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 August 31st, 2021, (Game #80939). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- No Trump Precision
- Bidding after Partner Preempts

There were a lot of challenging hands this week, and you are probably hoping I have some insight on what you "should" have done with them. The truth is, some hands are difficult for everyone; there is not always a clear path to the "right" contract. Consistency in the everyday hands wins more bridge games than brilliance in the occasional freaks.

Bd: 15 Vul: N/S Dlr: South	♠ Q ♥ AQJ92 ♦ AQ54 ♣ A63	Optimum NS 4S: +620
♠ KJ7 ♥ KT873 ♦ T976 ♣ 5	N W 15 E S	♠ A86 ♥ 654 ♦ KJ32 ♣ QT2
19 7 HCP 10 4	♠ T95432 ♥ -- ♦ 8 ♣ KJ9874	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 5 - - 4 2 S 5 - - 4 2 E - 1 1 - - W - - 1 - -

But I was asked about board 15, and it presented an interesting challenge, so I will address it - without any clear-cut answers. North has a beautiful hand and opens 1H. Should South make any response? In a survey of open game players, some will pass, and some will bid. Those who have weak jump-shift responses on their card might try that - but which suit? Optimists might hope to respond 1S and then rebid 2S, getting across the weakness of their hand that way. In our game, nobody jumped, but let's look at what happened to those who responded 1S. Several Norths now made the technically correct rebid of 3D; game forcing, showing a second suit of at least 4 cards and 19 or more HCP. This was exactly what South did not want to hear. With Pass now not an option, the lesser of evils now seems to be 3S, showing the length and hoping that North will find the right final contract.

Instead of 3D, some Norths found a rebid of 2NT, promising a balanced hand of 18-19 HCP. This had an interesting effect, but I will just remind players of 2 things. 2NT is highly invitational, but is NOT forcing. South may pass, but if she chooses to bid again, North will now not stop short of game. I think in this scenario, I would "correct" the contract to 4S, in the belief that my partner has promised at least 2 of those in her "balanced" hand. But, my action would not be unanimous.

What's more interesting on this hand is the play; it was played in 3NT and 5C, but can also make 4S. Although the analysis shows that 3NT can be set, that contract was the most successful, because the Norths who didn't bid their Diamonds got a (normal) Diamond lead, which helped. With 2 Diamond tricks and 1 Heart, North can hope for 6 Club tricks, or, by forcing out the HK can create a second Heart trick and then only need 5 Clubs.

But, the Club suit is clearly critical - how should that be played? Play AK and hope for the Q to drop? Or finesse against the Q? I bet everyone has heard "eight ever, nine never"; i.e. play AK for the drop. This is good advice in many cases, but you should never blindly follow a maxim without considering the situation at hand. In this case, if you play AK and the Q doesn't drop, you now have no access to the rest of the Clubs in dummy. If you play to the J and lose to the K, it may cost 1 trick, but you will still have 5 Clubs to cash - and access to them. So you can afford to be wrong if you guess to finesse, but you can't afford to be wrong if you play for the drop. Finesse it is!

Those playing in Clubs were, I think, blinded by all the high cards in the N hand - which were almost useless to them as declarers. What South needs to recognize is that they have at least 3 spade losers, and pitching one or two of them on good cards in the dummy does nothing to help - you still have to lose the A, K and J. What can help is the small trump in dummy. If you can ruff two Spades in dummy, you can reduce your number of losers. So win the opening lead, and play Spades right away. EW might notice what you are up to, and lead a trump, but that helps you pick up the CQ and eliminates a potential Club loser. Either way, your total losers are either two Spades or one Spade and one Club - making 5. But if you draw trump first, you don't stand a chance. Did you make a plan before playing to the second trick?

To play the hand in Spades, the trick is to recognize that, although your suit is awful, that's your only weakness, and you want to make sure you force out the opponents' trumps 2 by 2, so they don't score them separately with ruffs. So play on Spades at every opportunity, and then you make your contract if you guess to finesse against the CQ - or if West led her singleton and clarified that situation for you.

I must make one more comment on this board. At our game, one South player made an opening bid of 1C. This is not only very aggressive; it is, in fact, illegal. Our game is played under conditions specified by the ACBL. Although many clubs run their 299er games under more restrictive specs, we run ours under the same "Open Chart" provisions as our open games. Open Chart imposes very few restrictions on opening bids, but there are limits; anyone who

is tempted to push the boundaries should look up the full details on ACBL.org

One general "Tip" I have is to not mislead your partner with your NT bids. I've said it before, but I see it happening. If you play an opening 1NT range of 15-17, don't open 1NT with 18HCP. It may seem like a small difference, and it's true you will often get away with it, but you will also miss games when your partner has a nice 7 pts and doesn't respond. This applies to other NT bids as well. If you open the bidding 1 of a suit, and then rebid 1NT, you are showing a balanced hand of less than your 1NT opening range. Don't do this if you have 15-17. Equally with overcalls; don't overcall 1NT with 20HCP or even 19, if your agreement is 15-18.

This doesn't, of course, mean you shouldn't use your judgement. There may well be 17 point hands that you believe are "worth" 18 points, and 15 point hands that you judge are not worth that because of the quality of the points. IF that's your reason for bidding outside your range, that's fine. But don't mislead your partner by bidding outside your range unless you have a strong reason to do it.

Bd: 16 Vul: E/W Dlr: West	♠ 986 ♥ AK7 ♦ 96 ♣ JT842	Optimum EW 3N+1: -630
♠ QJ ♥ J852 ♦ AK852 ♣ AQ	N W 16 E S	♠ AT742 ♥ QT6 ♦ QJ4 ♣ K6
8 17 HCP 12 3	♠ K53 ♥ 943 ♦ T73 ♣ 9753	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 1 4 4 4 4 W 1 4 4 4 4

Board 16 demonstrates a variation on this theme. West has 17HCP, and has to choose an opening bid. Some chose to open it 1NT, despite being slightly offshape for that bid. Those who didn't, who opened 1D, were stuck when it came to their rebid. Some chose 1NT, which shows a weaker hand than this, and some chose 2NT, promising more - 18 or 19. But either of those bids indicate a balanced hand, and if you're going to call it balanced, it's more honest to open it 1NT and show your true strength.

The only rebid here that wasn't untruthful was 2H - a reverse. You have the right shape for that, and the HCP are close, but a reverse bid tells your partner you have a 2-suited hand, and should really promise a better second suit than this. As always, planning ahead for your second bid before making your opening bid helps resolve the problem; calling this hand balanced and opening it 1NT solves the rebid problem and paves the way to an easy 3NT final contract.

I want to make another general reminder of the importance of bidding your major suits. It doesn't pay to hide the existence of a 4-card major suit in your hand. This came up on board 11 this week; after East opened 1D and South overcalled in Spades, some Wests chose to show their Diamond support, thus hiding the Heart suit. And while it's true that EW don't have a Heart fit, East was understandably reluctant to bid NT without knowing that West had the Hearts covered. A negative double instead gets the Heart message across, and it doesn't cost anything. If East had a different hand and rebid Clubs instead, you would still have the 3D bid available next round to show your support.

Bd: 11 Vul: None Dlr: South	♠ T2 ♥ A9642 ♦ J87 ♣ T54	Optimum E 6N: -990
♠ 53 ♥ KJ73 ♦ K654 ♣ QJ8	N W 11 E S	♠ AQ9 ♥ Q ♦ AT932 ♣ AK93
5 10 HCP 19 6	♠ KJ8764 ♥ T85 ♦ Q ♣ 762	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 5 6 3 2 6 W 5 6 3 1 5

Board 10 presented a small challenge for defenders. North played the hand in NT, and East correctly led the DQ - top of a sequence. Now, it may seem wasteful to play your K on top of your partner's Q, but it's a necessary unblock. As long as you trust your partner to have a sequence - or a broken sequence (QJ9x) it doesn't cost. Whether or not you overtake, declarer will duck, but if they duck twice, you won't be able to continue the attack unless you unblocked; if you overtook, your partner can continue until the A is knocked out. Declarer will still make her contract, but will have to play very safe to be sure to keep East off the lead.

Bd: 10 Vul: All Dlr: East	♠ AQ ♥ AJ5 ♦ A976 ♣ KQ83	Optimum NS 3N+1: +630
♠ KJT7 ♥ 7642 ♦ K2 ♣ A95	N W 10 E S	♠ 8432 ♥ Q98 ♦ QJT85 ♣ 4
20 11 HCP 5 4	♠ 965 ♥ KT3 ♦ 43 ♣ JT762	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 5 2 2 - 4 S 5 2 2 - 4 E - - - 1 - W - - - 1 -

Since I've already gone over my usual length, I will make a comment on board 3 to finish. Almost all Souths opened with a weak 2S bid. That's pretty normal - a good suit, and a decent hand, but not good enough to stretch to a 1S bid. North hates spades, of course, but what can they do? The hand isn't strong enough to think about game level; can they try for a better spot?

In the game today some Norths bid 3D, and it was passed. And that's the main reason I'm including this board - because a new suit after a preempt should be a forcing bid, investigating a possible game contract. Trying to find a better part-score is not recommended; who's to say that your suit is better than your partners? Equally important: if you do play that a new suit is non-forcing, it needs to be alerted, because it's not considered standard, and your opponents have the right to know in case it affects their choices.

Bd: 3 Vul: E/W Dlr: South	♠ -- ♥ 75 ♦ AKT852 ♣ AT987	Optimum NS 1D+3,NS 1C+
♠ A95 ♥ KJ32 ♦ 9743 ♣ J6	N W 3 E S	♠ J876 ♥ AQ98 ♦ J6 ♣ Q43
11 9 HCP 10 10	♠ KQT432 ♥ T64 ♦ Q ♣ K52	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 4 4 - 1 2 S 4 4 - 1 2 E - - - - - W - - - - -