

Summertown Bridge Bulletin, 31 January 2022

Competitive bidding and vulnerability

At least it wasn't the robots who won last night! Congratulations to the winners John and Trevor, and runners-up Irene and Mike, for doing so well in a session where many hands needed to be carefully played or defended to get a good result.

It seemed to us that there were more hands than usual where both sides had a good fit, maybe even what you might call a "super-fit" (10 cards or more), and this led to some very competitive bidding. In these situations, you do need to keep an eye on the vulnerability. Most players know that when you're green against red you can be almost as aggressive as you like, but when you have a really long suit and partner comes up with a supporting bid, it's harder to know when to keep the brakes on if you're red against green. And of course, the real art is knowing when to stop bidding and click on that double card!

Dlr: East
Vul: E/W

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

Optimum
NS 4N+1:
+460

♠ K 6
♥ 9 5
♦ 8 7 5 3 2
♣ K 8 6 2

NORTH
6
SOUTH

♠ 2
♥ A K J
♦ 9 6
♣ Q J 10 9 7 5 3

11
6 11
12

| | ♣ | ♦ | ♥ | ♠ | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N | - | 2 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| S | - | 2 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| E | 3 | - | - | - | - |
| W | 3 | - | - | - | - |

On Board 6, for example, N/S had a 10-card fit in spades, whilst E/W had a huge 11-card fit in clubs.

Both fits were found at almost every table and N/S always reached game, usually in spades. Exactly half the E/W pairs then took the prudent view and passed, getting a fairly good score if they found the defence of leading A, K and another heart to hold declarer to 10 tricks (this seems obvious when you can see all the hands, but clearly wasn't always so at the table).

The other five E/Ws took their life in their hands and pushed on to 5♣. This was a real gamble! Of the three pairs who were left to play there, one was left undoubled and got an excellent score for losing 200 points by going two down. The other two (including, sadly, ourselves) were doubled and got an equally bad score for losing 500 points. And on the remaining two tables? Well, one got a top for bidding on to 5♠, doubled and making. The other got a bottom for bidding on to 5♠ and going one down.

So ... who was right? We think it depends how exciting you like your bridge to be. If your aim is to play steadily and avoid bottoms then, at this vulnerability, passing 4♠ is clearly the safest option. However, if you're the kind of person who always heads for the rollercoaster at the fairground, then by all means bid on, cross all your fingers and toes, and don't complain if it all goes pear-shaped!

On Board 15 the fits weren't so extreme. E/W had a fairly ordinary 8-card fit in spades missing only the K, whilst North had what's called a "self-supporting" diamond suit and a five-loser hand. Although the analysis says that E/W can make 4♠, no one got to game in the bidding and only one pair managed to make 10 tricks playing in spades, as the hand is really quite difficult to play.

Dir: South
 Vul: N/S

♠ K
 ♥ A J 7 5
 ♦ A K Q J 9 8
 ♣ 5 2

Optimum
 EW 4S:
 -420

♠ Q J 3
 ♥ 8
 ♦ 10 7 5 4
 ♣ A K 9 7 3

| | | |
|---|-------|---|
| W | NORTH | E |
| S | 15 | T |
| T | SOUTH | T |

♠ A 10 9 8 4
 ♥ K 10 9 3
 ♦ 6 3
 ♣ Q J

| | | |
|----|----|----|
| 18 | 10 | 10 |
| 2 | | |

♠ 7 6 5 2
 ♥ Q 6 4 2
 ♦ 2
 ♣ 10 8 6 4

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

At this vulnerability, if North bids 3♦, it has to be right for E/W to push on to 3♠. If you think N/S can make nine tricks, that would give them +110, so in theory, as long as you aren't doubled, you can afford to go two down for only -100 (although in the event, those who made only 7 tricks in spades came near the bottom of the traveller).

Is it then right for North, looking at an almost certain 7 tricks in his or her own hand, to go on to 4♦? If partner hasn't done anything but pass, it seems to us that, this time, the risk is too great. Going two down will cost you -200, which is almost always a bad score at pairs; plus, you may be pushing E/W into a making spade game that they wouldn't otherwise have found.

Dir: West
 Vul: E/W

♠ J 9 6
 ♥ A J 7 5
 ♦ - -
 ♣ K 10 9 8 7 2

Optimum
 NS 7S:
 +1510

♠ 7 4
 ♥ 9
 ♦ A J 9 5 4 3 2
 ♣ Q 6 3

| | | |
|---|-------|---|
| W | NORTH | E |
| S | 16 | T |
| T | SOUTH | T |

♠ 10 2
 ♥ K Q 10 4 3
 ♦ K Q 10 8
 ♣ J 5

| | | |
|----|---|----|
| 9 | 7 | 11 |
| 13 | | |

♠ A K Q 8 5 3
 ♥ 8 6 2
 ♦ 7 6
 ♣ A 4

| ♣ | ♦ | ♥ | ♠ | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| N | 6 | - | 2 | 7 |
| S | 6 | - | 2 | 7 |
| E | - | 2 | - | - |
| W | - | 2 | - | - |

Which brings us to Board 16. Here N/S have a 9-card fit in spades with no losers in the suit, while E/W have as many as 11 cards in diamonds, again with no losers in the suit. So N/S have a less powerful trump suit, and only 22 points between them – yet, the analysis says they can make all 13 tricks!

Assuming West starts with a normal 3♦ pre-empt, and North passes, what should partner do? It looks to East as if N/S will be able to play in spades making at least nine tricks, quite possibly game. If the vulnerability had been the other way round, an immediate jump to 5♦ would look like quite a sensible

move; but you don't expect to make more than 8 tricks (seven trumps and a heart), so three down doubled and vulnerable would be a very possible – and unwelcome – outcome. So should you raise to 4♦, hoping to put South off the scent? Again, look at the vulnerability. Even two down doubled has every chance of being a poor score since it loses 500 points, which is more than you would expect N/S to get from making 4♠, even with an overtrick or two: and you may well be pushing N/S into that game when they wouldn't have got there under their own steam.

As it turned out, almost every N/S did get to 4♠, with those left to play there making at least 11 tricks. Four pairs opted for the rollercoaster tickets and played in 5♦: those who were doubled lived to regret it, while those who weren't, were able to give themselves a rather undeserved pat on the back.

And the moral of these three stories? If your opponents make what seems to you to be a vulnerable sacrifice – don't let them get away undoubled!