TIPS FOR TOPS

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All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on May 11th, 2021; (Game 94434). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Play & Defence
- SOS Redouble

Bd: 2 Vul: N/S Dlr: East	♠ Q3 ♥ K643 ♦ K75 ♣ T752	Optimum EW 2Nx,EW 3Hx
♠ 864 ♥ AJ87 ♦ AQT ♣ AK6	N W 2 E S	♠ J92 ♥ Q952 ♦ 93 ♣ Q943
8 18 HCP 5 9	♠ AKT75 ♥ T ♦ J8642 ♣ J8	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - 2 - 2 - S - 2 - 2 - E 2 - 2 - 1 W 2 - 2 - 1

Board 2 presented a bidding sequence which comes up often, and which deserves a look. At most tables, after W opened 1C, there were 2 passes and then S balanced with a 1S bid. W had 18HCP; if she had a S stopper, she would want to bid NT, but how many? If E had responded, W would have jumped to 2N to show her strength. But, with E having shown a bust hand by passing the opening bid, a 1NT rebid is all you need to show the same 18 or 19 HCP.

But that's all for another time, because W doesn't have a S stopper, and should have no thoughts of rebidding NT. What else? A double is reasonable, if not perfect. You would like your partner to find a H call, but if she comes back in a minor, your 3-card suits are chunky enough to play in a potential 4-3 fit. Today, E does bid 2Hs, and there is no reason to bid any more.

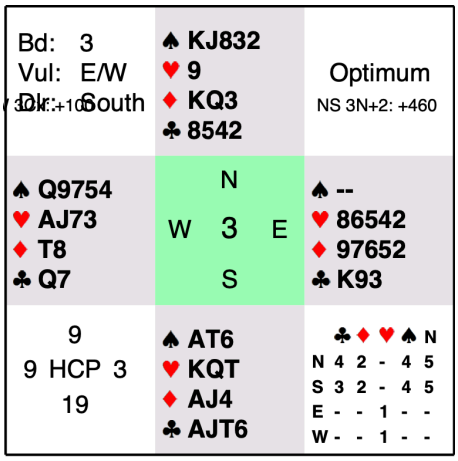
Bd: 5 Vul: N/S Dlr: North	♠ AQ93 ♥ A8 ♦ T762 ♣ Q84	Optimum NS 4S: +620
♠ KJ4 ♥ 62 ♦ J8543 ♣ 976	N W 5 E S	♠ 85 ♥ KQJ9753 ♦ K ♣ KJ2
12 5 HCP 13 10	♠ T762 ♥ T4 ♦ AQ9 ♣ AT53	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 4 4 1 4 3 S 4 4 - 4 3 E - - - - - W - - - - -

Board 5 saw some competitive bidding. N has a standard 1D opening bid with 12HCP. E has a good 1H overcall. A few E players chose to preempt, but it's too good a hand for that. You don't need a lot of help from your partner to make game viable; a preempt shuts you out of that possibility. Over 1H, S should show her Ss. I hope most of you have negative doubles on your card; here a double indicates exactly 4 Ss. If you don't have Negative doubles available to you, you can just bid 1S; what you can't do, although some did, is bid 1NT because that promises a H stopper, which you don't have. W can't support her partner with only 2 Hs; N now should make a minimum S bid - 1S if S used the negative X, or a raise to 2 if S bid 1S. E can certainly bid Hs again - maybe even a jump to 3, just to get in the way, but not again after that. You certainly have no hope of making 4, and your partner knows your full story, and can act if she has reason to. And, importantly: you might push your opponents to a makeable 4S. Without a push, I don't see any way for N/S to bid 4S; even if S has a way to invite a game, N has no reason to accept the invitation with a bare minimum hand.

How to play the hand in Ss? Whether from the N or the S, the play is the same. You should get a H lead - either the K or the 6. You had better take the A right away, in case W has a singleton, and get to work drawing trumps. Missing the K and the J, you need to lead the suit from the S hand towards the N to finesse, and play the 9 if nothing big has appeared from W. You don't really expect the 9 to win (although it does!), but if you lose to the J, you still have AQ to repeat the finesse against the K, and if you lose the 9 to the K, your AQ picks up the J. If, on the other hand, you play to the Q the first time, the finesse works, but then you have to lay down the A, and you still have to lose to one of the honours.

There is not much to say about playing the hand in Hs; the defenders will be pretty much in control. If Ss have been bid, S should lead one; N should win it cheaply, but not play another - you can't risk setting up a good trick in dummy if there's any chance declarer will be able to reach it. A C return looks safe, with only small ones in dummy. S will take the A, and knows it's safe to lead another S - she knows the Ds are no threat, and now N can play another minor.

Perfect defence isn't always easy, but E should score no more than 6 H tricks and 1C



You might wonder why I choose **board 3** to look at; the "right" bidding sequence doesn't get you to the top board today, due to the highly unusual split on the S suit. But there's a value in knowing the right way to do things; it pays off more often than not.

If E and W pass throughout; S opens 1C, N responds 1S, and S has a classic 2N rebid, showing a balanced hand of 18 or 19 HCP. Now, it's important to know: N may pass 2NT if they have an absolute minimum 5 or 6 point response, but if N bids again, it creates a game force. In other words, if responder bids anything at all over opener's 2NT rebid, neither partner may pass until game level is reached. With 9 HCP opposite 18 or 19, N should have no thought of passing, but NT looks a bit iffy with a singleton H. N should bid 3C; she has C support, after all, and knows S will bid again. And here's the important tip. S has already denied holding 4 Ss by not raising them immediately; so a 3S bid now tells your partner you have 3 of them, in case N has 5. It's called "secondary support". Three-card support looks good to N, who can now bid 4S.

Planning the play in Ss; N sees 1 H loser, and no D losers. C's need to be played from the N hand to the J or 10; if that loses you will lead again to the other. You have a good chance of losing only 1, if either the K or Q is in the E hand. In Ss, you expect the only possible loser would be to the Q, if you don't finesse the right way. But you have nothing you need to ruff in the dummy, so no reason not to pull trump right away. The way to play them is to play to the A first and then towards your hand, playing the J if the Q has not appeared. Of course, when E shows out on the first round, you have "found" the Q where you want her, but you will have to play the suit very carefully. As long as you always lead from the dummy, and cover W's card as cheaply as possible, you can actually pick up all but 1 S, and when the Cs come in for only 1 loser, you make your contract.

Now back to the bidding: I said "if" E and W pass, but at half the tables, W made a 1S overcall. What should N do now? There are really 2 choices. Would you like to let W play in 1S, doubled? It's borderline, but tempting. E/W are vulnerable, even down 1 would give you 200, which is more than you can make in a part-score. An immediate double would be "negative" for those pairs who use that convention; N would have to pass and hope that S will balance with a double. But don't pass unless you are planning to leave that double in when it comes back to you. As it happens, with today's hand S will not double - it's not the right hand for that, but when she bids 1NT instead, promising extra values, you can happily raise her to 3N

But if the thought of trying to set a 1-level contract is too much for you, N might as well bid 1NT right away over the 1S; it tells your partner your point count, and the fact that you have Ss stopped. S should now raise you to 3.

The play in NT is similar to the play in Ss, except that W's last S will not take a trick. You will play Cs from the N and Ss from the S, as described above, and you will make 4 Ss, 1 H, 3 Ds, and 3 Cs for a total of 11 tricks.

In the matchpoint game, W can now rue his bid, which pushed his opponents from the "standard" 4S game to the more profitable NT game.

I'm going to play "what if" to give you one more bidding scenario. What if the bidding had gone: 1C 1S p p X p p ? E will now be in a panic; she knows there's a disaster looming, (-1100 with best defence), but what can she do? Help is at hand in the form of an "SOS Redouble". You can't say "SOS" of course, but a redouble by E means " I have no help for you at all, partner, but I can help in at least 2 of the other suits. Please bid your next best suit". W will oblige by bidding 2Hs, and now N/S will have to find their 3NT game to score well.

A final comment: any gadget or convention that I mention in these columns has more to it that I have space to cover. If you and your partner decide to adopt any new ideas, please read more to make sure you have the complete picture. I find Bridge Bum (www.bridgebum.com) writes clear, concise explanations, and I also highly recommend anything written by Larry Cohen (www.larryco.com).

It doesn't pay to bend or stretch your opening NT bids. It misleads your partner. There is always another bid available.