

2 November

Weak 5/5 hands

Rakesh Kumar

On Monday 1 November, this deal turned up:

BD: 7	♠KT652	Dlr: S
	♥AJ4	Vul: ALL
	♦AQ2	
	♣95	
♠AJ4		♠873
♥K2		♥T53
♦J53		♦96
♣KJT73		♣A8642
	♠Q9	
	♥Q9876	
	♦KT874	
	♣Q	
	♣♦♥♠	N
		T
N	- 5 5 4 1	14
S	- 5 5 4 1	13 4
E	1 - - - -	9
W	1 - - - -	

At our virtual table, Chris Bayliss passed as South and I opened 1C as West. Rather than overcalling 1S, Steve Brabyn chose to double and of course Chris now responded 1H. When Steve rebid 1S, denying 4 hearts but showing extra spade length and some extra high card strength, Chris rebid 2D, now implying a 5-card heart suit. The auction continued 2H-3H-4H and thus game was reached. No one else got there, so we were rewarded with a zero for the board, as Chris duly made the available 11 tricks.

It took a bit of delicate negotiation by the North-South partnership to reach game on this board, but is there an easier way? Yes indeed ... 5-card weak 2-bids are now becoming widespread, because they are more frequent and allow for more effective obstructive bidding. Although often played as showing 5 of the major suit and 4+ of a minor suit, the partnership can agree that they be semi-constructive by requiring them to be at least 5/5 in the two suits.

That reduces the frequency with which one can interfere with the opponents' auction, but allows taking full advantage of the extra playing strength of a weak 5/5 hand, provided there is a fit with partner. On the above board, South's hand would be ideal for a weak 2H opening of this type. North might simply raise a 2H opening directly to 4H, or perhaps go via 2NT to discover the double fit and then bid 4H with greater confidence.

If you're wondering what then happens to 6-card weak 2-bids, there are a couple of possible solutions. One is to play a multi-2D that includes a 6-card weak 2-bid in either major or a strong balanced hand, say 22-23 hcp if you want 2C followed by 2NT to be virtually game-in-hand. Another is to play two-way weak 2 bids. How do they work? As below, with opener's rebids in plain text and responder's bids *in italics*:

2H/S openings: 6+ M, 6-10 hcp OR 5 M/5+ minor, 6-10 hcp.

2NT	=	<i>inquiry, 13+ hcp without 3+ support but 4+ cards in both minors, otherwise 15+ hcp</i>
3C	=	5-card major, 5+ clubs (<i>then 3 of opener's major is invitational</i>)
3D	=	5-card major, 5+ diamonds (<i>then 3 of opener's major is invitational</i>)
3H/S rebid	=	6-card major, minimum
3 other major	=	6-card major, maximum
Raise to 3H/S	=	<i>4+ support, pre-emptive</i>

Note that if you want to try this, be careful about responding 2NT to 2H unless you can tolerate opener rebidding 3S to show a maximum 6-card weak 2-bid!



9 November

Why not 3NT?

Rakesh Kumar

Successfully bidding and making a thin 3NT contract is usually good news at any form of scoring. It pays, therefore, to be on the lookout for the opportunity to bid 3NT when conditions seem favourable.

There were a couple of deals on Monday 8 November that illustrated the point. The first was board 1. At every table, the auction started innocuously enough: North passed and East opened 1H. Thereafter, things got interesting.

BD: 1 ♠643 ♥KJ ♦987 ♣AT963 ♠K52 ♥542 ♦T53 ♣8742 ♠AJ7 ♥Q98 ♦AKQJ42 ♣5	Dlr: N Vul: Nil ♠QT98 ♥AT763 ♦6 ♣KQJ
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♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N				
	T				
N	2	4	-	2	3
S	2	4	-	2	4
E	-	-	2	-	-
W	-	-	2	-	-
					8
					3
					12
					17

At a few tables, South doubled. This is not unreasonable as South has 17 hcp and can rebid 2D to show strength over the likely 2C response. However, with a single-suited hand including length in opener's suit, it makes more sense for South to first overcall 2D. With such a strong suit and additional high card strength, it will always be possible to rebid diamonds if necessary. A 2D overcall was indeed the more common action, which was of course followed by two passes.

Now what? East has support for anything other than diamonds so the hand is perfect for a re-opening double, asking partner to bid – trying to buy the part-score contract is a very good idea at this vulnerability. However, this didn't happen very often.

If East does double, as noted above South has an automatic 3D rebid, which will silence West.

The spotlight is now on North. What has partner shown? Whether via an initial double and a bid of 2D over a 2C response, or via a 3D rebid after East's re-opening double, South must have a good diamond suit, probably 6+ cards long. South must surely also have values worth at least another trick, probably in the spade suit. If that's 7 tricks, the North hand is worth 2 tricks on a heart lead, so why not 3NT?

In fact 3NT is absolutely cold even on a spade lead. However, on the day, 10 out of 10 North-South pairs stopped in a diamond part-score – usually making 10 tricks but sometimes 11 on less-than-optimal defence.

Both this deal and board 20 from the same event demonstrate the value of a long, strong minor suit in a no-trump contract, a point that I have made more than once before in these columns.



17 November

Inference and Re-evaluation

Rakesh Kumar

When partner opens 1C, you may have little idea whether this is merely a 3-card suit (if you play some form of Standard + better minor) or even a 2-card suit (if your 1D opening guarantees 4 cards). That can be a problem, but sometimes you can work out whether partner actually holds a genuine club suit.

Consider this hand:

♠K952
♥A962
♦5
♣T753

The auction commences with 1C by partner as dealer. Your RHO overcalls 1D and of course, with 4 cards in both of the majors, you make a negative double. Your LHO raises to 2D and partner passes. So does RHO. What do you know about the hands around the table at this point?

Holding a 4-card major, partner would surely have bid that suit. So partner has no more than 3-3 in the majors. Diamonds have been bid and raised – it's conceivable that partner has 4 cards in this suit, with 5 on your right and 3 on your left, but it is much more likely that the opponents have a 9-card fit and partner has only 3 diamonds. After all, with 4-4 in the minors partner would have opened 1D.

All of that indicates that partner *has* to have at least 4 clubs (in the worst case, in a 3=3=3=4 hand) and could easily have a 5-card (or even longer) suit. However, partner obviously doesn't have any reserve of high card strength, as s/he passed 2D.

Once you've worked that out, what should you do? Well, you have 4-card support for partner's suit and a couple of top honours that are hopefully worth a trick each. That's good.

More importantly, you have shortage in diamonds, which should be worth another couple of tricks via ruffs. That's even better! All you need now is some courage – it's time to bid 3C.

The deal below turned up on the occasion of our return to face-to-face bridge on Monday 15 November:

BD: 5	♠T43 ♥KT5 ♦J87 ♣AKJ2	Dir: N	Vul: NS
♠J86 ♥Q83 ♦AKT4 ♣984	♠AQ7 ♥J74 ♦Q9632 ♣Q6 ♠K952 ♥A962 ♦5 ♣T753		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N T	
N	3 - 2 2 1		12
S	3 - 2 2 1	10	11
E	- 1 - - -		7
W	- 1 - - -		

North did indeed have the "worst case" 3=3=3=4 hand, but 3C was still unbeatable, because the ♣Q came down doubleton when declarer returned to hand to ruff diamonds.

As it turned out, only 1 table played in 3C, but unsurprisingly this yielded a fine score for that North-South pair. At 2 other tables, East-West reached 3D, which was still an above average score for North-South as the contract goes at least one down.

Competing courageously based on inference and re-evaluation of your hand can be a very good idea ... no guarantees of success on any given deal, of course, but in the long run you are highly likely to gain more than you lose.



22 November

Highly distributional medium-strength hands

Rakesh Kumar

Every now and again, the gremlin in the bridge dealing computer produces a hand that doesn't fit any formula for an opening bid. Consider this:

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♠ AQT7432
♥ QT93
♦ Q
♣ T
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On the face of it, the hand isn't really a 1-level opening bid. It has more-or-less enough high card points, but then again, the ♦ Q may be worthless. However, it does have both majors, only 5 losers, and a suit that you can rebid until you're blue in the face. So yes, you certainly could open it 1S. If partner has a good hand with hearts, you might do better than in spades if partner has no support.

The counterpoint to that is that if a weak hand always plays better in its long suit, you might as well bid what you hope you can make – and bid it right now. What do you hope you can make? Well, if partner has some useful high card points, with this hand you want to be in 4S. Yes, you are breaking all sorts of "rules" by pre-empting with a side 4-card major, but just look at that spade suit ...

To complicate matters, though, you are vulnerable and the opponents are not. So as the dealer, will you still open 4S? In my opinion, you should. There's a good reason for that, see further below. This was the full deal, from Monday 22 November:

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BD: 21 ♠ AQT7432 Dlr: N
♥ QT93 Vul: N-S
♦ Q
♣ T

♠ KJ ♠ 96
♥ A42 ♥ J5
♦ AK862 ♦ T97543
♣ A85 ♣ J97

♠ 85
♥ K876
♦ J
♣ KQ6432

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
T
N 2 - 4 4 - 10
S 2 - 4 4 - 19 2
E - 3 - - - 9
W - 3 - - 2
```

It's a remarkable board. No matter what East leads, West is immediately endplayed! There is nothing West can do to prevent access to dummy, allowing declarer to take the spade finesse and claim 10 tricks. However, only 2 North-South pairs played in 4S – both were doubled and both made their contract for +790.

As it happens, North-South can also make 4H on this deal. Regardless, though, opening 4S is a much better idea than opening 1S. Why? Consider what would happen if North decided to treat her/his hand as a 1S opener instead. South would probably bid 1NT (or maybe an under-strength 2C) and West would overcall 2D. If North-South did now reach 4S, East-West would have a perfectly reasonable sacrifice in 5D. Even doubled – most unlikely! – this will make 9 tricks, so the worst outcome for East-West would be -300, which would still be a lot better than -620 for North-South making 4S. In fact 2 of the 3 pairs that played in diamonds made 10 tricks, for a good score.

So when you know where you want to go, take the shortest route.



30 November

Balancing one notrump

Rakesh Kumar

Your left-hand opponent opens 1-of-a-suit and the next two players pass. If you have nothing much, the deal probably belongs to the opponents and you too will pass. But what if you are in the "pass out" set and do have values? Then it depends on several factors: how much high card strength you have, whether you have a suit of 5+ cards or, if not, whether you have a stopper in the opponent's suit.

With modest values, say (8)9-13 hcp, you can bid any reasonable suit – and you might even make a jump bid if you have a good 6+ major suit and 11-13 hcp. With anything more, it makes sense to double first, then rebid your own suit to show a good hand i.e. better than just minimum values for a takeout double.

Without a good suit – and in particular without a major suit – you might want to bid 1NT. It's important to remember that a "balancing" 1NT bid in the pass out seat does not show a strong hand: partner clearly has some values, so you should bid 1NT with 11-14 hcp and a stopper. If you really do have a hand similar to a strong notrump opening, in the balancing seat you need to double first and then bid 1NT i.e. a similar approach to that with a good suit-oriented hand.

A deal illustrating the balancing 1NT came up on Monday 29 November:

Contract	Result	Score	Frequency
2NT by NS	=	120	1
1NT by NS	+1	120	1
2♠ by NS	=	110	1
1♥ by EW	-1	100	1
1♥ by EW	=	-80	1
3NT by NS	-1	-100	1
2♣ by NS	-1	-100	1
3♠ by NS	-1	-100	1

It's a good idea to make sure that you and your partner have the same understandings about what you will do in the balancing position.



6 December

Reverses with both minor suits

Rakesh Kumar

The bid referred to as a "reverse" by opener is often misunderstood. It is a rebid by opener of a higher-ranking suit, which forces partner to take a preference to the first bid suit at the 3-level. For example, opener bids 1C, responder bids 1S, opener rebids 2H. This sequence guarantees 5+ cards in clubs and 4+ cards in hearts. Because a minimum responder with no fit for hearts may wish to sign off in clubs, but is forced to do so by bidding 3C, opener's reverse bid also guarantees extra strength: typically this means 16+ hcp.

In fact there are just 4 reversing sequences *viz.* 1m-1S-2H (2 sequences) and 1C-1M-2D (2 more sequences). A reverse bid always guarantees an unbalanced hand but doesn't necessarily show a longer first suit if the opening bid was 1D: after 1D-1S a rebid of 2H may be made on a hand with 16+ hcp and exactly 1-4-4-4 shape.

Responder's continuations after opener's reverse depend on your agreements: there are both natural and conventional methods available.

On Monday 6 December there were 2 boards on which hands suitable for a reverse turned up. Both involved the minor suits. This was the first of them:

BD: 2 ♠KT98732 Dlr: E ♥AQT5 Vul: N-S ♦7 ♣6 ♠AQ65 ♠J ♥K843 ♥2 ♦Q3 ♦AKJT9 ♣543 ♣AKJT97 ♠4 ♥J976 ♦86542 ♣Q82 <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; gap: 10px;"> ♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; gap: 10px;"> N T </div>	
N - - 1 1 - 9	
S - - 1 1 - 11 17	
E 5 3 - - 2 3	
W 5 3 - - 3	

After East opens a club and West responds 1H, North will of course overcall 1S (more than that makes no sense at adverse vulnerability) and now East can rebid 2D. At this point, West knows that East has at least 5 clubs, 4 diamonds and 16+ hcp. A 3NT bid is therefore perfectly reasonable and is fairly safe – unless declarer tries to establish the clubs and then South specifically switches to ♥9.

As it happens, on this board 5C is an even safer contract – it's completely bullet-proof – but 3NT making 10 tricks wins the all the matchpoints. However, some pairs didn't manage to convey the strength of their hand effectively so they languished in 3C, which really shouldn't happen.

The second board was this one:

BD: 16 ♠KQ9763 Dlr: W ♥J2 Vul: E-W ♦82 ♣965 ♠J ♠82 ♥AK8 ♥QT53 ♦AQ94 ♦765 ♣QJT32 ♣AK84 ♠AT54 ♥9764 ♦KJT3 ♣7	
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	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	T
N	-	-	-	2	-	6
S	-	-	-	2	-	17 9
E	5	4	5	-	1	8
W	5	4	5	-	1	

This time West starts with 1C and over North's likely 2S weak jump overcall, East can double to show 4+ hearts and some values. Now West can bid 3D, showing 5+ clubs and 4+ diamonds with 16+ hcp, which makes it easy for East to raise to 5C. However, no one played in this contract! There were some in hearts, which should make at least 10 tricks even if the opponents do not continue spades and declarer shuns the diamond finesse after drawing trumps. However, only one East-West pair played in game – unsurprisingly, that was Eric and Patricia, who made 11 tricks for 100% on the board.



14 December

Positional advantage

Rakesh Kumar

Traditionally, a 1NT overcall of 1-of-a-suit promises 15-18 hcp and a stopper in opener's suit. However, after a 1D opening on your right, would you rather overcall 1NT with the first or the second hand below?

♠KQ7	♠A87
♥QJ6	♥KJ6
♦QJ5	♦K95
♣KJ76	♣KJ76

Obviously the first hand, with no aces and slow values all round, has less trick-taking power than the second hand. For that matter, the second hand would probably be just as good if either of the jacks was replaced by a ten.

But that would then be only 14 hcp, I hear you cry! So what? Well placed kings take one trick just like aces do. It's quite likely that with an opening bid on your right and a hand like the second one above, at least 2 of the 3 kings will take a trick. You can happily upgrade by 1-2 points and not quibble over a jack.

Partner didn't, on this deal from Saturday 11 December, the Christmas Party pairs:

BD: 17 ♠KT642 ♥Q7 ♦T643 ♣J8 ♠Q5 ♥95432 ♦J82 ♣A54 ♠A87 ♥KJ6 ♦K95 ♣KT76	Dlr: N Vul: None ♠J93 ♥AT8 ♦AQ7 ♣Q932
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	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	
					T	
N	1	2	-	2	1	6
S	1	2	-	2	1	7 13
E	-	-	1	-	-	14
W	-	-	-	-	-	

After I passed as North, East opened 1C and South promptly overcalled 1NT. Following a transfer to spades, partner played in 2S. Bridge Solver says this should only make 8 tricks, but on the likely heart lead, the defence is not straightforward: East has to switch to a diamond at trick 2. When that doesn't occur, South can make 9 tricks, whereas when played by North, the usual outcome is 8 tricks. Keeping the strong hand concealed always helps.

Two days later, the same type of hand turned up on the Monday:

BD: 30 ♠JT43 ♥J52 ♦J52 ♣943 ♠8752 ♥A3 ♦AT864 ♣T7 ♠AK9 ♥KT6 ♦973 ♣KJ85	Dlr: E Vul: None ♠Q6 ♥Q9874 ♦KQ ♣AQ62
---	--

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	T
N	-	-	-	-	3	
S	-	-	-	-	8	15
E	1	1	2	1	1	14
W	1	1	2	1	1	

East opened 1H and South borrowed a point to overcall 1NT, again with well-placed kings. This time, all I had for partner was rubbish, but if partner has to play the contract, 6 tricks when the doubleton ♠Q comes down means only -50, which is quite a bit better than the -110 that the opponents score by making 2H. And the 1NT overcall can make the opponents stumble into something going down ...

Yes, rules or agreements about high card point strength are made to be broken, or at least adapted to circumstances.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to everyone!



10 January

Another delicate balancing act

Rakesh Kumar

Happy New Year! Let's hope 2022 shapes up a bit better than the last couple of chaotic years.

Just before Christmas 2019, I wrote a column for our website about what to do when the auction begins 1x-P-P to you. There, I pointed out that passing really ought to be out of the question, because partner obviously has some values. So you have to find a bid, or a double to get partner to bid. Taking action in the pass-out seat in this situation is referred to as balancing.

The same argument applies after the auction goes 1x-P-1y-P-2y-P-P to you. The opponents have subsided at the 2-level in a fit, so if you let them play there, it's almost a given that you won't get a good score at matchpointed pairs. Partner must have some values and probably has them in the other 2 suits, so if you have length in one of those suits you should just bid it, while if you have support for both of them, you should consider making a takeout double.

On Monday 10 January, my partner held:

♠J8
♥T96
♦A873
♣KJT5

With neither side vulnerable, she heard LHO as dealer open 1H. After I passed, her RHO bid 1S, the opener rebid 2S and this was passed around to her.

Mindful of the futility of letting the opponents play in their fit at the 2-level, partner balanced with a double. Yes, she had just 8 working high card points, but surely I ought to be good for something? In any case, even two down undoubled for –100 would be better than if the opponents made +110 in 2S.

In fact her double turned out to be a very good idea indeed, as you can see from the full deal:

BD: 14	♠AQ7	Dlr: E	
	♥Q5	Vul: Nil	
	♦KQ94		
	♣8742		
♠KT65		♠9432	
♥AK8432		♥J7	
♦5		♦JT62	
♣93		♣AQ6	
	♠J8		
	♥T96		
	♦A873		
	♣KJT5		
	♣♦♥♠	N	
		T	
N	2 3 - - 1		13
S	2 3 - - 1	10	8
E	- - 2 1 -		9
W	- - 2 1 -		

As North, I had an opening hand but no sensible bid over West's 1H opening – I did consider making a takeout double myself, but with a minimum hand and lacking the expected 4 cards in the other major, that would have been silly. Instead, I was able to bid 3D in response to partner's double and was surprised to discover that with the clubs lying favourably, it was unbeatable!

Full credit to my partner – the next time you find yourself in this situation, you might want to try doubling as she did.

Incidentally, Bridge Solver indicates that 2S can be defeated, but that requires South to underlead ♦A a couple of times for club leads through declarer. In the real world, that's unlikely to happen. At other tables, the question of finding this defence didn't arise, because East-West played in 2H, which usually made.



25 January

A small reminder ...

Rakesh Kumar

Perhaps the most often-repeated advice about declarer play is that at trick one, you need to form a plan. Key to that is counting your sure winners as well as your potential losers, then looking for possible ways to dispose of some losers. In addition, the opponents' bidding or lack of it should give you some indication about how suits are likely to be breaking and may alert you to difficulties that could arise in the play of the hand.

The board below, from Monday 24 January, was a good example of the importance of counting your tricks. Every East-West pair played in hearts, most in game, but only 2 of 7 made 10 tricks.

Why? South usually led a top club. As declarer, you ruff and then ...

BD: 14	♠Q98	Dlr: E
	♥A74	Vul: Nil
	♦T87	
	♣AJ96	
♠KT32		♠J74
♥QJ3		♥KT9862
♦54		♦AKJ6
♣7543		♣
	♠A65	
	♥5	
	♦Q932	
	♣KQT82	
	♣♦♥♠	N
		T
N	3 2 - - 1	11
S	3 2 - - 1	6 12
E	- - 3 - -	11
W	- - 3 - -	

Did you stop to count tricks? If you did, it would be apparent that there's the ace of hearts to lose, of course, and almost certainly 2 spades as well. However, provided both opponents follow to two rounds of diamonds, your other two diamonds can be ruffed in dummy with ♥Q and ♥J, returning to hand with a club ruffed low.

The important point to realise is that the rest of your hearts are solid ... ♥Q and ♥J are not needed to draw trumps when holding ♥K1098. Then simple arithmetic should tell you that 5 heart tricks, 2 diamond tricks, 2 diamond ruffs and a spade = 10 tricks.

Moreover, if you count your tricks, it ought to be obvious that what you ***don't*** want to do is draw trumps!

The sharp-eyed will, however, have noticed that Bridge Solver indicates only 9 tricks should be made. How come? Well, that outcome is only achieved if South leads ♥5 and North wins the ace to return another heart – that means only one ruff in dummy is possible. No one in the South seat did that ...

