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 June 8th , 2021, (Game #28563). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Truth in Bidding & Play
- Unblocking

I'm going to start on a different note today, and state my concern about some of what I see while watching this game every week. Now, I'm the first to say "it's a game", and part of the fun of any game is sticking your neck out occasionally and seeing what you can get away with. We certainly aren't here to follow a bunch of stuffy rules, just trying to "get it right". But it's a partnership game, and if your partner can't trust you to have what you say you have, you are going to find yourself in hopeless situations, which are never fun, or find yourself looking for a new partner.

Perhaps it's not my Tips readers who are committing these crimes against common sense, because I'm sure you all know better. Still, I'm going to list some of them, and if you recognize yourself here, please pause to think.

This week I saw:

- A 2-level response to partner's opening bid with 5HCP. It promises 10 - even if your opponent's overcall "pushed" you there. (Board #2)
- A 2nd seat opening bid with 8HCP. This would actually be illegal in most ACBL Limited MP events. (Board #8)
- A 2-level overcall, vulnerable, with 4HCP. It promises 11HCP or more. (Board #3)
- An overcall at the 4-level, vul, with 8HCP (suicide!)
- After an opening bid and an overcall, responders bid NT without a stopper in the opponent's suit.
- The lead of a J from a holding of KQJ…Always TOP of a sequence.
- Opening leads away from the A in suit contracts

So; if one of those was you, you should probably consider: Do you need to review the basics? Or is your straying from standard practice intentional? If so, does your partner know what you're doing? If you have an agreement with your partner that allows non-standard bids, your opponents are entitled to know that as well..

Ok; enough admonishments. Now; back to a couple of boards.

Board 15: players found multiple different ways to get into trouble. Let's look at what the thinking process should be at the different stages of the bidding.

Most Ss opened 2D; that's perfect. If 2D is a preemptive bid in your system, you will never find a better hand for it. W had an opening bid, which she now can't make, but has a hand that's a classic take-out double; short in the opener's suit and support for the other 3 suits. It's extra nice that the Major suits are 4-4; 3 cards in Cs is good enough. Players should always prefer to respond to a takeout double in a Major suit; when they respond in a minor suit, they very often have 5. If not, playing in a 4-3 fit is not the end of the world.

Bd: 15 Vul: N/S Dlr: South	♠ A964 ♥ AQ954 ♦ -- ♣ QT54	Optimum NS 3D: +110
♠ KT75 ♥ K732 ♦ J2 ♣ AJ3	N W 15 E S	♠ QJ3 ♥ J8 ♦ 98543 ♣ K86
12 12 HCP 7 9	♠ 82 ♥ T6 ♦ AKQT76 ♣ 972	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 1 3 1 - - S 1 3 1 - - E - - - - - W - - - 1 1

Here is where the bidding got curious. What should N do after the X? Absolutely pass without thinking any more about it! Recognizing that the double is for takeout, you don't have to worry about rescuing your partner. And as long as E takes out to any other suit, you have a great hand to give them lots of trouble on defence. There's no reason to bid Hs - a suit that your opponent is known to hold.

If N passes, E is in a bit of a pickle (Preempts work!). Her Ds aren't good enough to convert to a penalty double by passing, so she is forced to choose her better Major - Ss.

Before we look at the play and defence, let's consider the bidding process at some other tables. 2 N/S pairs got to unmakeable games, apparently the N players were wearing rose-coloured glasses. N has an

opening hand, of course, but it's a minimum, and she knows that S has less, because S either passed as dealer or made a preemptive bid. So, as soon as it becomes clear that N/S don't have a fit, the objective should be to keep the bidding as low as possible in a reasonable part-score. Don't try to make 3NT just because you don't have a fit; you just don't have the strength for that. And a void in partner's suit is a huge red flag; how are you going to take any tricks in that hand if she has nothing outside her suit?

Looking at the defence against 2S in the E; S will lead a top D, and will soon discover the full distribution of that suit. What should she do after taking the top 2? There are 2 choices to consider; play another top D to give partner a chance to overruff, or play a H. A defensive signal from N will have given a message encouraging a H lead, which is best here. Lead the 10 - top of a doubleton - and N can take Q and A and then another for you to ruff. E will probably ruff with Q or J to prevent a cheap ruff by S, but when she then starts pulling trump, N can win her A and lead another H. If E ruffs high again, she will soon find N's 9 of trump promoted into a trick for down 2.

Curiously, if S leads a third D at trick 3, N should NOT overruff with her A. It can't cost anything to wait, as there's nothing she wants to lead; in fact, anything she would lead would help declarer and cost a trick. So be patient, and you will still set the contract, as you are entitled to 2Ds, 2Hs, 1C and 1S. This situation is one to store away in the back of your mind; don't overruff with a card which is sure to take a trick later. Even if you can't see why at the time, it often pays dividends in the form of an extra trick. The only exception is when there's an important reason you need to be on lead.

Board 16 was played in Ss at almost all tables, which reflected short-sighted thinking by most Ns. Yes, you have a lovely hand with a beautiful S suit, which you will either open or overcall 1S, but when your partner responds 2H, you need to pause and rethink. With 3-card support for a suit which has promised at least 5, THAT'S a golden fit, whereas your partner may have no Ss at all. Moreover, your hand has improved significantly, as your void suddenly has some value. So add at least 3 more points for the void and you have 15 opposite at least 10 - that's worth a 4H bid.

<table>
<tr><td>Bd: 16
Vul: E/W
Dlr: West</td><td>♠ AK98652
♥ A53
♦ --
♣ J93</td><td>Optimum
NS 6H: +980</td></tr>
<tr><td>♠ J73
♥ 82
♦ K7
♣ AKT765</td><td>N
W 16 E
S</td><td>♠ T4
♥ J9
♦ AT9865
♣ Q84</td></tr>
<tr><td>12
11 HCP 7
10</td><td>♠ Q
♥ KQT764
♦ QJ432
♣ 2</td><td>♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
N - 1 6 4 -
S - 1 6 4 -
E 1 - - - -
W 1 - - - -</td></tr>
</table>

This hand is worth looking at from the perspective of both play and defence. First: the defence against 4S. Some tried the DA, which, I'm afraid, made declarer's life easy. They pulled trump and ran Hs for 13 tricks. Some others got a C lead. W took the K, and then switched, which wasn't best. There's a natural inclination to not want to see your good tricks ruffed, but look again; if you play your CA and make declarer ruff with the SQ, she will be left with AK to draw your trumps - and your J will be made good. Are you worried that you are setting up declarer's CQ? You shouldn't be IF your partner led the 2. This again shows the importance of choosing the right card as well as the right suit; if E led the 8, W sees it as a worthless doubleton or top of nothing, and is forgiven for not continuing the suit. So, best play and defence: C4 to K, CA ruffed, H to A, 2 rounds of trump. And when W gets in with her J of trump, there's still a C to cash, holding declarer to 10 tricks.

The 4H contract, on the other hand, makes more, but it may take careful play. If you get the natural lead of CA and then CK, your task is straightforward with one caveat. When you make your plan, it looks easy - 6 H tricks as long as they break no worse than 3-1, and 7 S tricks IF they break 3-2, which we know is better than a 50-50 chance. But you have to be very careful. You won't make 7 S tricks if you overtake your Q on the board, and your only other entry to them is in Hs. That's fine; even if trumps are 3-1, you can draw them ending in dummy, but you had better be ready to run the Ss at that point.

So, the careful declarer draws 2 rounds of trump with the K and Q; if there is still a H outstanding, she plays the SQ to unblock the suit, and then another H to dummy's A. In today's hand, that care was not needed; trumps fall 2-2, so you play your SQ, and then ruff a D in dummy and play your Ss

Things are a little trickier if you get a D lead - maybe because E had bid Ds along the way. You can ruff in dummy, of course, but now the plan we just looked at is not good enough. It only works if Ss are 3-2 AND Hs are 2-2 and that's against the odds. With 1 ruff in the dummy, 6 Hs in your hand and 2Ss, that's 9 tricks; where will you get more? The easiest answer; another ruff in dummy. Trick 2, lead to your SQ, and lead another D to ruff. Now cash a top S, and your trick count is up to 10, but why not try for more? If you can get back to your hand safely, you can ruff one more D in dummy with the A. And the safe way back to your hand? Pitch your singleton C on the second S trick, and ruff a C to hand. Doing this risks trading a D loser for a H loser, but gives the upside of an overtrick if Hs indeed fall 2-2, or if the J is singleton. All in all a worthwhile risk, and when the Hs fall you lose only 1D, making 6.

I wanted to include this board because of the unblock. It's a trick that comes up often, both in declarer play and in defence. Look for potential problems like this when you make your plan, and you will often see the unblock that is required to get all the tricks you are entitled to.