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 , July 6th, 2021, (Game #24932). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Reaching Game Contracts
- Hamman's Law

I'm going to focus this week on a common problem that I see crop up often: not reaching game despite having enough to bid it. If your partner shows opening points and you have 13 points, you absolutely must make sure you get to game. You must know which bids are forcing (partner can't pass) and which are non-forcing (partner is allowed to pass), and you must not make any bid below game level which your partner can pass.

Bd: 1 Vul: None Dlr: North	♠ T876 ♥ KT543 ♦ 85 ♣ J5	Optimum EW 3N+1: -430
♠ A9 ♥ Q86 ♦ AK32 ♣ 9763	N W 1 E S	♠ 53 ♥ A92 ♦ QT4 ♣ AKQ84
4 13 HCP 15 8	♠ KQJ42 ♥ J7 ♦ J976 ♣ T2	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - 1 - S - - - 1 - E 5 4 2 - 4 W 5 4 2 - 4

Board 1 was the first example of this. E/W had 28 HCP between them, yet some pairs didn't reach game. In this case, the primary responsibility has to be with W. All E hands opened the bidding; with 13HCP opposite an opening hand, W knows there is enough to be in game; W must not make a bid below game that partner can pass.What bids are forcing and which can be passed? For a start, if partner opens 1 of a suit:

- A new suit by responder is forcing
- A raise of partner's suit, however high, is not forcing
- A NT bid is not forcing; 1NT shows a weak hand (6-9HCP); 2NT is invitational (10-12) (unless you play a convention over a Major opening)

In this case, If E opens 1C, W should immediately see a game in NT, and bid it right away. No point is messing around and giving the opponents more information when you know where you are going. Did S make a S overcall? No problem - you have those stopped. "Just do it."

If E opened 1NT (and why not? It's a textbook 1NT) W need only raise straight to 3.

Bd: 11 Vul: None Dlr: South	♠ JT9865 ♥ 62 ♦ T2 ♣ AK3	Optimum EW 3N+1: -430
♠ Q432 ♥ KJ ♦ K876 ♣ QT6	N W 11 E S	♠ A ♥ AQ85 ♦ AQ93 ♣ 9754
8 11 HCP 16 5	♠ K7 ♥ T9743 ♦ J54 ♣ J82	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 4 5 3 1 4 W 4 5 3 1 4

Board 11 was another problem; here there were 27HCP between the hands, and only one pair got to game. There are 2 cases to look at, because some had to contend with a 2S opening bid by N, and others didn't. In both cases, they key is for both players to give their partner an honest description of their hand strength

With no preempt from N, E has a slightly tricky opening bid. As always, it pays to plan ahead; before you make your first bid, know what your second bid is going to be.With 16HCP, E has the strength for an opening 1NT bid, and I wouldn't rule it out completely, but it's not quite the shape your partner will be expecting. But what's important is that, if you don't open 1NT, you can't plan to rebid 1NT after your partner bids Spades. Why? Because a 1NT rebid promises a balanced hand just as much as a 1NT opener does, and it says you weren't strong enough to open 1NT - which is NOT TRUE. So, if you open 1D, you have to plan to rebid 2C; now your strength is unknown - anywhere from 12 to about 18, but you haven't told any untruths. (You wouldn't, of course, rebid 2H, because that would be a reverse - the right strength, but promises a D suit that's longer than the Hs.)

From the W perspective, if E opens 1D, of course you respond 1S, and when they rebid 2C, you have 2 choices. What you must not do is take a simple preference to 2D; you would do that with only 6 points and you have a much better hand than that - enough to invite game. 3D would be invitational, but what's better is 2NT, showing invitational

strength and a stopper in the unbid suit (Hs). In either case, once E hears that there's more than a minimum 6-9 points in W, they should be happy to bid 3NT.

Looking back at the tables where N opened 2S - not a great bid, but forgivable in 3rd seat - E has a clear takeout double. And, again, the spotlight is on W. A 3D bid here is not enough - you would make that bid with no points at all. 2NT is probably the best compromise; it understates the value of the hand a little, but shows the stopper and indicates at least a bit of strength (A NT bid should never be made in response to a double without at least 8 or 9 points). And E, with extra values, should raise to 3.

Bd: 3 Vul: E/W Dlr: South	♠ Q53 ♥ 9873 ♦ T72 ♣ 843	Optimum E 3N+2: -660
♠ 64 ♥ AKT ♦ K64 ♣ QJT75	N W 3 E S	♠ AJ9 ♥ 65 ♦ AJ983 ♣ K62
2 13 HCP 13 12	♠ KT872 ♥ QJ42 ♦ Q5 ♣ A9	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 5 5 2 2 5 W 5 5 1 1 3

Board 3 is our last example; it's the least clear of the 3, but still biddable. E/W have 26HCP between them, but S, as dealer, has a legitimate 1S opening bid. W has too good a hand to pass; some chose to overcall their C suit, which is not wrong, but suggests a hand that's more single-suited than this. A takeout double is a better description of the hand - you have strength in all 3 unbid suits, and if partner ends up playing in a 4-3 H fit, your AK10 can hardly be a disappointment.

Whichever call W makes, E's ears should perk up. 2C should show full opening points; added to E's 13, that's enough for game. You have a stopper and a half in Spades and with the lead coming up to you, 3NT seems clear. If W, instead, doubles, E may want to consider her partner's style, but the legitimate choices are really only 2NT or 3NT. 2D doesn't promise any points at all; 3D shows some, but not this strong. 2S is the only forcing bid - forcing to game, but what useful information is going to come back? 3NT would be the choice of many players; if your partner is prone to doubling with 8HCP and a void, you might cut him some slack and bid only 2NT, but in that case, W should raise to 3NT, knowing that his hand is better than his partner might expect.

In all of these hands, the common theme is communication; both partners have to tell the other what they have and also listen to what they're being told.

Is it significant that the best contract in all these hands was 3NT? There is a bridge maxim known as "Hamman's Law", ascribed to Bob Hamman, one of the world's greatest players.

"If you have a choice of reasonable bids and one of them is 3NT, then bid it."

Good bridge is about good reasoning, not blindly following maxims. But any time you're thinking about bidding a minor suit, stop to consider NT. It takes 11 tricks to make game in a minor suit, and only 9 for game in NT.

Bd: 2 Vul: N/S Dlr: East	♠ KQ832 ♥ JT832 ♦ J5 ♣ T	Optimum NS 4S+1: +650
♠ T765 ♥ A ♦ QT742 ♣ 943	N W 2 E S	♠ 4 ♥ K9754 ♦ 986 ♣ KJ82
7 6 HCP 7 20	♠ AJ9 ♥ Q6 ♦ AK3 ♣ AQ765	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 2 1 3 5 3 S 2 1 3 5 3 E - - - - - W - - - - -

With the little space that remains, let's look at board 2. S opens 2NT and N has 2 5-card Majors. N should show both her suits and then let S make the choice of game based on full information. The way to do this is to transfer into the H suit, and then bid the Ss. S should understand that N is 5-5; with only 5-4, N should start with Stayman.

What S should choose is not obvious. Normally, I coach you to play in the 8-card Major, but 3NT looks pretty tempting, especially with the lead coming from your left. As it happens, the computer analysis says you can make more in Spades than in NT, but in the normal play of things, declarers will make more in NT than in Spades, so "Matchpoint greed" pays off.

But, I chose this board as much for the play as for the bidding. The key to this hand; the difference between an average result and a good one, is to recognize the value of the second suit - the Hs, and to manage the timing. With the normal D4 lead, the J takes the trick, and you make a plan.

In a suit contract, you count your losers; the hand with the long suit is the "master" hand, so here you count your losers in the N hand. It looks as if you have only 2 - the H AK, but you will lose the lead twice before you can set up your long Hs. And if you play too many Ss before you set up your Hs, you will have no access to them.

So start right away developing the H suit; play a H on trick 2 and lose to the A. You still have time to draw trump and set up the Hs while you still have Spades in the N hand.

If you're playing in NT, the situation is similar. In NT you count your tricks; 5Ss, 3Ds and 1C is enough. You could try the C finesse for an overtrick, and this time it works, but it's a 50/50 proposition. If you work on Hs instead, you have a chance to set up 3 H tricks, and even when the Hs break badly, you still have 1 H trick and you can try the C finesse for a second overtrick.

Long second suits: an often overlooked resource.

If you have a choice of reasonable bids and one of them is 3NT, then bid it.

-Bob Hamman