Bridge Principles and Maxims

By Neil H. Timm

A "Rule" in bridge is a guide to help with your bidding and play of a bridge hand. A rule is automatic when applied but as always is just a guide to bidding and play.

On the Ocala Web site: www.bridgewebs.com/ocala UNDER the Tab: Timm's Lessons, Plus Bid, Play and Analysis, I have the entry "Bridge Rules Lesson" and an "Overview of Bridge Rules" WITHIN the Tab: Timm's Bridge Bits which you may like to review.

" Bridge Principles" on the other hand are fundamental assumptions that demand careful thought and inquiry both to establish and apply in the game of bridge.

- **Principle of fast arrival**. In game forcing auctions, bidding game directly with a preemptive jump bid shows a limited minimum hand and no slam interest.
- **Principle of restricted choice**. The play of a particular card decreases the probability the player holds any equivalent card.
- **Useful Space Principle**, or USP. The Bridge World glossary defines USP as: "a partnership's assigning meanings to actions so that the remaining bidding space matches the needs of the auction."

Useful Space Principle

One of the most important principles in bridge is the Useful Space Principle (USP), which was **first articulated in a series of six articles in The Bridge World**, from **November 1980 through April 1981**. (The International Bridge Press Association awarded its 1981/1982 award for Best Article or Series on a System or Convention to Jeff Rubens for this series.)

What does the USP mean? The best bridge conventions and systems are those that take up the LEAST bidding SPACE.

Some Conventions that use the USP

Popular conventions that use the USP are for example **transfers** (e.g. Jacoby and Reuben), **some slam-bidding conventions** (e.g. Kickback, Jeff Reuben's Grand-Slam Non-force (GSN), Leo Baron's Baron Slam-try, John Gerber's Gerber Convention 1938 devised by William Konigsberger and Win Nye from Switzerland who published it in 1936), Expert/Kickback Gerber also called Roman Blackwood by the Italian Blue Team in the 1960's) and many other **conventions that employ asking bids** (e.g. those used in precision and incision systems) and **relay bidding sequences** (e.g. Scroll bids developed by Neil Timm.)

Bidding Systems that use the USP

Popular bidding systems that employ the USP are any of the numerous "strong" 1♣*/1♦* bidding systems. Goren methods contradict the Useful Space Principle (USP). Jumping to game to show strong hands is silly bidding since you are pre-empting your own partner. Hence, weak jump bids were devised.

While many duplicate club players use and are familiar with Jacoby Transfers, less are familiar with Reuben transfers/advances.

Here is how they work, with a few modifications, after the bid of 1♣ - 1♠ - pass - ??

1NT   natural
2♣*   transfer to diamonds
2♦*   transfer to hearts
2♥   cue bid (takes the place of the bid of 2♣, a strong bid)
2♠   natural support bid

*Alert – in what follows an asterisk indicates an alert

With interference 1♣ - 1♠ - 2♣ - ??

Dbl   transfer to diamonds
2♦*   transfer to hearts
2♥   cue bid (a support bid too strong for a natural raise)
2♠   natural support bid

Similarly, after the sequence 1♣ - 1♥ - pass - ??

1♠   natural
1NT   natural
2♣*   transfer to diamonds
2♦   cue bid (a support bid too strong for a natural raise)
2♥   natural support bid

With interference 1♣ - 1♥ - 2♣ - ??

2♦*   transfer to spades
2♥   natural support bid
2♠   cue bid (a support bid too strong for a natural raise)

If the overcall is a touching suit 1♥ - 1♠ - ??

2♣   natural, forcing one round
2♦   natural, forcing one round
2♥   a support bid too strong for a natural raise
2♠   natural support bid

For more detail and examples go to the Ocala web site, Timm's Bridge Bits and click on Reuben Advances.

Conventions like Reverse Bergen, Bergen, and Combined Bergen employ the USP. If you do not use these but instead 1M-3M as a limit raise in the bid Major can you now also use the USP? Yes as follows.

      Opener   Responder
      1♠   3♠ = limit 10-12 Dummy Points

When responder bids a new suit at the 4-level it is treated as a cue-bid to show an ace or a king so 3NT cannot be natural but may be used as a shortness-asking bid (similar to a short-suit game try bid). If responder bids of a new suit at the 4-level it show shortness and lacking any bids spades. However over 1♥ - 3♥ you cannot use 3NT. If you use 3NT as the asking bid, 4♥ is the negative response but the you only have two bids (4♣/4♦) available to show shortness in three suits: clubs, diamonds, and spades.

To overcome this situation may use the USP. One bids the next STEP 3♠ as the shortness asks! And the bid of 3NT shows shortness in spades, 4♣ in clubs, and 4♦ in diamond.

Conventions that DO NOT use the USP

Conventions that ignore the USP include the Easley Blackwood's Blackwood Convention developed in 1933, the bid of 4NT used in RKCB (1430) developed by the Italian Blue Team in the 1960's but popularized by Eddie Kantar in the USA along with RKCB (3014) **when used for any suit except spades.**

Principle of fast arrival

With the popular acceptance of the 2/1 bidding system, the principle of "fast arrival" became more common, leap to game with a minimum! Fast Arrival jump bids limit your hand, but say very little about location of values. Furthermore a jump bid reduces your ability look for slam, and guarantees that slam exploration must occur above the game.

Fast arrival jumps work well when partner is limited since the jump bidder knows the partnership is not in the slam zone. However, when you don't know whether game is the limit, jump bids should send a precise message about location of values to allow partner to judge weather or not to bid on.

Is there an alternative to "Fast Arrival" Yes they are called Picture bids developed by Al Roth. The Roth-Stone bidding system provided the foundation for 2/1.

Picture bids are still "fast arrival" but specify/paint a picture of your hand to your partner. These bids state that you have game with good suit values but with no outside controls. If

you had outside controls, you would have bid them as a courtesy. These picture bids are not just limited to 2/1 and are commonly used over Jacoby 2NT.

The bidding sequence: 1♠ - 2NT - 4♠ show a huge hand and 3♠ become invitational. The bids are as follows.

- **3♣, 3♦ or 3♥** = Singleton or void in that suit.
- **3♠** = good 14+ HCP with extra length in spades, no singleton.
- **3NT** = 15-18 pts., balanced (no singleton or void).
- **4♣, 4♦, 4♥** = Decent 5-card side suit (QJxxx or better).
- **4♠** = 19+ HCP with slam interest.

Without the concept of picture bids, most partnerships playing Jacoby use the bid of 4♠ and no slam interest. Then the bid of 3♠ is either semi- strong of real strong. Then additional bids are employed to describe your hands giving more information to the opponents!

The picture bids **ARE NOT THE SAME AS JACOBY**, recall that these bids are:

Jacoby 2NT* Responses by Opener

Rebids by Opener	Suit Length	Bergen Points
3 (new suit)*	Singleton/Void	12+
3 (major suit opened)*	5/6+ in major	18+
3NT*	(5-3-3-2) balanced	15-17
4 (new suit)*	4+ card suit	12+ to 17
4 (major suit opened)	5+ major	12+ to 14

Principle of Restricted Choice

In statistical probability, the principle of restricted choice is a simple application of Bayes' Theorem: $P(A|B)=P(A)P(B|A)/P(B)= \frac{1}{2}$.

Let Kp = King played is the event that East "plays" K to the in first trick. KQ = the event that East has KQ, and let K = the event that East has the K. Then using the theorem we have that

$$P(KQ|Kp)=P(Kp|KQ) \, P(KQ)/P(Kp) \text{ and } P(K|Kp)=P(Kp) \, P(K)/P(Kp)$$

But the (Kp|KQ)= ½ because we assume that East plays the K or Q with equal probability, given the choice. And the P(Kp|K)=1.

But the $P(K) \approx P(KQ) \Leftrightarrow P(K|Kp) \approx 2 \, (KQ|Kp)$ and the result follows (QED).

Jeff Rubens (*Encyclopedia* (1964 edition, p.457) in the latest 7th Edition of the Encyclopedia of Bridge (pp. 457 – 462) one finds the principle stated: "The play of a card which may have been selected as a choice of equal plays increases the chance that the player started with a holding in which his choice was restricted." That is after observing one equivalent card; one should continue play as if two equivalents were split ≈between the opposing players, so that there was no choice about which one to play. Whoever played the first one doesn't have the other one.

Eddie Kantor stated the principle nicely as follows: **When the opponents hold 2 equally important cards and one has appeared on the previous trick, then take the finesse for the remaining important card.**

For many examples see the Encyclopedia of Bridge 7th Edition (2011, pp. 457 – 462) or go to the web site: http://austinbridge.org/sbruce/lecture/RestrictedChoice.pdf

Larry Cohen's provides a very nice discussion in his article, which is available on the web site https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/restricted-choice#!

Bridge Maxims

A bridge maxim is a rule of thumb in duplicate bridge is a practice gained from experience rather than theory. I have provided a few, but rational and information are provided in Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia and the two references I have provided below for those interested in the topic.

Bidding

- **If you have a choice of reasonable bids and one of them is 3NT, then bid it**.
- **Prefer majors to minors**.
- **Prefer length to strength.**
- **With a misfit, pass ASAP; with a good fit, bid aggressively.**
- **A new suit bid by responder is forcing and a new suit bid by opener is not forcing for one round.**
- **When making a bid, make sure you have a second bid in mind.**
- **Overcall bid are lead directing, don't be embarrassed.**
- **Trust your partner.**

Declarer Play

- **Eight ever, nine never**. With 8-cards finesse for the Queen and with 9-cards play for the drop, given no information gleaned from the bidding/play.

- **Ten ever, eleven never**. With 10-cards finesse for the King and with 11-cards play for the drop, given no information gleaned from the bidding/play.
- **Bad splits happen**.
- **Have a plan**.
- **Use Dummy trumps to trump losers rather than visa-versa.**
- **An even number of cards tend to split unevenly and an even number tends to split more evenly**. For example with 4 or 6 cards expect 3-1 or 4-2 (unevenly) but with say 7 expect 3-2 or 4-3 (almost evenly).
- **Play short suit honors first**.

Defending

- **If in doubt, lead a spade or major if the opponents are in NT**.
- **If the opponents are in one major lead the other**.
- **Cover an honor with an honor**.
- **Play into weakness** and **play through strength**.
- **Second hand plays low**. **Third hand plays high**.
- **In fast arrival NT contract, lead a major**
- **Lead trump to protect tenaces in non-trump suits or when the opponents have splintered.**
- **Lead top of sequences in NT or BOSTON.**
- **Avoid the rule of 11 in suit contracts so lead low from 5 and 3 from 4.**
- **Partner bids a suit you lead it.**
- **Returns partner his partners' lead.**

Bridge Maxims: Secrets of Better Play by Eric Rodwell and Audrey Grant (1987, Trade Paperback).

101 Bridge Maxims by Hugh Walter Kelsey (1986, Trade Paperback)

Bidding Decisions*

When playing 2/1 and 5-card majors, the probability of picking up a strong 1NT (15-17) hand is about 10.09% (picking up a hand with 15, 16, and 17 HCP are exactly 4.42%, 3.31%, and 4.42%). However, if one opens a strong NT the number of HCP in the hand being 15/16/17 HCP are about 44%, 33%, and 23%, respectively. They are not equally likely.

If the shape of the NT hand must be: 4432/5332/4333 the likelihood of these shapes are: 21.6+15.5+ 10.5= 47.6% and if we further assume 15/16HCP hands are opened 80% of the time and that 17HCP are opened 90%, the probably of the opener having 15/16/17 HCP are about 40%, 37%, and 24%, respectively. So we see that the 15 HCP hand percentage decreased and the higher HCP hands increased marginally. The most like percentage remained the15HCP hand. The expected HCP is 15.79.

Playing precision, picking up a hand with 16+HCP occurs 9.76% of the time. However if a person opens 1♣* his hand will have at least 16HCP 33% of the time and if you add the constraint of having a balanced hand and 17+HCP it occurs 24% of the time.

How much is needed for game? In Standard American the NT range was 16-18 with 10HCP; however with 2/1 it became 15-17 with partner HCP remained 10! If the agreement is 25, the frequency of bidding game occurs about 25% of the time while using 26HCP the frequency occurs 35% of the time.

Playing Precision, game is bid based upon 8 and the frequency of bidding a game playing NT (12-15HCP) or a suit contract occurs only 24%. When Precision players open one of a suit they will have 11-15HCP 34% of the time.

The success rate for playing making the game bid using either Precision or 2/1depends on how well one plays a hand and cannot be determined with mathematical probability. The advantage of Precision System over the 2/1 System is that you know when to not bid game.

Playing 2/1, a hand is opened 2NT based upon 20-21HCP about 1% of the time. However, if one opens 2NT, the opener will have 20HCP 63% of the time and 21HCP 37% of the time.

*Based on the book, Julian Laderman (2020), Useful Probability for Bridge Players, Master Point Press.