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 January 4th, 2022, (Game #76776). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Looking for NoTrump

I started this "column" in hopes that I could share some pointers that would help aspiring players to improve their games. What I find is that most players don't need fancy new gadgets or insight; they need to be consistent in applying the basics that they already know.

The basics of bidding: make sure your bid describes your hand as best possible - both in strength and in shape. If you are opening, is your hand a minimum (12-15), a medium (16-18), or a maximum (19+)? Same question if you are responder: Minimum (6-10), medium/invitational, (10-12) or a maximum/game force (good 12+)? Make sure your bids reflect that strength. You can't always define it precisely; some bids cover a very broad range, but don't make a bid that promises something you don't have. Don't get pushed onto a level higher than where you belong - but don't make a bid that defines your hand as less than what you hold. Don't tell the same story twice. And think about what will make your partner's job easier; the more closely you can define your hand, the better their decision will be.

One helpful hint that is sometimes overlooked: if you have a balanced hand, endeavour to make a NT call. It might be as an opening bid, if you're within the point range (15-17 for most pairs, or 20-21 for 2NT); it might be as an overcall, or as your first rebid - as long as you aren't bypassing a 4-card major. The beauty of a NT bid is that it describes your hand with such precision that your partner often has all the information they need to place the contract. Do we belong in game or a part score? Do we have a golden fit? IF they don't know the final answer, they have tools to find out.

This NT opportunity arose on at least 3 boards this week.

On Board 5, East had a natural 1NT opening bid, but North opened the bidding in Diamonds - most at 2D. What should East do? Go ahead and bid NT - an overcall at the cheapest level available, It's the perfect description of the hand: 15-18 HCP and a Diamond stopper. Anything else is a distortion. Some of our Easts made a takeout double, but with only two Spades, that's asking for trouble. A takeout double promises support for the three other suits, and you don't have that.

Bd: 5 Vul: N/S Dlr: North	♠ J93 ♥ KT ♦ AJT653 ♣ Q4	Optimum EW 3S: -140
♠ QT8652 ♥ 4 ♦ 82 ♣ 8762	N W 5 E S	♠ K4 ♥ AQ62 ♦ K74 ♣ AJT5
11 2 HCP 17 10	♠ A7 ♥ J98753 ♦ Q9 ♣ K93	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - 2 2 - 2 S - 2 2 - - E 3 - - 3 - W 3 - - 3 -

With a NT overcall, West knows exactly what to do. There is no hope for a game contract, but you know you have a fit in Spades, because a balanced hand has at least two of each suit. So if South passes, West initiates a transfer to Spades and then passes - a much safer contract than NT.

On Board 10, the NT bid comes up in the rebid. East has a balanced hand, not strong enough to open 1NT, but after West responds in Hearts, a 1NT rebid describes exactly this. Again, this gives West all the information they need. With 9 HCP opposite a

maximum of 14, there is no point in looking for a game so a pass is clear.

Bd: 10 Vul: All Dlr: East	♠ AJ42 ♥ A953 ♦ JT ♣ T52	Optimum EW 1H+1: -110
♠ 853 ♥ QT72 ♦ K6 ♣ KJ97	N W 10 E S	♠ Q96 ♥ KJ6 ♦ AQ953 ♣ Q6
10 9 HCP 14 7	♠ KT7 ♥ 84 ♦ 8742 ♣ A843	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - - - S - - - - - E 1 2 2 - 1 W - 2 2 - 1

On Board 16, it's the West hand that has the 1NT opening bid, and almost all players made that choice. But, notice the difference it makes to South, who has a very nice hand; it's hard to know what to do over 1NT, but defending 1C, when West chose that opening instead, was great fun!

Bd: 16 Vul: E/W Dlr: West	♠ 96 ♥ T9752 ♦ J74 ♣ K76	Optimum NS 3C: +110
♠ KQJ7 ♥ AKQ3 ♦ 92 ♣ Q84	N W 16 E S	♠ AT53 ♥ 864 ♦ 8653 ♣ J3
4 17 HCP 5 14	♠ 842 ♥ J ♦ AKQT ♣ AT952	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 1 1 - - S 3 1 1 - - E - - - 2 1 W - - - 2 1

Of course, bidding NT after the opponents have opened or overcalled, PROMISES a stopper in their suit. On Board 3, South opened 1C and most Wests overcalled in Spades. What can North do? You can't bid NT without a Spade stopper, you can't bid 2D, because that shows five, and you can't make a negative double, promising Hearts. The call that shows this hand is 2S - a cue bid - which tells partner you have an invitational strength hand and support in Clubs. Now South can bid NT - SHE has good stoppers, and makes 3NT if she gets the natural spade lead.

Bd: 3 Vul: E/W Dlr: South	♠ 964 ♥ J5 ♦ AKQ5 ♣ J862	Optimum N 4Dx,NS 4Cx: -1
♠ KJT852 ♥ KT43 ♦ 2 ♣ 93	N W 3 E S	♠ -- ♥ Q98762 ♦ J9843 ♣ A4
11 7 HCP 7 15	♠ AQ73 ♥ A ♦ T76 ♣ KQT75	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 3 3 - 1 1 S 3 2 - - 1 E - - 3 - - W - - 3 - -

Bd: 18 Vul: N/S Dlr: East	♠ QJT ♥ Q4 ♦ AQ987 ♣ Q87	Optimum NS 3N: +600
♠ 97642 ♥ J873 ♦ T6 ♣ K9	N W 18 E S	♠ 853 ♥ AT5 ♦ KJ53 ♣ T52
13 4 HCP 8 15	♠ AK ♥ K962 ♦ 42 ♣ AJ643	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 4 3 2 - 3 S 4 3 2 - 3 E - - - - - W - - - - -

Board 18 gave some of our declarers a hard time in 3NT. There are some important issues to consider here. First, the Spade suit is vulnerable with its unfortunate duplication of values. There are 3 tricks there, but we don't want to cash them early, as that would establish one or two tricks for the opponents. And the suit is blocked, with only one sure entry - the DA - to the 3rd Spade trick. Overall, there are five top tricks - three spades and 2 Aces, and we can generate one more trick in Hearts, but we still need three more to come from one of the minor suits. Which one? We have one more Club than Diamond, and we have both Queen and Jack of Clubs, so that's the slightly stronger suit, and that's what we need to get working on. When you need to establish more tricks, it's important to not cash your sure winners first, as that tends to set up tricks for the opponents. That's especially true in a case like this, where we know we will lose the lead twice in the process. So, if the opening lead put you into the North hand, lead a club from there, but lead a small one. If the opening lead put you in the South hand, don't use up your DA to get to North; you will need it later as access to your last Spade. So lead from the South side, and you may as well lead the A, just in case the K is singleton. The consideration on which club to lead is this: missing the K, 10 and 9, it's unlikely that you can pick up the suit for no losers. If the five missing cards are divided 3-2, you will always escape for one loser. But if the K is singleton, you need to either play the A and catch it, or play low so it "catches air". Don't lead the Q or the J; if you lose that to a singleton K, you will still lose another to trick to the 10.