TIPS FOR TOPS

BY JANE JENNINGS

- Overcalls
- Balancing
- And, an Endplay

All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on March 16, 2021, (Game 66473.)

Today we continue on the subject of takeout doubles. The general meaning of a takeout double is that you have a hand with opening points, which can support any suit other than what the opponents have bid. So, the usual situation, when your partner has named their best suit, is that, if you bid again, you support your partner. What does it mean if you don't; if you name a new suit, or bid NT after your partner has responded to your double? It means that you have a hand that was too strong for a regular overcall of your suit, or too strong for a 1NT overcall. A 1NT overcall shows a range of about 15-18 HCP; a suit overcall has a much wider range, but it also has an upper limit of about 17HCP. So if you make a takeout double and your partner offers H as her best suit, and you now bid S, you are telling her you have a hand that was too strong to overcall 1S - at least 18 or 19HCP, and it's a 5+ card S suit, just like a regular overcall. And if you bid 1NT after your partner has responded to your overcall, you are saying you have 19-20 HCP, and a stopper in the opponent's suit.

In other words; don't change the suit or bid NT just because you don't really like the suit your partner chose. Don't make a takeout double unless you are going to be happy with any suit she chooses OR your hand is extra strong. And yes; that means that sometimes you have a good hand and there's nothing you can do but pass after your opponent opens - at least for the first round.

Bd: 9 Vul: E/W Dlr: North	♠ 875 ♥ J85 ♦ QT5 ♣ 7542	Optimum EW 2H: -110
♠ AKQ9 ♥ A64 ♦ J76 ♣ KQ9	N W 9 E S	♠ 63 ♥ T732 ♦ K832 ♣ J83
3 19 HCP 4 14	♠ JT42 ♥ KQ9 ♦ A94 ♣ AT6	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 1 2 2 1 1 W 1 2 2 1 1

We had an example of one of these strong hands this week on board 9. S opened the bidding 1C, and W had 19HCP, including 2 stoppers in Cs. It's too strong to overcall 1NT, but perfect to start with a double. Of course, if your partner were to show you a S suit, you would support that next, but when she bids Hs, you can now bid 1NT - the perfect hand for this sequence. If E had a little more, they could add their points to your known 19-20 and consider inviting game, but with their actual 4, they should be happy to pass. And 1NT is all you can legitimately make.

One last detail: how to value your hand for a takeout double. Unless you have one of these very strong hands, you expect your hand to be the dummy when you accept the suit that partner has bid. Your short suit will be helpful; your partner will be able to ruff losers with your small trump. So you should include dummy points in your count; 5 for a void, 3 for a singleton, 1 for a doubleton. Of course, don't add points for length AND shortness on the same hand.

We have been talking so far about takeout doubles and overcalls. These terms refer to action you take when your RHO opens or responds to an opening bid. But if your LHO opens and the next 2 players pass, the situation is different. Any action you take here is called balancing, and balancing actions typically promise a K less than the same action would promise in the direct seat. So after 1D p p, you can bid 1NT with a hand of 12-15HCP and a D stopper; if you have the 15-18 point hand that would be a 1NT overcall in direct seat, in balancing you show it by doubling first and then bidding 1NT. You can also make a balancing double with short Ds and 10 points, including distribution, and feel free to bid 1H or 1S if you have 5 of them and 6HCP.

This week an example of balancing came on board 7. At most tables, W opened the bidding 1H, and many were allowed to play it there, most making 2. The N/S pairs who fared better were those where S balanced; they bid 2C with 10HCP. It would have been a very skimpy bid as an overcall, but quite sufficient in the balancing seat. These pairs came out ahead in a variety of ways; they made a plus score by playing 2C or defending 3H, which they set. Even playing 3C and going down for -100 scored better than the -110 of the 1H defenders.

Bd: 7 Vul: All Dlr: South	♠ J542 ♥ KQ2 ♦ Q93 ♣ K53	Optimum NS 2N: +120
♠ KQ73 ♥ AJT63 ♦ AJ ♣ 96	N W 7 E S	♠ 86 ♥ 987 ♦ KT642 ♣ J72
11 15 HCP 4 10	♠ AT9 ♥ 54 ♦ 875 ♣ AQT84	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 2 - - 1 2 S 2 - - 1 2 E - 1 1 - - W - 1 2 - -

I will have more to say about balancing, and will hope for more examples, next week.

Bd: 1 Vul: None Dlr: North	♠ AKJT6 ♥ A765 ♦ T ♣ A92	Optimum NS 5S: +450
♠ 53 ♥ Q2 ♦ J654 ♣ 76543	N W 1 E S	♠ 2 ♥ KT83 ♦ AKQ987 ♣ JT
16 3 HCP 13 8	♠ Q9874 ♥ J94 ♦ 32 ♣ KQ8	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - 2 5 1 S - - 2 5 1 E - 3 - - - W - 3 - - -

I have one final point for our advanced players - or those who would like to be. Board 1 was played in 4S at all tables; most made 4 and a few made 5. The way to make 5 has a fancy title, but is quite simple to pull off, as long as you recognize the situation. What you have here starts with extra trumps; enough that you can draw the outstanding trumps and still have some left in each hand. You have no extra cards in Cs - you have 3 tricks off the top - and none in Ds. So the only suit of any concern is the H suit. And the way to try for the extra trick is called elimination (or "strip") and endplay. You "eliminate" the outside suits by playing all the Ds and Cs before you play the Hs. This week, in all cases, E had led 2 Ds, so once you've ruffed the second one, you have none left in either hand. If she hadn't, you would - after pulling trump - ruff dummy's D in your hand, to finish the job. And you play your AKQ of Cs. Now, when you play A and another H, the W player - who takes the trick with her Q - is endplayed. She doesn't have another H to lead, and when she leads a D or a C, you can pitch your last H loser from dummy while you ruff in your hand - the classic "ruff-and-sluff".

Is there any guarantee this will work? No - if Hs were divided 3-3 instead of 4-2, or if E held both the K and Q, you will not have gained anything. But you will not have lost anything either, and there's no risk in trying. It's worth remembering to look for a situation like this; it can often gain you a trick. Today it was an overtrick, but sometimes it's the last trick you need to make your contract.