TIPS FOR TOPS

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All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er games at the Bridge Centre of Niagara on Oct 5th and Oct 12th, 2021, (Game #84066 & #23237). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Showing Two Suits
- Second Hand Low

A few hands on Oct. 5th illustrate the benefits of knowing and following the basic rules of bidding - and of understanding the implications of what you hear. The rule: when you have two 5-card suits, you bid the higher one first. This is true if you are opening the bidding, if you are responding to an opening bid, if you are overcalling; even if you are responding to a takeout double.

On the other hand, responding with 4-card suits, you bid them up-the-line. And, if you are 5-4, you bid the longer one first.

Sticking to the pattern is how your partner knows what you have in your hand.

Bd: 1 Vul: None Dlr: North	♠ A83 ♥ J ♦ AQJ8532 ♣ 83	Optimum EW 6Cx: +300
♠ 6 ♥ A85 ♦ KT4 ♣ AKQJ65	N W 1 E S	♠ QT42 ♥ Q964 ♦ 9 ♣ T972
12 17 HCP 4 7	♠ KJ975 ♥ KT732 ♦ 76 ♣ 4	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - 4 1 5 - S - 4 1 5 - E 4 - - - - W 4 - - - -

Take Board 1: North opens 1D, and South has both majors. The correct response is 1S - the higher-ranking suit. West will overcall her club suit, and North will probably rebid her diamonds. When South now bids her hearts, North must recognize the implication: If South had four hearts and four spades, she would have bid up-the-line with hearts first. She may, in this sequence, have only four hearts, but she certainly has at least five spades to bid this way, and now North should give up on her minor suit - which will still be very helpful in a spade game - and support the spades. Optimistic pairs may bid to the game level, but, even if they don't, making 4 in spades pays better than making 4 in diamonds - and MORE is what counts in matchpoints.

Board 16 is similar but a little bit different. In this case, South opens the bidding, and North has both majors; five spades and four hearts. In this case, North must reply in the spade suit. South will think, for the moment, that North is denying hearts. But, if South didn't have

Bd: 16 Vul: E/W Dlr: West	♠ T9762 ♥ AT54 ♦ 2 ♣ K63	Optimum NS 6S: +980
♠ K3 ♥ J32 ♦ KQJ75 ♣ 542	N W 16 E S	♠ Q5 ♥ KQ976 ♦ T98 ♣ QT8
7 10 HCP 9 14	♠ AJ84 ♥ 8 ♦ A643 ♣ AJ97	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 5 1 2 6 2 S 5 1 2 6 2 E - - - - - W - - - - -

spade support and rebid NT, North is now in a position to show her second suit, and, in the process, show her fifth spade. Of course, this time, South has great spade support, and should raise to 3S, giving herself credit for 3 dummy points for the heart singleton.

Back to Board 14. North opens and South has two 4-card majors. In this case, the proper reply to North's opening 1C bid is 1H - up-the-line. North can now bid the spades, and you've found your fit. Replying 1S works this time, but if North had 4 hearts and not spades, you would miss your golden fit. What if East overcalls 1D over 1C? You make a negative double; in this sequence it shows BOTH majors, 4-4. I've noticed that all our regular pairs have the negative double marked on their convention cards, but there seems to be a reluctance to use it. This is exactly what it was made for. Remember; what you DON'T bid speaks as eloquently as what you DO bid. In this case, bidding one major after 1C (1D) denies holding 4-4 in Hearts and Spades.

Bd: 14 Vul: None Dlr: East	♠ Q842 ♥ AQ9 ♦ 764 ♣ KQ4	Optimum NS 4S: +420
♠ T5 ♥ T862 ♦ K52 ♣ A986	N W 14 E S	♠ K73 ♥ 43 ♦ AQT83 ♣ J52
13 7 HCP 10 10	♠ AJ96 ♥ KJ75 ♦ J9 ♣ T73	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 1 - 3 4 1 S 1 - 3 4 1 E - 1 - - - W - 1 - - -

Now to the game on the 12th:

Kudos to Nadine and Rosemary, who bid and made 6NT on Board 11. In fact, three pairs bid the slam, but only one made it. Now, with any lead other than spade, declarer has no chance. This is a pointer for defence: when on lead against a slam, it's best to look for the safest

Bd: 11 Vul: None Dlr: South	♠ A876 ♥ AJ75 ♦ J2 ♣ JT9	Optimum NS 3N+1: +430
♠ KJT4 ♥ 943 ♦ 987 ♣ 862	N W 11 E S	♠ 92 ♥ KQ62 ♦ T543 ♣ 743
11 4 HCP 5 20	♠ Q53 ♥ T8 ♦ AKQ6 ♣ AKQ5	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 5 4 4 4 4 S 5 4 4 4 4 E - - - - - W - - - - -

lead possible. Against a game contract, a risky lead can be productive, because you hope to have time to set up your suit, but you don't have time for that against a slam.

In any case, with the spade lead, declarers let it ride to their Q, and then had to count tricks and make a plan. There are 11 top tricks; two spades, one heart, four diamonds, and four clubs. The heart suit is the only chance for a 12th trick, and it's promising. You can play the 10 from your hand and let it ride; if it loses to East, you play next time to the J; you make your contract if either the K or Q is in the West hand, a 75% chance that fails today. But, there is one more chance, and Rosemary found it. When she ran her minor suit winners, East had to make one discard, and pitched her second spade, leaving herself with nothing but hearts. When East won the first heart trick with her Q, she was endplayed, forced to lead a heart from her Kxx into the AJ on the board, giving declarer her 12th trick. Note that, If East had not pitched the spade, declarer could have played to the SA, and then led a small heart from the board, achieving the same result.

Bd: 3 Vul: E/W Dlr: South	♠ AK98 ♥ KJ74 ♦ K2 ♣ AJ8	Optimum N 6N: +990
♠ T653 ♥ T2 ♦ T9 ♣ K9653	N W 3 E S	♠ J742 ♥ AQ9853 ♦ 6 ♣ Q4
19 3 HCP 9 9	♠ Q ♥ 6 ♦ AQJ87543 ♣ T72	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 6 1 3 6 S 2 6 1 1 5 E - - - - - W - - - - -

Kudos also to Tim and Bob who bid and made 6NT on Board 3. This time, there was nothing to the play; all tables made either 6 or 7, depending only on whether East took the HA at trick 1. But, the bidding here was a bit tricky. All South players opened the bidding in diamonds, from 1D up to 4D. Calling it an opening 1-bid is too much of a stretch for me; it surely must be a preempt. And, while an opening 4-bid is somewhat standard with an 8-card suit, it is always a bit risky, as you can't get back from there to 3NT, which is often the best contract when you have a long minor. That's probably why several players opened 3D, and played the hand in 3NT. But, in this hand, when Bob opened an honest 4D, Tim could almost count the 12 tricks he needed for slam. A quick check with Blackwood confirmed one A missing, and now there is reasonable expectation of eight diamond tricks, plus two spades and a club. A heart lead makes it twelve; an alternative club lead might pick up a second trick there. Very little is guaranteed in bridge, but this is a very good slam that made easily.

I've been wanting to find more in the way of defensive tips. There are general rules that you should be aware of when it comes to playing your cards on defence. The card you play depends heavily on your place in the order of play. I have said quite a bit about leads; top of a sequence, low from an honour, hi-lo from a doubleton are a few of the general rules. What if you're the second person to play on the trick? In other words, declarer has led, either from his hand or dummy, and it's your play next. In this situation, the general rule is to play low. There is little to be gained, and lots to lose, by playing anything other than your lowest card in the suit; you don't want to help declarer find the high cards in the suit, and your partner still has a chance to help out, being the last to play on the trick.

Bd: 17 Vul: None Dlr: North	♠ A3 ♥ KJ54 ♦ AQT92 ♣ A3	Optimum NS 4H: +420
♠ J4 ♥ T732 ♦ KJ85 ♣ 965	N W 17 E S	♠ KT96 ♥ 96 ♦ 764 ♣ KQJ8
18 5 HCP 9 8	♠ Q8752 ♥ AQ8 ♦ 3 ♣ T742	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 4 4 3 3 S 2 3 4 3 3 E - - - - - W - - - - -

Take board 17 as an example. When South leads diamonds towards the north hand, West's K and J are very badly placed. West might be reluctant to play low; you don't want to see the trick won with the 9. But look again. IF declarer plays the 9 and wins, they now get another trick with the A, but that's the end. If, on the other hand, you play either the K or the J on the first trick, they can capture it, and then have the power to force out your other honour and take four eventual tricks in the suit. The situation may not always be so clear, but the general rule is: "Second hand plays low".

I want to take a moment for a gentle reminder about alerts. In general, if your bid is not natural and standard, it probably needs to be alerted. The only exceptions are conventions that "everyone" uses, such as *Stayman* and *Negative Doubles*. But, *Bergen Raises* and *Inverted Minors*, for example, may be common-place to you, but not everybody uses them, and they must be alerted. Even transfer bids need to be announced, and in the world of online play, announcements work the same as alerts; they are self-alerted by the player who makes the call. Of course, you don't just say "Bergen", because not everybody knows the Bergen system. Instead, say "4 card support and 8-10 HCP", or whatever is correct. For transfer bids, if you are bidding 2D as a transfer to hearts, just say "Hearts".

If you are responding to an Ace-asking bid, alert "2 Aces", or "1 or 4" if you play keycard. In f2f play this is announced after the auction is over, but online the protocol is to make the announcement as you make the bid.

If in doubt - ALERT. If your opponents are disadvantaged by your failure to alert, there may be a penalty applied. Why take the risk?