TIPS FOR TOPS

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- Pre-empts
- Rule of 2, 3 &4

All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on April 20, 2021, (Game 3149.)

There were some devilish hands this week, and I'm sure readers are hoping I will have something to say about them. The truth is: games are won and lost less on figuring out the occasional freaks than they are on not making mistakes on the bread-and-butter ordinary games and part-scores. Having said that, I will take a look at two of the freaks.

Bd: 12 Vul: N/S Dlr: West	♠ AJ63 ♥ A5 ♦ KQ872 ♣ KJ	Optimum NS 5C: +600
♠ KQ972 ♥ KT9864 ♦ JT ♣ --	N W 12 E S	♠ 4 ♥ 32 ♦ A96543 ♣ AT74
18 9 HCP 8 5	♠ T85 ♥ QJ7 ♦ -- ♣ Q986532	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 5 - - 1 2 S 5 - - 1 2 E - 1 1 - - W - - 1 - -

Board 12: To get started, I offered the W hand to 2 of our club's top players, and got 2 different suggestions. That didn't surprise me; there isn't always a "right" answer on these hands that don't fit the standard formulas. On this hand, one of my experts would pass and expect to be able to show both suits in a later round, likely with a Michael's cue-bid. The other would open 1S; that's my choice, although it's a close call. But I like the high quality of both suits, and the hand passes the "rule of 20" - a popular alternative method of evaluating hands.

What we wouldn't do is open 2H; yes, it's a 6-card suit, but opening 2H eliminates any chance of finding a S fit, and your Ss are too good for that. Nor would 1H be a good choice; if you judge this to be an opening hand, you have to act as if it's 5/5 and open the higher suit first, because you certainly don't have enough strength to reverse.

Looking at the 2 different starts, the auction might go as follows, among other possibilities:

1S 1NT X 2C (natural*) 2H p p 3C 3H (? We're not vulnerable; partner has promised some points, and we sure don't want to play in Cs.)

** You need to know your partnership agreement here. For some this would be Stayman; I prefer my bids to be natural after a penalty double of NT so I can "escape" to any suit at the 2-level.*

P 1D p p 2D (both majors) p (wait to see what transpires) 2H 3C p (?)

In this scenario, I might feel that I have described my hand to partner, who has promised nothing. I should leave her in charge; maybe she has a fistful of Cs and wants to play there.

A note on defence: If E/W are playing in Hs after an auction where W has advertised long Ss as well, it's usually good strategy to lead a trump to keep her from ruffing her losing Ss in the E hand.

If S is playing in Cs, the SK - top of touching honours - is a safer lead than a H; it sets your Q up as a winner.

Board 10. There was quite a variety of bidding sequences on this board. A 2H (weak) opening bid by E seems standard; it's a pretty good 6-card suit which you would like partner to lead if you end up on defence. S has

Bd: 10 Vul: All Dlr: East	♠ 53 ♥ 3 ♦ AK86542 ♣ KQ8	Optimum NS 6N: +1440
♠ T9 ♥ 4 ♦ T7 ♣ JT975432	N W 10 E S	♠ 8742 ♥ AQ9876 ♦ QJ ♣ 6
12 1 HCP 9 18	♠ AKQJ6 ♥ KJT52 ♦ 93 ♣ A	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 1 5 4 5 6 S 1 5 4 5 6 E - - - - - W - - - - -

no trouble overcalling 2S*. W should pass, more about that later. N knows the partnership must have enough points for game; by overcalling at the 2-level, S promised at least opening points. N can't support Ss, but has a great D suit - so bids 3Ds. Now S should bid 3N. Bidding Hs (your opponent's suit) in this sequence would not show a stopper; it tells your partner you don't quite know where to go. ("Do something intelligent, partner".) And there's no need to rebid Ss - your partner already knows you have 5 of those. Isn't S afraid of the C suit? No.To bid at the 3-level, N must have more in her hand than just 5 Ds to the AK. If she has AKQJ of D, you have an easy 9 tricks; if she doesn't have that, she must have something in Cs, or the (unlikely) HA. Either way, 9 tricks looks pretty safe. So 3NT is the clear favourite bid.

For those tables where E didn't open 2H, N will play the hand, after a se-

quence such as 1S 2D 2H 3N (Standard American) or 1S 2D 2H 3D 3H 3N (2/1).

**One S passed the 2H bid; she was probably hoping that her partner could make a balancing double, which she would gleefully leave in. Unfortunately, N didn't have the right hand for a double; once she named her D suit, it got difficult to stop in the optimal NT contract.*

Half the Ws couldn't resist bidding their C suit; 2C, 3C and 4C overcalls. I've been asked to comment on these. Definitely, this is not a 2C hand. A 2-level overcall promises a hand with opening points, or very near - a good 11+. Sometimes we stretch, but only if there's something to be gained as a trade-off for the risk. Here there is nothing to be gained. Bidding 2C doesn't interfere with the opponents' bidding; it misleads partner, and suggests a lead that won't be particularly useful. The same is true of 3C over the 2S overcall. In that case, E had opened with a preemptive bid. Any new suit bid by W shows a strong hand - at least an opening bid and a very good suit.

If anything, this is a preemptive hand, but before you leap right in, consider what you are trying to accomplish. A preempt gets in the opponents' way, but it backfires if you give them a score that's higher than what they will earn on their own. How do you know? A useful guide to this is the rule of 2, 3 and 4. It suggests that you look at how many tricks you will take if partner has no help for you. If the vulnerability is unfavourable (you are vulnerable; they aren't) you should be within 2 tricks of your bid. With equal vulnerability you should be within 3 tricks, and when favourable within 4 tricks.

Not all experts follow this rule precisely. More conservative bidders use a rule of 1, 2 and 3. Others, for simplicity, work on the basis of being within 2 tricks when vulnerable, and within 3 when not. But you can see the general logic: if the opponents can make 620 in a vulnerable major game, you can do well being down 2 or 3 doubled not vulnerable for -500, but no good if you're vulnerable and it's -800, or if they're not vulnerable and only in line for 420.

Looking at this hand, you can't expect to take more than 5 tricks - all in Cs after you lose the A, K and Q. Even a 3C contract requires 9 tricks; you're 4 short of that, so this is not a good bargain. In this case, 5C, doubled cost 1700 points - a clear bottom even if the opponents were going to bid and make a slam, which they were not.

There's another factor to consider. If you preempt as dealer, LHO is totally in the dark as to what is in his partner's hand. But when your preempt is an overcall, RHO has already shown opening points, which makes it much easier for LHO, with points, to know to double you. And they will.

There is little to say on this hand about play or defense. Unless the opponents take their HA on the first trick, the friendly lie of the D suit means declarer will take all 13 tricks in NT; those in Ss will suffer a H ruff and only make 5 - proving the worth of that 2H opening bid.

Bd: 5 Vul: N/S Dlr: North	♠ KQ7 ♥ 63 ♦ 8762 ♣ 7654	Optimum EW 6H: -980
♠ T964 ♥ AJT94 ♦ Q ♣ JT9	N W 5 E S	♠ AJ32 ♥ KQ2 ♦ AKJ94 ♣ 8
5 8 HCP 18 9	♠ 85 ♥ 875 ♦ T53 ♣ AKQ32	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E - 5 6 5 3 W - 5 6 5 3

I've chosen board 5 as one of those mundane, apparently easy hands, that can separate the winners from the losers. At all tables E/W played in game; mostly 4S in the E, but a few 4H in the W. In either case, the difference between going down, or making 4, 5, or even 6, is worth examining for the basic technique.

All the S players got the lead of a top C; they lost the first trick and ruffed the second. Looking at the E hand to make a plan, it's clear that there are no more losers in Cs, Hs or Ds. Even if the last D isn't good, your H winners in dummy will take care of it. So the ONLY suit that you need to think about is the trump suit. Missing both K and Q, you will have to lose 1 of them, but can you avoid losing both? You can, with a favourable lie of the cards. Go to the dummy with the DQ; lead the S1 and let it ride if N doesn't cover. This gains you a trick if N has both honours, if she has honour doubleton, or if she only has 1 and covers. Not a huge favourite, but worth a shot, and there's no risk.

If you simply lay down your A, or if you lead low from your hand, you are almost guaranteeing that you will lose to both K and Q. Why give the opponents a trick they don't deserve?

For those playing 4H in the W, your plan will depend on the lead. Your hand has 3 losing Cs, as well as the same S situation as noted above. But you also have at least 3 Ds, probably 4, in dummy on which to pitch your hand's losers.

If N leads the SK - not recommended on this auction - that solves the S question, and you can pull trump and pitch all your losing Cs on the Ds. But if they lead to the CA first, you can plan to pitch 3Ss on the Ds, which leaves you only with 2 more C losers. Can you ruff both in dummy? You can certainly ruff one, but, unless the opponents help you out with their trick 2 lead, transportation is probably lacking to ruff both. And you will have to play with care, overtaking Hs in your hand when you pull trump after your ruff, and carefully preserving your entry to the Ds.

Still, ruffing one C will get you up to 11 tricks, and when the Ds work out you make 6.I

f they lead a D (unlikely), you will have to pull trumps ending in Dummy, pitch your losing Cs on the Ds, ruff a C in your hand and hope for that double S finesse. And if they lead a trump, you have time to get one C ruff, with few entry issues.

I know: this was called a mundane hand. But making 5 on this hand tied for what should have been an average board; those in Hs had the chance to make 6 for a clear top. And making only the 4 to fill the contract is fine in party bridge, but not matchpoints.