TIPS FOR TOPS

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- Bidding
- Should I Alert?

All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on March 30, 2021, (Game # 5732.)

Bd: 3 Vul: E/W Dlr: South	♠ QJT6 ♥ KJ5 ♦ A943 ♣ AT	Optimum NS 4S+1: +450
♠ 97 ♥ T972 ♦ KT852 ♣ 82	N W 3 E S	♠ 32 ♥ AQ64 ♦ 76 ♣ QJ543
15 3 HCP 9 13	♠ AK854 ♥ 83 ♦ QJ ♣ K976	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 2 2 5 4 S 2 2 1 5 4 E - - - - - W - - - - -

Although our primary focus is on achieving better results, I must take a moment to talk about systems and alerts. Board 3 brought this to my attention. S opened 1S, and many Ns bid 2NT - the Jacoby 2NT convention. Almost all self-alerted their bids, and most explained it well. But a reminder for those who didn't; almost all bids that aren't natural require an alert and an explanation. In this case, if you aren't suggesting playing in NT, your opponents are entitled to know that. But please don't write "Jacoby" - that's not an explanation. Write something simple like "S support, game force" so that opponents who don't know Jacoby get the picture.

To take this further: when S rebid 4S, I don't think anybody alerted the bid - but they should. It may seem odd; you ARE offering to play 4S, of course. But if you are using the system properly, your bid has a much more precise meaning: it's a minimum hand with no singleton or void.

Again, your opponents are entitled to know that; it might affect their defence. Once the artificial system has been triggered with the 2NT bid, all the follow-up bids are alertable.

I'm focusing on bidding again this week; a few underbids and some dangerous overbids. I will take the boards in order.

Bd: 6 Vul: E/W Dlr: East	♠ K94 ♥ J3 ♦ AJ ♣ AKQJ83	Optimum NS 3N: +400
♠ A63 ♥ Q976 ♦ KT972 ♣ T	N W 6 E S	♠ QT85 ♥ 842 ♦ Q654 ♣ 76
19 9 HCP 4 8	♠ J72 ♥ AKT5 ♦ 83 ♣ 9542	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 4 - 2 - 3 S 4 - 2 - 3 E - 1 - - - W - 1 - - -

Board 6 is another example of a board where with 27HCP and 10 Cs between 2 hands, you can make game in NT but not in Cs. How to bid the game? It's up to N. N has a clear 1C opening bid, and S has a clear 1H response. But what should N's rebid be? Often it pays to think in terms of tricks instead of points. If you get a S lead, not unlikely in this auction, you probably have 8 tricks in your hand; all you need from partner is one more - probably in the H suit which she bid. If you look at it this way, 3NT is the standout call. A 2NT rebid gets you there this time, but tends to show a more balanced hand than this - and sometimes your partner will pass. 3NT in this situation shows exactly this sort of hand; less balanced than 2NT, but with a good source of tricks.

Bd: 7 Vul: All Dlr: South	♠ AKT86 ♥ 7 ♦ K8 ♣ AQ973	Optimum NS 3N+1: +630
♠ QJ7542 ♥ T ♦ JT97 ♣ 82	N W 7 E S	♠ -- ♥ KQ8653 ♦ 5432 ♣ KJ4
16 4 HCP 9 11	♠ 93 ♥ AJ942 ♦ AQ6 ♣ T65	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 5 2 3 4 4 S 5 2 2 4 4 E - - - - - W - - - - -

I have to comment on Board 7. Several Ss opened the bidding with 11 HCP - a stretch. When they did, several Ws - vulnerable and with 4HCP - overcalled 2S. Folks - you're asking for trouble. If N doubles you for penalty, you're looking at -1400; not a reasonable sacrifice ever. N's - if you can't double for penalty, you know you want to be in game somewhere; no need to look further than the NT game.

Board 8. N opens 1S; S's response will depend on which system you are using - 1NT forcing for those playing 2/1 or 2C for those playing Standard American. If it's 1NT, N needs to be careful to make a forcing rebid. As soon as S responds, N knows you're heading for a game somewhere; you certainly don't want partner passing at a part-score level. What's forcing?

Bd: 8 Vul: None Dlr: West	♠ AKQ764 ♥ AQJ83 ♦ Q3 ♣ --	Optimum NS 6H: +980
♠ T852 ♥ K7 ♦ J97 ♣ 9742	N W 8 E S	♠ J ♥ T4 ♦ AT8542 ♣ K865
18 4 HCP 8 10	♠ 93 ♥ 9652 ♦ K6 ♣ AQJT3	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 1 6 5 4 S 3 1 6 5 4 E - - - - - W - - - - -

3H - a jump-shift - a new suit at a level higher than you needed to bid - forces the side to game. S doesn't know that N has 5 Hs - she only promises 4, but in this hand that's enough for S to support, because you have the magic 8-card golden fit.

If you are playing Standard American, N will not need to make a jump-shift, IF you have this agreement with your partner, as I recommend. Although your 2C bid is not forcing to game, as it would be for 2/1 players, you should have an understanding with your partner that if you start with a 2-level response, you owe your partner at least one more bid. If you have this agreement, it gives N a little more time and space to describe her hand - repeating the H suit if necessary to give the full picture. If you have this agreement, the only exception comes if the opening bidder signs off in 2NT; that's passable.

The bidding described above was disturbed at half of the tables by E players, who stuck their necks out with a 2D overcall. They were about 4HCP light for this bid - it really should show at least a good 11. But what should S do over that with your natural responses not available? You have that nice C suit, but it would be nice to be able to show your H suit, too. You can't bid 2H - that promises a 5-card suit. A negative double does the trick. When there has been an overcall over partner's opening bid, if there is one major that hasn't been bid yet, a X promises 4 or more cards in that major.

If you don't have the negative double in your arsenal, you would have to bid 3C, which might get the side too high, if N didn't have such a great hand. In this case, N can jump to the H game if she hears the negative double, otherwise will have to bid her Hs over the 3C. She should still jump to 4H; knowing you want to be in game, force your partner to choose between your 2 suits.

Bd: 13 Vul: All Dlr: North	♠ QJ85 ♥ JT975 ♦ J9 ♣ T9	Optimum E 6N: -1440
♠ K2 ♥ Q6 ♦ AQ2 ♣ KQJ754	N W 13 E S	♠ T63 ♥ A832 ♦ KT53 ♣ A6
5 17 HCP 11 7	♠ A974 ♥ K4 ♦ 8764 ♣ 832	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 6 6 2 1 6 W 6 5 2 1 5

One last board to look at - board 13. Only half the E/W pairs reached the cold NT game. In most cases it was because W didn't show the full value of her hand. After a 1C opening and 1D response, W needs to bid 3C - 16-18HCP. A 2C rebid just doesn't do this hand justice; it describes a hand in the minimum range of about 12-15HCP. And E? Some now bid 3N, which was a bit of a gamble with nothing in Ss. A more scientific bid would have been 3H, showing a H stopper, and now W can comfortably bid 3N.

You will notice I indicated E should respond in Ds rather than Hs. Are we not always looking for the Major suit fit? Yes, of course we are, but responding in Ds won't stop W from bidding Hs if she has them, so we won't miss the fit. And those who responded in Hs, if they subsequently bid Ds, are indicating at least 5 Hs. That's why, with 4-card suits, the standard is to bid "up-the-line".

A quick look at the play and defense. The opening lead will depend on the bidding at your particular table. If S is on lead and Ss have not been bid, I would certainly lead them. If N is on lead, Ss probably won't have been bid, but W - the strong hand - has indicated a stopper when she bid NT. I would be inclined to lead a H; yes E has promised a stopper, but at least you are leading through the strong hand.

Which S? From the S, it's the 4th best 4. Which H? The J - top of a sequence of 3 or more. BTW: If you were leading Ss from the N it would be the 4th best 5. You need a sequence of 3 to lead your top card against NT.

How does E play with a S lead? You grit your teeth and pop up with the K - it's your only chance to make it good. When it holds, you make your plan. But first, notice the card that was led - the 4. How many Ss does S hold? Exactly 4; you know this because you can see the 3 and the 2. So if the 4 is the 4th best, that's all she has. Which leaves 4 for N. So, if you lose the lead, they will have exactly 3 S tricks to cash. How many tricks do you have? 6 C tricks unless the split is 5-1 (unlikely); 1S, 1H and 3Ds - 11 in total. There's no point in taking any risks because if you lose the lead they will cash Ss and hold you to 9. As it happens, the D suit is friendly; the J falls, making your 10 good and you take 12 tricks.

What if you are W playing with a H lead? In this case, you really don't have much choice; you must take the A on the first trick. Why? Because you don't know that the SA is on your right, and if you lose the first trick to your RHO and they switch to a S, you might be down before you get started. If you take the A, you know your contract is safe, so go for it - and you end up taking 11 tricks.