

8 November

Almost par

Rakesh Kumar

Once upon a time, there used to be par competitions in bridge – the challenge being to reach the optimal outcome for the board. Sometimes this would involve high-level play or defence, sometimes bidding to an unlikely contract, or perhaps doubling and defeating a sacrifice when your side could not make a higher-level contract etc.

With that background, have a look at this hand:

♠ 84
♥ AT9763
♦ KQ74
♣ A

As dealer, not vulnerable against opponents who are vulnerable, you open 1H, of course. Your LHO overcalls 2H, a Michaels cue bid promising 5+ spades and a 5+ minor – your opponents advise that their agreement is that the overcall shows either a weak (6-10 hcp) or a strong (15+ hcp) hand, but not an intermediate hand. Partner raises to 3H and RHO bids 3S. You continue on to 4H but when this goes around to RHO he bids 4S. How will you defend?

On Monday 6 November, one of our new members, Margaret Murray, showed how it should be done. Here is the complete deal – Margaret was East:

BD: 18 ♠AT96 Dlr: E
♥ J8 Vul: NS
♦ J2
♣ KQ986

♠ J5 ♠ 84
♥ KQ52 ♥ AT9763
♦ T9 ♦ KQ74
♣ J7532 ♣ A

♠ KQ732
♥ 4
♦ A8653
♣ T4

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
T

N	2	2	3	11	
S	2	2	3	7	13
E		4		9	
W		4			

Margaret led ♣A and switched to a *low* heart, underleading her ace to put partner in. Brenda Dayman figured out what was going on and returned a club for Margaret to ruff. As there was still a diamond trick to lose, 4S went one down.

This was almost the par result – the only thing missing was that East-West didn't double 4S so North-South escaped for -100 instead of -200. At 5 tables, East-West were allowed to play in 4H for +420, while at one other table, the excellent defence that Margaret found wasn't reproduced, so 4S was made and North-South therefore scored +620.



12 November

Five-card weak twos?

Rakesh Kumar

Vulnerable against opponents who are not vulnerable, you hold:

♠K543
♥QJ62
♦A32
♣K9

LHO is the dealer and passes, as do partner and RHO. Depending on your methods, you open either 1C or 1D and LHO overcalls 1S. Partner doubles, promising 4+ hearts (if 5 or more then less than 10 hcp) and RHO raises to 2S. With at least 5 spades on your left and 3 on your right, you now know that partner must have at most a singleton spade and are therefore happy to raise to 3H, which buys the contract.

Now suppose the auction had begun with LHO bidding 2S, followed by two passes to you. What would you do? I'd be surprised if you did anything other than pass. That's what happened at our table, when East opened 2S on this deal from Saturday 11 November:

BD: 2	♠K543	Dlr: E		
	♥QJ62	Vul: NS		
	♦A32			
	♣K9			
♠QT6		♠AJ982		
♥K7		♥53		
♦JT95		♦KQ74		
♣A764		♣83		
♠7				
♥AT984				
♦86				
♣QJT52				
♣	♦	♥	♠	N
T				
N	1	3		13
S	1	3		10 10
E	3	4 1		7
W	3	4 1		

What this illustrates is the pre-emptive value of a weak two-bid with a 5-card suit, an approach that is now very popular around the world. Weak hands with a 5-card

major suit are much more common than those with a 6-card suit, so this increases the frequency of pre-emption and if the opening is 2S, allows your side to do a much better job of annoying the opposition. On this occasion, it turns out you're not just being a nuisance – while North-South can easily make 3H, you manage 10 tricks in spades because of the favourable lie of the cards.

There are a couple of different ways of playing 5-card weak twos. In Australia, the most common is to combine them with a multi-2D opening, which is then used for all the 6-card weak two-bids, so that openings of 2H/S explicitly show a 5-card suit with another 4+ suit. Some folks require 5/5 shape to open a 5-card weak two in a major, but that largely defeats the purpose – the 5/4 hands are much more common and pre-emption is all about frequency. It does make sense, however, to avoid opening a 5-card weak two with 5431 shape and 3 cards in the other major in first or second seat, because partner may be the one who has strength and a good holding in the other major suit.

What about if you have a better use for a 2D opening in your system? Can you still play 5-card weak two-bids? Yes, certainly – it's possible to play two-way weak twos, where a 2H/S opening shows either a 6-card suit or a 5-card suit with 4+ in a minor suit. With a strong hand, partner can resolve this by inquiring with 2NT, then opener rebids the minor suit with 5/4+ or the major suit with 6 cards (you can even play that a rebid of the major opened shows 6 cards and a minimum, while a rebid of the other major promises a maximum – just be careful of the sequence 2H-2NT-3S).

Many who don't play 5-card weak two-bids will open a weak two with 5 cards in third seat anyway, but you might want to consider the possibility of amending your methods to include 5/4+ hands in first or second seat. On the deal above, if East-West were not playing 5-card weak twos but North-South were, East would pass, South would open 2H (which should promise 5/5 at adverse vulnerability) and this would be passed out!



20 November
Pre-empting in third seat
Rakesh Kumar

There are many guidelines about how to assess your hand (in relation to suit length, suit quality, vulnerability) when deciding whether (or how high) to pre-empt in first or second seat. What's not often discussed is that in third seat (i.e. after two passes) most of those guidelines don't apply. A few weeks ago, at a pre-session presentation at which Chris Bayliss and I were discussing tactics when playing in IMPs events, I recommended that in third seat, when not vulnerable against vulnerable opponents, one should make a pre-emptive bid of 3D holding only:

♠J3
♥42
♦Q97643
♣T73

That of course is an ultra-weak hand, but you know the opponents have lots of heavy artillery, so you had better fire your popgun now.

The converse of that approach is also relevant. Consider this hand from Monday 20 November, with both sides vulnerable:

♠AT865
♥T3
♦AQT6
♣T7

If, after two passes, your RHO opens 1H, you will happily overcall 1S, won't you?

Now consider what you might do if your RHO opens 4H instead! I think it's very, very likely that you will pass. And that's why this deal generated such varying results:

BD: 13	♠7	Dlr: N
	♥98	Vul: ALL
	♦K7542	
	♣QJ532	
♠AT865		♠KJ942
♥T3		♥QJ
♦AQT6		♦J983
♣T7		♣K6
	♠Q3	
	♥AK76542	
	♦	
	♣A984	

♠	♦	♥	♣	N
				T
N	6	1	5	1
S	6	1	5	1
E		2		13
W		1		

When South opened 1H, East-West competed in spades and usually ended up sacrificing in 4S for -100 (the table of makeable contracts says this should be more than one down, but that will only come to pass if North makes the double-dummy lead of a diamond and South then avoids cashing ♣A).

However, if South opened 4H, that was that. Declarer easily makes 12 tricks on anything other than a trump lead.

But wait, you might say, that's not a pre-emptive hand, that is a good opening hand with only 5 losers! Quite so. But do you want to play in any denomination other than hearts? Of course not! Do you think you can make game opposite many (most?) hands that would pass in first seat? Yes, very probably. Do you think you can make a slam? Almost certainly not, partner has passed. So why not just bid what you think you can make? That shuts the opponents out and earns lots of matchpoints ...

Contract	Result	Score	Frequency
5♥ by NS	+1	680	1
4♥ by NS	+2	680	1
1♥ by NS	+5	230	1
3♠ by EW	-1	100	1
4♠ by EW	-1	100	3
3♠ by EW	=	-140	1

Finally, it's worth noting that none of what has been written above would be at all relevant if East-West were playing 5-card weak twos as recommended just a few days ago. In second seat, with a poor 11 hcp hand including the tight ♥QJ, East could quite justifiably open 2S. Now even if South jumped to 4H, West would save in 4S and unless North-South somehow bid on to 5H, East-West would have won the bidding battle.



28 November
Five over five?
Rakesh Kumar

Have you heard the saying "the five-level belongs to the opponents"? Like most bridge aphorisms, it is true at least some of the time, but you can't be sure whether this rule-of-thumb is relevant at the point where you're looking for guidance on a tricky deal.

If your side clearly has the majority of high card points and a good fit, the decision about whether to bid e.g. 5H over 4S or 5-of-a-major over 5C/5D firstly depends on having "sharp" values i.e. aces and kings; and secondly on whether one of you has undisclosed distributional values. In any case, that decision should usually be made by the hand with the extra distribution e.g. a void in the opponents' suit.

However, when your side is the one pre-empting, if you have succeeded in pushing the opponents to the five-level it is hardly ever a good idea to bid five-over five e.g. 5S over 5H or 5-of-a-major over 5-of-a-minor. The reason is that you might now push the other side into a slam contract they would not otherwise have reached – and they might well make it!

Surprisingly, two examples of this turned up at SHBC within a week. First was this one, from the evening of Wednesday 22 November, round 1 of the Bong Bong Cup:

BD: 27	♠J754	Dlr: S
	♥A2	Vul: Nil
	♦T983	
	♣A72	
♠K3	♠AQ9862	
♥KQJ9864	♥T753	
♦4	♦52	
♣T84	♣3	
♠T		
♥		
♦AKQJ76		
♣KQJ965		
		N
		T
N	6 6	1 9
S	6 6	1 9 6
E	4 2	16
W	4 2	

South decided that the only way to show her amazing 2-loser hand was to open a strong 2C. West did his best to jam the auction with 4H and after two passes, South

bid 5D. When this was passed around to East, though, she backed in with 5H. Now looking at two aces and 4-card support, North in the pass-out seat decided it was time to raise to 6D. The unsuspecting West led ♥K. Declarer discarded her losing spade on the ace and shortly thereafter claimed 13 tricks!!

Then on the following Monday 27 November, along came this deal:

BD: 14 ♠92	Dlr: E
♥T92	Vul: Nil
♦JT86	
♣AKJ6	
♠KQ63	♠AJT8754
♥J8765	♥43
♦K9	♦43
♣Q2	♣93
♠	
♥AKQ	
♦AQ752	
♣T8754	
♠ ♦ ♥ ♣ N	
T	
N 6 6 1	9
S 6 6 1	11 5
E 2	15
W 2	

East opened proceedings with an aggressive pre-empt of 3S. South very sensibly bid 4NT, promising a game-forcing hand with both minors and denying 4+ hearts. West passed and North chose 5D, figuring that it made sense to play in what was certainly partner's stronger suit, while concealing his club holding. However, after two passes, West now decided to bid 5S. Ever the optimist, North continued to 6D.

East led ♠A and declarer ruffed in dummy, crossed to ♣A and ran ♦10, losing to the king. West returned her remaining diamond, East following. Now declarer had to pick up the clubs without losing to the queen. In the hope of learning something, he played off the top hearts and noted that East showed out on the third round. That yielded an inferential count of the West hand: assuming 4 spades for the raise to the 5-level, she had shown 5 hearts and 2 diamonds, so ought to hold exactly 2 clubs. Therefore, when the next club was led off the table, North was going to rise with ♣K and drop the offside queen if West followed with a low card, but as it turned out, this wasn't necessary ...



19 December

Hamman's Law revisited

Rakesh Kumar

Bob Hamman is an American professional bridge player, often described as one of the greatest players of all time. One of his most popular contributions to bridge is sometimes referred to as Hamman's Rule or Hamman's Law: "if you have a choice of reasonable bids and one of them is 3NT, then bid it".

I wrote about Hamman's Law back in February this year. It was certainly applicable on 3 tricky-to-bid deals that came up on Saturday 16 December. This was the first:

BD: 1	♠AT53	Dlr: N
	♥9853	Vul: None
	♦	
	♣AKQ92	
♠J6		♠9872
♥QJ6		♥AKT42
♦KT843		♦6
♣T74		♣J86
♠KQ4		
♥7		
♦AQJ9752		
♣53		
♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
T		
N 5 4 1 4 2	13	
S 5 4 1 4 2 7 8		
E 12		
W		

After 1C by North, if East passes South will respond 1D. North will now rebid 1H and South will presumably jump to 3D. What should North do? If s/he applies Hamman's Law, the answer is to bid 3NT.

East isn't going to feel like giving declarer a gift with a heart lead after the above auction, so will probably lead a spade, which gives declarer 4 spade tricks. When clubs fortunately break 3-3, declarer has 5 tricks from that suit plus the diamond ace i.e. an easy 10-trick game. However, only 4 of 9 were in this contract.

Note that if East overcalls 1H, North-South are likely to finish in a fragile 4S contract in a 4-3 fit, or in an even more fragile 5C contract.

The next exhibit in support of Hamman's Law was the deal shown overleaf:

BD: 15	♠A	Dlr: S
	♥AT7432	Vul: NS
	♦T4	
	♣A972	
♠QT975		♠J43
♥K86		♥QJ95
♦AJ		♦97532
♣854		♣T
	♠K862	
	♥	
	♦KQ86	
	♣KQJ63	
♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
		T
N	6 2 2 1 3	12
S	6 2 2 2 3	10 4
E		14
W		

South will probably open 1C, intending to rebid spades over partner's likely 1H response. However, it might also be reasonable for South to start with 1D, planning to rebid clubs if partner responds 1NT – South must not open 1C and rebid diamonds, because that would be a reverse, showing a hand with 16+ hcp.

Let's say the auction starts with 1C-1H-1S. What should North do now?

It's hard to tell whether partner has some sort of useful heart support e.g. a doubleton king would make 4H a sensible contract. What is clear is that North wants to be in game, so a fourth suit forcing bid of 2D is best. This establishes a game force and enables South to describe her hand further e.g. by showing delayed heart support or extra length in clubs.

What happens then is a surprise for North: South raises the fourth suit by bidding 3D. Now it's clear that South's shape must be 4=0=4=5 because with 5 diamonds and 4 clubs or a 4=1=4=4 hand she would have bid 1D in the first place. So perhaps the best thing to do is to bid 5C? However, making 11 tricks is always hard work so it is once again time to apply Hamman's Law and bid 3NT. This contract is safe, although interestingly it turns out that North-South can make a slam in clubs! No one reached this – or even game in clubs – but 3 of 9 were successful in 3NT.

Sometimes even when Hamman's Law seems not to be relevant, it still works. On the third deal, shown overleaf, after South's 2NT opening showing 20-21 hcp North has a bit of a problem – given his poor holdings in the majors, if South doesn't have both well stopped, 3NT will be in trouble. Fortunately, partner and I had a bid to describe the North hand: a 3S response showed either at least 5-4 in the minors with

a major suit singleton and game interest only, or a similar hand with slam interest. Partner could bid 3NT with strong major suits, or else choose a minor suit.

BD: 18	♠J83	Dlr: E
	♥K	Vul: NS
	♦QJ862	
	♣J932	
♠97642		♠QT5
♥AT97		♥Q8652
♦T9		♦53
♣75		♣KT4
	♠AK	
	♥J43	
	♦AK74	
	♣AQ86	
		N
		T
N	6 6 1 1 5	8
S	6 6 1 1 5 4	7
E		21
W		

So I bid 3S and partner bid 4C – she had a choice. We ended up playing in the very safe contract of 5C – in fact once again 6C can make, as can 6D – but with almost everyone else simply bidding 3NT, that was a lousy score at matchpoints. On the lie of the cards, South's ♥J is always a stopper and 3NT makes 10 or 11 tricks with considerable ease. Of course if the heart holdings had been swapped between the two hands, 3NT would go down in double quick time, but it wasn't so. Even when Hamman's Law is wrong, it's right!



9 January
Gruesome misfit
Rakesh Kumar

Happy New Year! To kick off 2024, the dealing software decided to have some fun at our expense. In the afternoon on Saturday 6 January, there were more misfit hands than I've seen in a single session in quite a long time. On this one, the usual auction was 1S-2H-2S-3C-3NT:

♠AQJ972
♥T3
♦AQT
♣JT

That was the end of the story at every other table except ours, where partner chose to rebid 4C. What does that tell you and what should you do now?

One thing is certain, partner has at least 5-5 in hearts and clubs. Another that's fairly certain is that partner has a void somewhere, probably in spades, and thinks that with the gruesome misfit, 3NT won't fare too well. As it seems possible that partner has a really good heart suit, or conceivably has 6-5 shape, the least bad option is now 4H. So that's what you should bid, undoubtedly with a sigh of disappointment.

If you do, though, it could work out surprisingly well. Whereas 3NT has no hope at all, partner can indeed make 4H, because this was the full deal:

BD: 9 ♠63 **Dlr: N**
 ♥AKJ7 **Vul: EW**
 ♦854
 ♣Q862

♠ ♠AQJ972
♥Q98542 ♥T3
♦K2 ♦AQT
♣AK753 ♣JT
 ♠KT854
 ♥6
 ♦J9763
 ♣94

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
 T

N	10	
S	12	14
E	3 1 3 2 2	4
W	3 1 4 2 2	

The play is not trivial, however. Assuming North leads the unbid suit, i.e. diamonds, you win in hand and need to cash ♣AK, then ruff a club high with ♥10. When this survives, you play ♠A, discarding a club, followed by a spade ruff which is necessary to extract North's last spade.

Then it's back to dummy with a diamond to discard your last club on the third diamond winner. Only now can you lead the remaining heart from dummy, inserting ♥8 and endplaying North for 10 tricks ...

In practice, everyone went down in whatever contract was played!



22 January

Glass half full

Rakesh Kumar

Last week, at the Summer Festival of Bridge in Canberra, I was playing in IMPs events (Swiss Pairs and Teams) in which the goal is always to bid to (and hopefully make) every available thin game. I was still thinking in those terms by the time I got back to our matchpoints duplicate session at SHBC on Monday 22 January, which might have had something to do with what happened on the board featured in this article.

That said, vulnerable against opponents who are not vulnerable, what would you be thinking about with this hand when LHO deals and opens a weak 2H (typically a 6-card suit), partner overcalls 3D and RHO passes?

♠KJ3
♥T985
♦KT3
♣A74

This isn't a particularly strong hand, but it does have useful support for diamonds, plus an outside ace and a king that may be well placed given that LHO has opened a weak two. So partner's 3D contract ought to have an excellent chance of making.

But might there be a better contract available? What is partner likely to hold for a 3D overcall? Presumably some 10-15 hcp and either a very good 5-card suit or a reasonably good 6-card suit. You have ♦K10 so the latter is much more likely. That could be a useful source of tricks in a 3NT contract. You have obvious stoppers in both of the black suits ...

Which raises the question of whether you really have a heart stopper for 3NT. That holding of ♥10985 might work, especially if partner turns out to have even one minor honour in hearts. Will you dare to try 3NT?

I guess that depends on whether your glass is half empty or half full. In my post-Canberra continuing state of enthusiasm for bidding to any potentially makeable game, my glass was overflowing so I didn't hesitate. As you can see from the full deal below, the contract proved to be surprisingly easy to make on the lead of a low heart. Dummy's heart king dropped West's singleton queen, declarer's diamond king dropped another singleton queen (!) and the spade ace could then be knocked out, so 10 tricks were readily available (declarer loses just the spade ace and two heart tricks). In theory declarer could be held to 9 tricks on the lead of ♣9, but who was going to find that?

BD: 2 ♠KJ3 **Dlr: E**
 ♥T985 **Vul: NS**
 ♦KT3
 ♣A74

♠T98652 ♠A4
♥Q ♥AJ6432
♦Q ♦972
♣KQ853 ♣92

 ♠Q7
 ♥K7
 ♦AJ8654
 ♣JT6

♣	♦	♥	♠	N
				T
N	3	1	3	11
S	3	1	4	9
E	1		3	11
W	1		3	

If this story has any moral at all, it is that an optimistic view of the outcome of the auction doesn't do any harm!



30 January
Long Suits = Tricks
Rakesh Kumar

Long suits are worth tricks – not only as trumps but also for additional tricks outside the trump suit, or as a source of tricks in notrumps. Hands with a long suit therefore need to be upgraded, because they will usually be worth more than their high card strength might suggest.

This idea was very well illustrated in two deals that turned up on Monday 29 January. What would you do with this hand after partner passes and your RHO opens 1H?

♠Q3
♥KQ
♦AKQ982
♣AQ8

You have a strong hand with an excellent diamond suit. Yes, of course, you can bid and rebid diamonds, with a very high likelihood of being able to make 9 tricks in diamonds if partner has anything at all. However, you have a sure stopper in hearts and every chance of making the same 9 tricks in notrumps. Why not just bid 3NT?

If you do, it turns out that partner has more than her fair share of the remaining points and the contract is easy:

BD: 10 ♠T8764 Dlr: E
 ♥92 Vul: ALL
 ♦JT7
 ♣T42

♠Q3 ♠AJ95
♥KQ ♥764
♦AKQ982 ♦653
♣AQ8 ♣J96

 ♠K2
 ♥AJT853
 ♦4
 ♣K753

 ♣ ♦ ♥ ♣ N
 T

N	1					
S	22	6				
E	3	5	1	3	5	11
W	2	4	3	5		

After the heart lead, you have one heart trick, 6 diamond tricks, a spade trick and 2 club tricks on the marked finesse of ♣K. In fact on the run of the diamonds, South will either have to discard two low clubs or throw all her hearts, in which case she can be endplayed by cashing ♠A and exiting a spade to the king, so 11 tricks can always be made.

The deal below also illustrated the power of the long suit. After West opens 1NT (15-17 hcp) what should East do? Transfer to hearts, of course, but then?

BD: 20	♠QT98	Dlr: W
	♥K8	Vul: ALL
	♦AK85	
	♣965	
♠AK3	♠J4	
♥QT4	♥AJ9763	
♦QJ63	♦97	
♣KJ2	♣T83	
	♠7652	
	♥52	
	♦T42	
	♣AQ74	
♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N T		
N		12
S	16	6
E 1 2 4 1 3		6
W 1 2 4 1 3		

It's a bit of a gamble, of course, but the best bet is to upgrade the hand and raise to 4H. With both ♥K and the top club honours favourably placed, this also works out well. So next time you're looking at a hand with a long suit and conditions appear promising – bid up!

