



# A Second Look



What Are We Thinking? — Lessons from the Fifth Chair

A FEW HANDS FROM THURSDAY'S NKY FOUR-IS-ENOUGH GAME

On Thursday afternoon, players gathered at the Erlanger Lions Club for a duplicate bridge game that is equal parts competition and classroom. The format is simple: experienced players paired with those still learning the game, working through hands together in real time. But the learning doesn't have to stop when the cards are put away. The Fifth Chair — that invisible observer with the luxury of seeing all four hands — picks a few of the most instructive deals and takes them apart. We'll look at the bidding through the lens of Standard American, the system most players learn first and never fully leave behind, and we'll follow the play from the opening lead to the final trick. Whether you're the mentor or the mentee, there's always something worth a second look. You can review all the hands online (<http://www.nkybridge.org/>) but we'll look at four of them in detail here.

Dir: East  
Vul: None

♠ 4 3 2  
♥ A K 7 5 3  
♦ A 7 2  
♣ J 5

♠ K Q 10 9  
♥ Q 2  
♦ 5  
♣ A 10 9 6 3 2

NORTH  
WEST 14 EAST  
SOUTH

♠ A J 8  
♥ J 9 8  
♦ K Q J 10 8 6  
♣ 7

12 11 12  
5

♠ 7 6 5  
♥ 10 6 4  
♦ 9 4 3  
♣ K Q 8 4

♣♦♥♠N  
N - - - -  
S - - - -  
E 2 4 1 4 2  
W 2 4 1 4 2

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**Board No 14 None Vul Dealer East**

NS	EW	Bid	By	Ld	Tks	+Sc	-Sc	+	-
16	7	3NT	E	♣4	-2	100		6.00	0.00
2	4	2NT	E	♥4	2		120	5.00	1.00
3	8	3♦	E	♥10	4		130	3.50	2.50
14	10	3♦	E	♥6	4		130	3.50	2.50
6	13	2♠	W	♥A	3		140	1.50	4.50
12	11	3♠	W	♥A	3		140	1.50	4.50
9	15	4♠	W	♥A	4		420	0.00	6.00

### Recommended Auction

West	North	East	South
—	—	1♦	Pass
2♣	2♥	Pass	Pass
2♠	Pass	3♦	Pass
Pass	Pass		

### Every Bid a Choice, Every Card a Consequence

On Board 14, East holds 12 HCP with a singleton club. When evaluating whether to open 11–12 HCP at the one level, ask two questions.

- *Does the hand have useful distribution?* Yes — the singleton adds trick-taking power if diamonds are trumps.
- *Will there be a convenient rebid?* If we open 1♦ we may plan to rebid 2♦ regardless of what partner does — about as convenient as it gets.

So we open 1♦. South passes, and West faces an interesting choice: 1♠ or 2♣? The right call is 2♣ — here's why. The 1♦ opener can be a three-card "convenient minor," so holding a singleton in "partner's suit" isn't fatal. More importantly, this is a two-suited hand with real trick-taking power — if we can find a fit. If we bid 1♠, partner will never believe we have longer clubs. In Standard American, a new suit at the two level promises 11+ HCP, and this hand — despite the questionable ♥Q — is worth it. West should bid 2♣.

North may come in with 2♥. It's an acceptable call, though possibly unwise — the opponents have already implied 23–25+ combined HCP. Still, many players today are that aggressive, and North does want a heart lead. Let's say that happens.

East now chooses between 3♦ and pass. With only 12 HCP, pass is probably correct — bidding freely when partner still has a chance to bid tends to imply extras. South, holding only 5 HCP and three hearts, should stay quiet: the flat South hand makes a stiff penalty double at 3♥ quite possible.

West comes back in with 2♠ — a responder reverse. Bidding a higher-ranking suit than your first at the two level forces the partnership to a higher level to take a preference, and therefore promises extra strength. This

hand, though only 11 HCP, qualifies because of its two suited nature.

East faces another decision. First note that pass is not an option – West’s bidding has shown an unlimited hand and is in part designed to force game. So East must think about what to bid. Partner may hold only four spades, and if partner holds the diamond ace and a heart honor, 3NT could be cold. As the cards lie, it isn’t — but to probe, East could cuebid 3♥. A note on cuebids — when your partner bids the opponents’ suit, you should never ever pass! Given that West has shown nine or more black cards, a heart stopper and the diamond ace seems like a longshot, so let’s reject the idea of bidding 3♥.

The better options are 3♦ (which surely shows at least six pretty solid diamonds, since we know partner’s hand is mostly black) or 3♠ (which ideally implies four-card support). The recommended call is 3♦ — warning partner of a potential misfit. There’s an old saying that applies well to misfit hands: “When in a hole, stop digging!” Note that opener should never pass the 2♠ bid, because West’s bidding has not shown an upper limit on strength.

Those who do bid 3♠ will hear 4♠ from partner — and be rewarded in somewhat lucky fashion when the spade suit breaks 3–3. Interestingly, even 3♠ is likely to fail if spades are anything other than 3–3 (a 35% bet).

In 4♠, the play is not automatic. Declarer will surely go down if she doesn’t think it through at trick 1 – always good advice. The hand has two quick heart losers and the diamond ace to lose — so no other tricks can be surrendered. If spades are 4–2 or worse, the contract fails: you cannot draw trump and dislodge the ♦A while maintaining entries. Assuming the favorable 3–3 break, there is still a critical order-of-play issue. Drawing trump immediately leaves no entry to East’s long diamond suit once the ace is knocked out. The winning line: push out the ♦A first, win the return, draw trump ending in the East hand, then run the diamond suit, pitching clubs. Making 4. George and Peggy were the only pair in the room to apparently find that line.

In 3♦ — the preferred contract — the play is far more straightforward. After losing two hearts and the diamond ace, draw trump and claim the remaining tricks on high cards. A clear plus score, and one that reflects the hand’s true nature.

### Leave No Chance Behind

The auction on Board 21 begins with three passes to West (don’t be tempted to open the East hand with 11 HCP; the hearts need to be spades to justify bidding that opening). West opens 1NT, East bids 2♦ (a Jacoby transfer, showing five or more hearts), and West accepts with 2♥. East now bids 3NT, showing exactly five hearts and a game-going hand and asking partner to choose the final contract. West, with only a doubleton heart, chooses to play 3NT.

All North players chose to lead a spade — quite reasonable, and the only lead that can give the contract real trouble. South wins the king and returns a spade to

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Board No 21 N/S Vul Dealer North									
NS	EW	Bid	By	Ld	Tks	+Sc	-Sc	+	-
15	13	3NT	W	♠8	-2	100		5.92	0.08
3	2	3NT	W	♠4	-1	50		3.58	2.42
10	4	4♥	E	♣J	-1	50		3.58	2.42
6	8	3NT	W	♠3	-1	50		3.58	2.42
7	12	2♦	W	♠4	3		110	1.25	4.75
1	14	3♥	W	♦7	3		140	0.08	5.92

dummy’s ace, and we take stock. We’ll win two spades, three hearts, and three diamonds easily (after pushing out the diamond ace), plus the king of clubs — nine winners on paper. But there is danger: the opponents may be able to win both their aces and cash three more spades before we promote our ninth trick.

It’s very tempting to start on hearts at trick three, hoping to run the suit. But this is wrong, because if hearts don’t break 3–3, you’ll have at least one losing heart in addition to the rest and may wind up discarding winners in the end. The correct play is to lead diamonds at trick three — setting up that suit and guaranteeing at least eight winners regardless.

As the cards lie, the only way to actually make 3NT is to lead clubs at trick three, eventually blocking the spade suit. But trying to set up one club trick is not logical when a diamond lead sets up three tricks. So we lead diamonds — South wins and knocks out our last spade stopper. We are still missing the ace of clubs, and North almost certainly holds it: if South had two aces and a king, she would likely have opened.

We cash our diamond tricks, then play the ace of hearts and a heart to dummy hoping for the 3–3 break to salvage the contract. It doesn’t come. We fall back to clubs — and the contract goes down on the unfriendly lie of the cards. Switch the aces in the North-South hands and our correct line of play succeeds. Bad luck runs across all tables, so 50 for North-South is a fair par result.

## The Long Suit That Dreamed Big

Dir: South  
Vul: E/W

♠ J 6 2  
♥ A 6  
♦ A 9 7 5 4 3 2  
♣ K

♠ A 10 4  
♥ 10 8 3  
♦ Q 8  
♣ 10 8 5 3 2

WEST NORTH EAST  
19 SOUTH

♠ 9 8 7 5  
♥ Q J 7 4  
♦ 6  
♣ Q J 9 7

♠ K Q 3  
♥ K 9 5 2  
♦ K J 10  
♣ A 6 4

12  
6 6  
16

♣♦♥♠N  
N 1 6 3 3 6  
S 1 6 3 3 6  
E - - - - -  
W - - - - -

View Larger Play it again

Board No 19 E/W Vul Dealer South									
NS	EW	Bid	By	Ld	Tks	+Sc	-Sc	+	-
14	13	6♦	N	♥Q	6	920		6.00	0.00
4	8	3NT	S	♣3	6	490		4.50	1.50
15	12	3NT	S	♦Q	6	490		4.50	1.50
16	10	3NT	S	♣3	5	460		3.00	3.00
6	11	5♦	N	♣Q	6	420		1.00	5.00
2	1	5♦	N	♥Q	6	420		1.00	5.00
9	3	5♦	N	♠9	6	420		1.00	5.00

On Board 19, South holds a flat 16 HCP and opens 1NT. East and West should be passing throughout. It is North who will determine what happens on this hand. With a seven-card diamond suit, slam is possible despite only 12 HCP — if partner holds the right cards. But that's a fairly big ask, so the most likely Standard American auction is simply 1NT followed by 3NT.

### Standard Auction

West	North	East	South
Pass	Pass	Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

3NT should make six. Declarer has seven diamond tricks, two club tricks, and two heart tricks off the top, and can promote the king of spades for the 12th trick. You do have to be a little careful with transportation, however. If you use dummy's ♠K and ♥A too early — before playing the ace, king, and jack of diamonds — you won't have the entry to enjoy those last four diamond tricks.

If North is aggressive and decides to investigate slam, the recommended path after 1NT is Stayman — 2♣. Why? A jump to 3♦ directly over 1NT is merely invitational in Standard American, not forcing. We must be in game, so we create an auction that is 100% forcing by initially pretending to have a major. In the process, we'll learn if partner has a four-card major which may be useful information. Whatever partner responds, we'll ignore it

and bid 3♦, which should be interpreted as a much stronger diamond hand than bidding 3♦ directly over 1NT. South may choose 3NT, but if South chooses 4♦ it is probably worth it for North to try 6♦. Most pairs playing simple systems will not reach this slam.

### Aggressive — Stayman Route

West	North	East	South
Pass	Pass	Pass	1NT
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♦
Pass	3♦	Pass	4♦
Pass	6♦	All Pass	

More advanced pairs play four-suit transfers (not part of Standard American), which may lead to slam. North responds to 1NT by bidding 2NT (alerted as diamonds). South then bids 3♦, showing a fit. South would bid 3♣ instead with a doubleton diamond (this is called "gap negative"). Upon finding the ten-card fit, North may begin cuebidding with 3♥, showing a control (ace or king) in that suit. South responds with 3♠, again showing a control in spades. North bids 4♣, and at this point South will be comfortable enough to use Blackwood and ask for keycards — ultimately reaching 6♦ even missing the ace of spades.

### Advanced Auction Using Four-Suit Transfers

West	North	East	South
Pass	Pass	Pass	1NT
Pass	2NT*	Pass	3♦
Pass	3♥	Pass	3♣
Pass	4♣	Pass	4NT
Pass	5♥	Pass	6♦
Pass	Pass	Pass	

### The Play

There is very little to the play — 12 tricks are there after drawing trump, losing only the ace of spades. So shouldn't we be in 6NT for 990 instead of 6♦ for 920? **Absolutely not.** With North's distributional hand opposite a 1NT opener, 6♦ is the far safer contract. Much of the field won't bid a thin slam like this (the traditional threshold for a small slam in notrump is 33 combined HCP, and we know we don't have that). So let's be in the suit contract on a distributional hand — it is much more likely to make.

### About the Author

As a statistics professor at Northern Kentucky University and an avid bridge player in the NKY/Cincinnati area, I enjoy incorporating probability into both bidding and play — which is why at the table you may see me make creative (and occasionally disastrous) bids on occasion. When they work, I'm happy — when they don't, I just accept that sometimes they won't!

-Joe Nolan

## The Finesse You Shouldn't Take

Dir: West  
Vul: All

♠ Q 10  
♥ J 10 8 7  
♦ J 10 2  
♣ Q J 10 5

♠ A K J 8 7  
♥ K 2  
♦ Q 8 3  
♣ A 8 6

NORTH  
WEST 20 EAST  
SOUTH

♠ 9 5 4  
♥ 9 6 5  
♦ A 9 4  
♣ K 9 7 3

♠ 6 3 2  
♥ A Q 4 3  
♦ K 7 6 5  
♣ 4 2

7 7 9

♣	♦	♥	♠	N	
N	-	-	-	-	
S	-	-	-	-	
E	3	2	1	4	3
W	3	2	1	4	3

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**Board No 20 Both Vul Dealer West**

NS	EW	Bid	By	Ld	Tks	+Sc	-Sc	+	-
15	12	4♠	W	♥J	-1	100		4.50	1.50
14	13	4♠	W	♥J	-1	100		4.50	1.50
6	11	4♠	W	♣Q	-1	100		4.50	1.50
16	10	4♠	W	♣Q	-1	100		4.50	1.50
9	3	1NT	W	♣Q	2		120	1.50	4.50
2	1	1NT	W	♥7	2		120	1.50	4.50
4	8	1NT	W	♥7	3		150	0.00	6.00

On Board 20, West deals and holds a very nice 17 HCP with a five-card spade suit. So 1♠ or 1NT? The field was clearly divided. 1NT is chosen at three tables and should be passed out by the flat 7 HCP in the East hand. At the other four tables, the choice was 1♠, probably followed by 2♠ and then 4♠. This auction, which isn't the best, results in a spade game that declarer must scramble to make.

Let's start with the opening bid. Which is correct, 1♠ or 1NT? Playing Standard American we should always open this hand 1♠. The risk of missing a spade fit is too high if we open 1NT, and we don't have advanced systems (such as Puppet Stayman) that allow us to find that 5-3 fit.

After the 1♠ opening, a raise to 2♠ (6-8 HCP) with at least 3 spades is fairly obvious. But what should happen next for West? West's 17 plus East's 6 is 23 HCP. West needs East to have 8 for a real chance at game, and so should not bid 4♠ unilaterally. Since West is balanced with cards in each suit, a simple invitation is made by bidding 3♠. East will pass, and West will be happy with a pretty good board, even if they find the way to make four.

### Recommended Auction

West	North	East	South
1♠	Pass	2♠	Pass
3♠	Pass	Pass	Pass

Now for the play. With 4♠ being bid at more than half the tables, should it make? The answer is actually yes, but it isn't obvious and starts with a lot of thinking by declarer at trick 1 (always good practice). We outline that thinking.

The queen of clubs lead from North is very logical, and also possibly helpful — if North has ♣QJT, the nine of clubs can now potentially be turned into a trick. Here is how we would do that. First win the A♠. After drawing trumps, lose the second club to the ten or jack! Now we can lead the 8♣ and either finesse the 9♣ or cover the J♣ depending on how North plays. It's a nice idea — but it isn't helpful here — because there is really nothing from the west hand that can be effectively pitched to avoid a loser. So we forget about clubs for the moment and look at the rest of our hand.

First question — how many tricks might we lose in each suit? Spades, 0 or 1, depending on what happens with the queen. Hearts, 1 or 2, depending on whether the ace is in South. Diamonds, 1 or 2, depending on whether the king is held by South. And clubs, likely 1. That's a LOT of likely losers, so on the surface, we expect to go down.

Second question — is there any lie of the cards that would allow us to make? *This is really important — we want to make assumptions about defenders cards that might let us make if they are true!* We've already determined if south holds A♥ and K♦ that we could potentially hold each red suit to one loser. To finesse, we'll need to enter dummy twice (and the K♣ and A♦ would let us do that. We'll always lose one club, and so must avoid losing a spade. Oh Boy! One way to avoid the spade loser is to take a winning finesse with the jack. But if we are using the K♣ and A♦ to get to dummy for other finesses, we won't have that option. So what's left? We must just play to drop the Q♠. To recap, in order to make this contract, we need the A♥ and K♦ with South, and we need to find one of the opponents with the doubleton Q♠. Improbable but possible, so now work out the line.

Win the opening club in hand with the ace and cash the AK♠. The queen falls — one requirement down. Draw the last trump with the jack, and then cross to dummy with the K♣ (which you carefully didn't play at trick 1). Lead a heart and pray. Either south ducks or takes the ace and returns a heart to your king. Two requirements down! Now cross to the A♦ and lead a diamond back toward your queen. When this finesse also wins, you have 10 tricks — 3 spades, 2 clubs, 2 diamonds, and 1 heart.

In bridge there are often hands where it looks like we are a bit overbid — but by thinking about the position of cards, sometimes we can identify a layout that lets us make it anyway. This is one of those cases: 4♠ has roughly a 6% chance of making, and as the cards lie, we are squarely in that 6% realm!