TIPS FOR TOPS

BY JANE JENNINGS

All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er games at the Bridge Centre of Niagara on Nov 9th, 2021, (Game # 1677) and on Nov 16th, 2021 (Game # 40242. Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Establishing Long Suits
- Strip & Endplay

I'm going to start with a general word of advice, based on what I have been observing recently. In your search for the best contract, a top priority should always be to check for a Major suit fit of eight cards or more. When your partner opens the bidding in a minor and you have a Major, it's important to show it. Responding in a Major suit only requires four cards; responding 1NT to a minor suit opening DENIES holding a Major of four cards or more. Responding 1NT to a 1H opening bid DENIES four spades. Raising your partner's opening bid in a minor - whether you play standard or inverted minors - DENIES holding a Major. Once you have denied having a Major, bidding it later doesn't make up for the lapse; it typically shows control in a search for NT, NOT a real suit. Keeping this priority in mind will simplify your bidding immensely, and get you to the right contract much more often. The only times you don't bid your Major first: you may show Diamonds as you bid "up the line" responding to 1C with 4-card suits. And, you may show your longer minor before your major as long as you know you will have another chance to bid the Major, thus showing your 5-4 shape.

To recap:

1C (p) 1D - doesn't deny a major

1C (p) 1NT - denies both Hearts and Spades

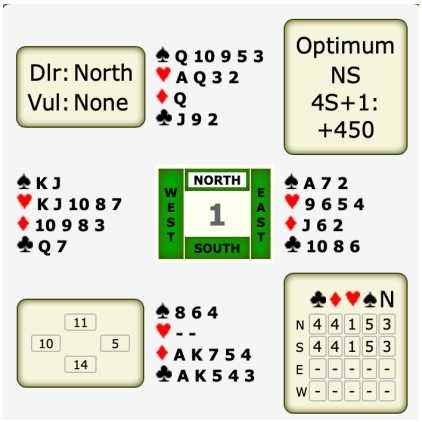
1C (p) 2C, 1C (p) 3C, 1D (p) 2D, 1D (p) 3D - <u>all</u> deny both Hearts and Spades

1C (p) 1H - doesn't deny Spades

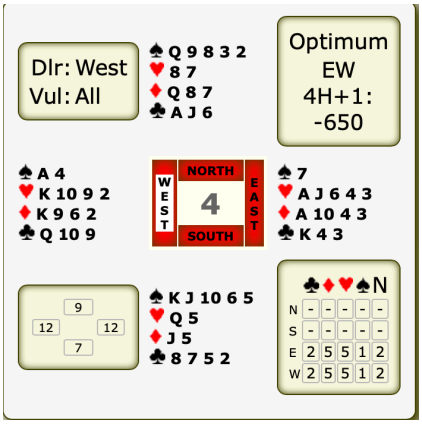
1C (p) 1S - tends to deny Hearts, unless you bid Hearts next round, which then says you have 5 or more Spades

Another important consideration: finding a fit increases the value of your hand. By contrast, if you find you don't have a fit, put the brakes on as quickly as you can.

From the Nov 9th game, Board 1 shows an extension of this principle. South opened the bidding 1D, planning, no doubt, a rebid of 2C. In most cases, West overcalled 1H. North was already going to respond 1S; now after the overcall the 1S bid promises 5 - otherwise North would use a negative double. South must recognize now that there is an 8-card "Golden Fit," and her hand has increased in value - the Heart void is <u>huge</u>; worth at least three extra support points as North will be able to ruff any Heart losers. If South shows her strong spade support by rebidding 3S instead of 2C, North will play in an easy 4S contract - the prime spot on this board.



Our players in Spades made 3, 4, or 5. The difference between making 4 and making 5 is all in the play of the Spade suit. With a scrappy suit such as this, the trick is to recognize that you can't avoid losing to the A and K; what you don't want to do is lose to the J. If you lead a low card from your hand, you are bound to lose to the J, so you always want to lead from the dummy and hope that something good happens - as it does this time.



Moving to Nov 16th, Board 4: West opens 1D, and some Norths overcalled 1S. East has a Heart suit. Without the overcall, they would have responded 1H; now they have to go to 2H - but that's ok; their hearts and hand are strong enough for that. The important thing is not to raise the Diamonds when you have Hearts to show. In fact, North's skimpy overcall has assisted the EW communication. Consider: a 1H response to 1D would have promised 6+HCP and 4+ hearts. The 2H bid

shows 10+ points and 5+ hearts. The extra precision in the information can sometimes be very valuable. Today, most EW pairs got to their 4H contract and were allowed to play it there.

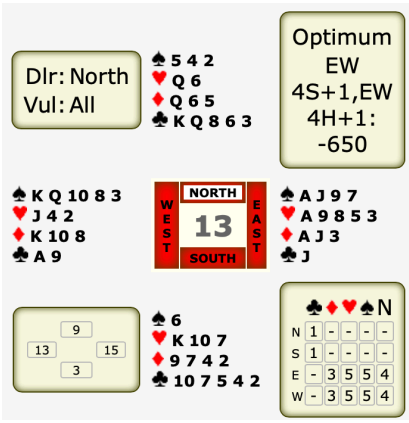
I have word of advice for those who defended a Spade contract. When West opens the bidding and East has an opening hand, East knows that this is YOUR hand. You can't let NS steal the contract with impunity; in other words, you should bid on OR double the opponents. If East has shown her Hearts and not got a raise from West, she should next show her good Diamond support; West must have 4 of those. [Fact: If a player opens 1D, they will have at least 4 Diamonds UNLESS they are exactly 4=4=3=2.] Today, West will correct 4D to 4H.

If EW bid their Heart game and NS bid 4S, it's clearly a sacrifice, and it must not go unpunished - as one NS pair found to their chagrin..

Why did some EW make 4H and one pair made 5H? 5H is always there if you play carefully. You have no Spade losers, and no Heart losers if you play for the Queen to drop (No reason to overrule "nine never.") You have to lose 1 Diamond, and the CA. The way to play this is to draw trump and then ruff your last Spade. Now play Diamonds, A, K, and small. If the Diamonds don't fall, and you lose 2 tricks; well, there was nothing you could have done about that. But now, whoever takes the Diamond trick has to help you; with no more Diamonds or Hearts, they have to lead a Club, which eliminates one of your losers in that suit, or a Spade, which gives you a ruff/sluff - you ruff in one hand and pitch a Club from the other. Again, this gets rid of a Club loser, and you lose only to the Ace. Playing this way is called "strip and endplay" - you "strip" out the other suits so that the opponent is "endplayed" when they take their trick. Anything they do next helps you.

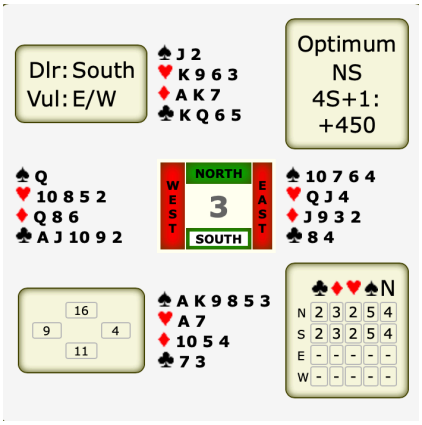
Another factor in taking all the tricks you are entitled to: newer players sometimes don't recognize the value of a long suit in the dummy. When you make your plan, you look at what losers you have in your hand, and what you can do about them. The possible solutions include ruffing your losers in dummy, but they also include setting up a long suit in dummy; if you can set up a long suit while you still have access to it, you can pitch losing cards from your hand on your established winners.

Board 13 from Nov 16th, is an example of this. The hand



was played in 4S in the West, and there was little chance of failure. You have 2 Heart losers, and one Club loser, which can be ruffed. You can make 5 if you guess where the DQ is, and two of our declarers did that, but that's a 50-50 proposition, and there's a better way. After you win the first trick draw your trump, which takes three rounds, and then work on Hearts. You expect to have to lose two of them, so duck them the first round (although it matters little here); win the return, then play Ace and ruff another Heart. If the outstanding cards fall 3-2, as they do here, you now have 2 good Hearts in dummy on which to pitch a losing Diamond. And, you will have access to the board either in the form of the DA, or by ruffing your Club loser - as long as you didn't use those cards before you played on hearts.

In fact, even if the Hearts hadn't split this way, you had time to ruff one more in your hand, and still have a long Heart suit in dummy for your Diamond pitch.



Still on Nov 16th, and finally to board 3, you might think you don't see a long suit in the North hand, but the Clubs are longer than in the dummy than in the hand, and can work the same - if the A is onside. The hand was played in 4S in the South. Leading an unsupported Ace is never good, so assume West leads a red suit. Declarer wins, and makes a plan: no Heart losers, one Diamond loser, one Club loser. Spades are not clear; probably one loser there. But you can eliminate a Diamond loser if the Club suit cooperates. Win the opening lead and play the SA - interesting; it caught the singleton Q. But that still leaves you with a Spade loser in the form of the 10. Now, three losers is fine in a 4S contract, but this is matchpoints, and you would like to make 5 if you can. So lead toward the KQxx of Clubs; if the Ace is with West, they will probably duck; you will win, play SJ , back to your hand with HA, pull another trump with the King, and then play Clubs again. If West ducks again, you have eliminated your Club loser, and if they don't, you now have a good Club in dummy on which to pitch your Diamond loser. Making 5, for a top board.