strength and the big heart fit. Here's a sample auction: 3NT, all pass. Making 12 for a bad score or 13 for average.

I have incorporated Kokish relays into my agreements with a few partners, but I admit that it hasn't come up yet. And it won't come up, for two reasons: first there is a conspiracy among the card gods to make me spend mental energy on new stuff, and second, I never get any cards. On that first reason, we all know that we win or lose based on how well we play our cards, not whether we have a special bid for 25+ balanced hands. On the second reason, I am sure that this is said by every bridge player who ever lived. But in my case, it's true. ☺

Riddle of the day: Kokish originally called the method Birthright. I have not a clue why.

See you at the table.