TIPS FOR TOPS

BY JANE JENNINGS

All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on , Feb 23, 2021, (Game #54900). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- 2 Big Hands
- Introduction to Squeezes

Bd: 2 Vul: N/S Dlr: East	♠ KJT4 ♥ KT7 ♦ AJ9 ♣ AQJ	Optimum NS 6N: +1440
♠ 95 ♥ A85 ♦ Q532 ♣ 9532	N W 2 E S	♠ Q8762 ♥ J9632 ♦ -- ♣ T64
19 6 HCP 3 12	♠ A3 ♥ Q4 ♦ KT8764 ♣ K87	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 4 6 2 3 6 S 4 6 2 3 6 E - - - - - W - - - - -

There are a couple of interesting points to look at on board 2 this week. The first is the disadvantage of playing in minor suits. Matchpoint scoring is all about how your score compares with the other pairs who played the same cards. Some N/S pairs played this hand in Ds; others in NT. They took the same 11 tricks, but because NT scores more than minor suits, those in NT did well, and those in Ds did badly. If you were playing a team game, or rubber bridge, Ds would make a lot of sense - it's a safer contract. But in matchpoints, it pays to play in the higher scoring contract - and that's NT. Major suits are different; in most cases 4 of a major plays better than 3NT if you have an 8-card fit. That's why we use Stayman, and other techniques, to locate a Major suit fit. But if you are thinking about a minor suit - try very hard to play it in NT if at all possible.

What's the bidding sequence here? Quite simple: S opens 1D - it's much too strong to open 2 - N responds 1S, because you always want to check for a MAJOR suit fit. S rebids 2D, showing a 6-card suit and a minimum hand, and N can happily say 3NT. At no point should N bid 2NT - that can be passed, and you know you need to play this in a game contract. One N thought about a slam and bid 4NT to ask for As, but subsided in 5D when she found they were missing an A.

Do you know how to play in 5NT after asking for As and not liking the answer? The 4NT bidder can't bid 5NT - that would be asking for Ks. But there is a trick. After the 4NT ask and the 5D response, if the next call is an impossible bid, it asks partner to bid 5N to play. In this case, N had responded S, and then asked for As. If her next bid over 5D was 5H, it can't be natural; she's had 2 chances earlier to show Hs, and didn't. So this would be an "impossible" bid, and when S now bids 5NT, N can happily pass, for a better matchpoint result than playing 5D.

This is a hand where the chart says you can make 6 in either Ds or NT. And you can - **IF** you know from the start that all 4 missing Ds are in the W hand. Without seeing the hand records, that's not a sensible assumption to make - very much against the odds - so 11 tricks is the reasonable limit. But a few declarers in NT didn't make their contract - why?

It all comes down to the first trick. When a H is led by E - the 4th-best 3, of course - there is nothing to be gained from playing the Q from dummy. With the K in hand and Q in dummy you are always entitled to 1 H trick, but you can make 2 if you can pick up the J - and this lead is helping you do just that. Looking at only the N and S cards, consider the play if you start with low from dummy. If W has the A and plays it, you now have established your Q AND K. If W doesn't have, or doesn't play the A, you can beat their hypothetical J with your K, and now your 10 is promoted as a second stopper; OR you can win the trick with your 10 if they don't have/play the J, and you still have both K and Q as a secure second stopper. All of those scenarios lead to 2 H tricks, whereas having the Q taken by the A restricts you to one.

I do understand that you don't have time at the table to go through this sort of analysis, but it's worth remembering the general principle; it's better not to commit your high card (the Q in this case) until your opponent has had to commit to their play. It can save a trick.

So, playing the Q early cost the second H trick, but you can still make your 3N contract and salvage a few matchpoints if you duck the next H trick. That way, when W gets in with the D, she doesn't have a H to play - E's 2 good H's are stranded. Do you know that W will be out of Hs? No, but if she has another, it means they split 4-4, and there will be only one more for the opponents to cash.

There were 2 big hands today - 12 and 18 - with similar bidding opportunities and challenges. It's worth reviewing how the sequence should progress.

Bd: 12 Vul: N/S Dlr: West	♠ T963 ♥ A643 ♦ T2 ♣ 653	Optimum NS 4S,NS 4H: +6
♠ Q72 ♥ QJ2 ♦ QJ9765 ♣ 9	N W 12 E S	♠ 85 ♥ T98 ♦ A83 ♣ JT742
4 8 HCP 5 23	♠ AKJ4 ♥ K75 ♦ K4 ♣ AKQ8	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 - 4 4 2 S 3 - 4 4 2 E - 1 - - - W - 1 - - -

In each case there were 23HCP in one hand - enough to open the bidding 2C. DO NOT open 2NT with 23 if your agreement says that your range is 20-21; you will miss easily biddable games that way. Open 2C, partner will, in each of these cases, respond 2D, and now you rebid 2NT. That promises a hand with a balanced 22 or 23 HCP - perfect!

Now responders' actions should follow the same pattern as if you had opened 1NT. In other words, Stayman and Transfers both apply, if you usually play them over 1NT. You don't need much strength; opener has promised 22-23HCP, so that ace you hold is enough to put you into game territory. So, on board 12, you bid 3C - Stayman - and when opener bids Ss, you raise them to game in Ss. On board 18, you have a 5-card Major, so you use your transfer bid, and then rebid 3NT. You don't rebid 4S on this one, because you don't know whether you have an 8-card fit; opener might have only 2 Ss. So you leave the final decision to your partner, having told her you have 5.

Now the decision rests with E. The books will tell you that you should play in Ss with a 9-card fit. Some matchpoint players get greedy with a hand like this. If you take the same tricks in NT as you would in Ss, you score better in NT, and better is what matchpoints are all about. This hand has no short suit - nothing that needs ruffing in the short hand - so some players - myself included - will ignore the book and play this in NT. Sometimes greed works; sometimes it doesn't.

A side comment on board 12. Several Ws opened the bidding 2D, which made life a lot more difficult for S. What should S do in this case? With a hand this big, it will be up to you to make sure you get to game; there's no way to tell your partner you only need 3 points from her. So you have only 2 real choices; jump to 3NT yourself, or double and hope that partner's response will help clarify the situation. A bid of 2N is not sufficient; as the cheapest NT bid available, it only shows a hand of about 15-18. On this hand if you double, partner will bid 2H, and you still have no good choices. Bidding 2S is not a valid option, as it promises a 5-card suit. 3H is a possibility, hoping that partner has 5. I admit, I would probably try 3N, which turns out to have no chance on this layout. Sometimes preempts work!

Bd: 18 Vul: N/S Dlr: East	♠ -- ♥ J98743 ♦ K62 ♣ K643	Optimum EW 3N+2: -460
♠ A9653 ♥ 52 ♦ 94 ♣ 9872	N W 18 E S	♠ KQJ7 ♥ AQ6 ♦ AJT ♣ AQ5
7 4 HCP 23 6	♠ T842 ♥ KT ♦ Q8753 ♣ JT	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 3 1 - 5 5 W 3 1 - 5 5

This hand is interesting from the play aspect for a couple of reasons. It turns out the play is effectively the same whether you play in Ss or NT. With a 4-0 trump split, you have no choice but to play 4 rounds of Ss to pull your opponent's trump, and now you're more or less playing the rest in NT. Of course, if you are playing NT, you have to be careful not to block the S suit, or you might end up with a good trick stranded in dummy. The solution is, as always, to play the high cards from the short-side first. Play KQJ and then the 7 to dummy.

I'm going to play a little "what if" on this board to illustrate a concept. "What if" S led a spade on trick one? Whether you (E) are playing in Ss or in NT, you should play out all your Ss as described above. You are now in dummy for the only time (assuming NT); what should you lead? There is a clear answer here: lead a D and play your J if N plays low - as she should. This is not a 50% finesse; chances are you are going to lose this trick to S. But S is now endplayed. This is the concept I wanted to illustrate. S is stuck - anything she leads will help you - H or C play into your AQ, so you win both, regardless of where the K is. And the Ds are now equivalent, with you holding the A10. I'm sure you all recognize the feeling of being the victim of an endplay; here is a typical set-up where you can put your opponent in the uncomfortable position.

The other thing to observe is what happens to N while you play out 5 S tricks. If we were at live tables, you would see her squirm! What 5 cards can she pitch on your Ss? If she reduces either minor suit to Kx, there's a danger you will play to a Q and her K will then fall under your A. And she doesn't want to pitch Hs - that's her long suit that she hoped would be a problem for you. N is squeezed.

Squeezes can be a complicated and advanced topic. But what you should know is that, if you have a long suit that you can run without setting up winners for the opponents, it's worth doing just that; it can make life very uncomfortable for the opponents.

I would like to make one further comment while I have your attention. (Do I, still?) When I look over the hands you have played, I see situations where bids have not been properly alerted. Please remember; you need to alert any call that shows up as red or blue on the standard ACBL convention card, and you need to do it by explaining - not naming - your bid. Any bids that would be explained after the auction in a f2f game, need to be explained as you make them on BBO. If you bid 4NT to ask about Aces, say "ace-asking", not "Blackwood". Similarly, don't announce "Bergen" if you use Bergen raises - not everybody knows what that means. Say "10-12 pts and 4 Ss", or whatever the true meaning is.

2C as a strong opening bid does not need to be alerted; nor does any 2D response to it. But if you respond 2H to 2C - whatever your system, unless you are suggesting Hs as a suit to play in, you need to alert it. It only takes a moment, and it's much easier to do it right the first time than to try to correct the situation if your opponents report that they were not properly informed.