

1 September

The 3NT/4M conundrum

Rakesh Kumar

When playing matchpoint pairs, if your side is heading towards game there's sometimes a potential choice between playing in 4-of-a-major versus playing in 3NT. If the same number of tricks is available, of course 3NT scores better every time. However, the suit contract may allow for an extra trick via a ruff, in which case it's the winner; while 3NT may be able to be defeated if it turns out there is one suit that isn't adequately stopped.

So here you are, looking a strong balanced hand:

♠J95
♥AK64
♦KQJ
♣AJT

Partner is the dealer and passes. You are getting ready to open 1C or whatever it is that you might prefer to open with a flat 19 hcp hand, when your RHO opens 1S. Now what?

There are a few things to consider. Firstly, if RHO has some 12+ hcp and you have 19 hcp, partner doesn't rate to have much and may be absolutely broke. Secondly, there's no reason to assume that partner *will* be absolutely broke. Thirdly, you have no suit worth an overcall but you can't bid any number of notrump with your spade holding. So you really have no choice but to double – while you don't have shortage in the opponent's suit, which is normally a requirement for a takeout double if you have some 11-15 hcp, with your extra strength that isn't as much of a concern.

LHO passes and partner responds 2H. That's good, you have at least a 4-4 fit. Now, however, there are more things to consider. Partner may have bid 2H with zero points – after all, you forced her to bid. But you can surely at least invite game. If you raise to 3H, that shows a good 16+ hcp hand and partner can co-operate in the final decision. Then again, are you sure you want to invite game in hearts?

Look at your hand once more. You have 4333 shape, so there is no chance of gaining a trick by ruffing with one of your small trumps. Your spade holding seems likely to be wasted in a 4H contract. Both of these features suggest that you could be better off in 3NT if partner has, say, a top honour in spades and ♥Q. But how are you going to find out about that?

There is a solution – bid 2S. This obviously shows a strong hand, presumably able to cope with a minimum 3H rebid, and must be asking for a spade stopper. Partner rebids 2NT and now you are happy to raise to 3NT.

The full deal, from Wednesday 30 August, is overleaf:

BD: 3	♠ J95	Dlr: S	
	♥ AK64	Vul: EW	
	♦ KQJ		
	♣ AJT		
♠ KT763		♠ Q4	
♥ 8		♥ J32	
♦ A43		♦ T862	
♣ KQ94		♣ 8763	
	♠ A82		
	♥ QT975		
	♦ 975		
	♣ 52		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
		T	
N	2 4 2 4		19
S	2 4 2 4	12	3
E	1		6
W	1		

As you can see, partner had what you hoped for. Yes, 4H is cold for 10 tricks, but so is 3NT. A score of +430, vs. +420 in hearts, wins all the marbles.

Next time you find yourself in this type of situation, consider the possibility of looking for 3NT via a cue bid that asks for a stopper.



7 September

Leading against 3NT

Rakesh Kumar

When your RHO opens 1NT and the opponents then bid to 3NT, how do you choose your opening lead?

There are obviously some "default" choices e.g. top of any sequence of 3 honours; or, with no information to suggest it would be a bad idea, the fourth highest of a 5-card suit – provided you have a re-entry or two to be able to cash any established long suit tricks.

What if you don't have any such not-much-thought-required lead? Then you should pay attention to how the opponents got to their 3NT contract, as it might be informative. Suppose you hold:

♠Q983
♥A42
♦AT94
♣92

Here are 4 possible auctions for the opponents:

- (1) 1NT by RHO – 2C Stayman by LHO – 2H by RHO – 2NT by LHO – 3NT
- (2) 1NT by RHO – 2C Stayman by LHO – 2D (no major) by RHO – 3NT
- (3) 1NT by RHO – 2H (transfer to spades) by LHO – 2S by RHO – 3NT
- (4) 1NT by RHO – 3NT by LHO.

What would be your lead in each case? Why?

In the first auction, the opponents have had an invitational sequence and probably have just enough to try for 3NT. RHO has hearts but LHO probably does not have spades – if the opponents are playing simple Stayman, with an invitational hand and 4 spades LHO will normally bid 2S over 2H. Before leading, you might wish to ask RHO whether the 2NT bid denied 4 spades but in any case, the lead of ♠3 makes sense. Partner could have ♠A or ♠K or ♠J10 and you might do well.

In the second auction, LHO has one or both major suits and no shortage of high card points. The best lead isn't obvious but perhaps the diamond suit offers chances. If you decide to lead a diamond, depending on your partnership agreements you would either choose ♦10 (if you lead the top of an internal sequence headed by the ten) or ♦4 (if you only lead the top of an internal sequence headed by the jack).

The third auction is interesting. Once again the declaring side appears to have sufficient high card points. LHO presumably has 5 spades and RHO has only two, so your ♠Q might eventually prove to be worth a trick. However, you certainly won't be leading a spade this time, so perhaps the diamond lead is again a good bet.

What about the fourth auction? When responder doesn't go via Stayman but instead jumps straight to 3NT, she/he usually has either a balanced hand with no 4-card major, or strength in one or both minor suits. You can't tell until dummy comes down, but in case it's the latter, the ♠3 is the standout lead.

This deal, from Wednesday 6 September, illustrates the point very well:

BD: 20		♠Q983	Dlr: W
		♥A42	Vul: ALL
		♦AT94	
		♣92	
♠KJT		♠65	
♥KQJ8		♥63	
♦J5		♦KQ76	
♣AJ75		♣KQ864	
		♠A742	
		♥T975	
		♦832	
		♣T3	
		♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N
			T
N			10
S			16 10
E	4 2 3 1 2		4
W	4 2 3 1 2		

At those tables where North led ♦10, declarer made 3NT – all that is required is to win the first trick in hand and knock out ♥A, then at worst declarer has one diamond, two hearts, one spade and five club tricks. Our opponents, however, did the right thing and started with ♠3 to the ace and a small spade back, the finesse of the jack predictably proving unsuccessful. In due course, the defence therefore collected 3 spade tricks and the two red aces, for one down ...



25 September

Trying for slam

Rakesh Kumar

Your partner opens 1NT promising 15-17 hcp and you are looking at this rather good hand:

♠A5
♥Q953
♦87
♣AKQT4

Of course you bid 2C Stayman. Now you hear 2H from partner, so your hand has just improved even further. Will you try for slam?

Say you bid 4NT Roman Keycard Blackwood and hear partner respond 5H, promising 2 keycards but no queen of trumps – the latter hardly being a surprise as you're looking at that card. Now what?

If partner has ♥AK but no top honours in diamonds, you could easily lose two quick tricks in that suit. Then again, your club suit is a source of tricks and offers the potential to discard quite a few losers. If partner has just ♦K you might be able to run for home in 6H. You know that partner has at most 1 hcp in clubs, so surely she must have a top diamond to be able to open 1NT? Well, not necessarily: she might have say ♠KQx-♥AKxx-♦QJxx-♣Jx or something equally doomed ...

How do you decide what to do? You can't find out exactly what you need to know, so the decision is ultimately based on how likely it is that gambling on slam will pay off. This was the deal, from Wednesday 20th September 2023 – which, by the way, was the club's 45th (Sapphire) Anniversary.

BD: 4	♠KQ72	Dlr: W
	♥KJ62	Vul: ALL
	♦AK9	
	♣87	
♠9		♠JT8643
♥T74		♥A8
♦T6542		♦QJ3
♣J963		♣52
	♠A5	
	♥Q953	
	♦87	
	♣AKQT4	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	T
N	5	3	5	3	5	16
S	5	3	5	3	5	1 8
E						15
W						

Your decision becomes a matter of tactics, in large part influenced by the form of scoring. This is a relevant issue with the club's annual Congress coming up in just over a month. If you are playing for IMPs, pushing for slam can pay off very handsomely, especially at Teams if the other table doesn't bid to slam and you do (provided you make it, of course). In fact one such slam swing can win (or lose) a match. However, if you are playing matchpoint pairs, the usual format in our club sessions, then what matters is what the rest of the field is likely to do. If others will not bid to a risky slam, neither should you.

Partner took that view on the Wednesday evening and we stopped in 5H. On a diamond lead, it wasn't too difficult to make 12 tricks as all suits broke reasonably well and ♣J could be ruffed out. A score of +680 was the result at 5 of 11 tables on the night.

Should we have been in slam? Well, maybe not. As you can see, the table of makeable contracts suggests that only 11 tricks are possible in hearts. However, that requires a spade lead by East, followed by another spade when in with the ace of hearts, so that West can ruff. Much too difficult defence, you say? Perhaps not ... the only pair that did bid to 6H went down after ♠J was led!



5 October

Coping with pre-empts

Rakesh Kumar

There's no doubt about it – pre-empts are a darned nuisance. That's because they eat bidding space and force you to make a decision without an opportunity to exchange critical information. No matter how hard you try to do the right thing after an opponent has pre-empted, you will get it wrong at least some of the time. It helps if you and partner are on the same wavelength about what to do when there has been a pre-empt.

So with that in mind, here are a couple of hands for you to think about – both from the session on Wednesday 4 October. On this first one, with both sides vulnerable, after two passes RHO opens 3C. What will you do?

♠ AKQ832
♥ AJT84
♦ T5
♣ –

This is the second one – you are vulnerable while the opponents are not and RHO opens 3S as dealer. With some reluctance, you pass and it goes around to partner, who bids 4D. Will you do anything now?

♠ 92
♥ AQJ63
♦ K5
♣ Q964

On the first board, you know you want to play in a major suit game but you would much rather play in a 5-3 than a 6-1 fit, so you would like partner to choose. The way forward is to bid 4C, which you and partner should both understand is a "choice of games" bid.

4 W/All	♠ 75	♠ J	N S	
	♥ K6	♥ 752	NT	2 2
♠ T964	♦ K874	♦ J32	♠	5 5
♥ Q93	♣ K6432	♣ AQJ975	♥	5 5
♦ AQ96			♦	1 1
♣ T8			♣	
9	♠ AKQ832		Opt res:	
8 9	♥ AJT84		NS 4H, NS 4S; 650	
14	♦ T5		E W	
	♣ -		NT	
			♠	
			♥	
			♦	
			♣	1 1

In fact on this board partner has only a doubleton in each of the majors so will choose hearts, as she has a high honour in that suit. That means you won't find your way to an 8-card or better fit but as it turns out, game is makeable in either denomination, even if you don't take the reverse finesse in hearts (you should, expecting West to have more of the high card points outside clubs).

By the way, note the aggressive 6-card pre-empt in third seat even when vulnerable. This is good tactics at any form of scoring.

On the second board, now that partner has shown significant values you have enough to again want to play in game – but while you have useful support in the form of the doubleton king, do you have to play in 5D? What if partner has 3 cards in hearts? In that case 4H is surely a better contract and it requires only 10 tricks, not 11. So again you and partner need to have the understanding that a bid of 4H at this point is not a rejection of partner's suit but is also a "choice of games" bid – without a fit, partner can safely rebid 5D, after which you will have to hope that she might be able to make it.

25 N/EW	♠ AT87643	♠ 92	N S	
	♥ KT9	♥ AQJ63	NT	3 3
♠ K	♦ 98	♦ K5	♠	
♥ 852	♣ 5	♣ Q964	♥	
♦ AQJ762			♦	
♣ KT7			♣	
7	♠ QJ5		Opt res:	
13 12	♥ 74		NS 4SX; -100	
8	♦ T43		E W	
	♣ AJ832		NT	
			♠	
			♥	4 4
			♦	4 4
			♣	3 3

As it turns out, 5D does go down, but 4H makes, so offering partner the option is important!



17 October

Favourable conditions for mischief

Rakesh Kumar

When the opponents are vulnerable and your side is not vulnerable, if partner has passed then with a weak hand you have licence to be mischievous, in an attempt to derail the opponents' auction.

This idea was discussed in the pre-Congress seminar on Monday 16 October, when it was suggested that at favourable vulnerability after two passes, a pre-emptive bid might be justified even with an awful 6322 hand and a mere 3 high card points.

As it happens, a variation on that theme then came up in the course of the afternoon. North held:

♠AT974
♥Q75
♦J2
♣984

East-West were vulnerable and East was the dealer. After East and South passed, West opened 1C. What do you think North should do?

On the face of it, the hand really isn't worth a 1S overcall – just 7 hcp, an ordinary suit, dull 5332 shape. On the face of it, the hand certainly isn't worth a weak jump overcall of 2S. Yet bidding 2S is almost certainly the best action you can take, because it causes the maximum inconvenience to the opponents.

At our table, when this deal came up, North did bid 2S. The full deal is below: East had a choice of making a negative double to show a reasonably good hand with 4 hearts, or of bidding 3D. The double is preferable because with shortage in spades, it would be best to play in a 4-4 heart fit if available. In any case, though, South believed partner and raised to 3S just to add to the inconvenience. No one could double that for penalties and 3S became the final contract.

BD: 22 ♠AT974 **Dlr: E**
♥Q75 **Vul: E-W**
♦J2
♣984

♠J532	♠6
♥T2	♥AJ83
♦AQ	♦K7643
♣AQJ73	♣K65

♠KQ8
♥K964
♦T985
♣T2

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	T
N	-	-	-	-	-	7
S	-	-	-	-	-	14 11
E	4	3	2	1	2	8
W	4	3	2	1	2	

As it turned out, although 3S had no chance of making more than 7 tricks, East-West could readily make 9 or even 10 tricks in clubs, so -100 was quite a good score:

Contract	Result	Score	Frequency
3♣ by EW	-1	100	1
3♠ by NS	-2	-100	1
3♣ by EW	=	-110	3
2NT by EW	+1	-150	2
3NT by EW	=	-600	1

Perhaps you too should consider being mischievous when conditions – and the vulnerability – are favourable!



26 October

Bidding on rubbish

Rakesh Kumar

If partner opens 1NT showing say 15-17 hcp and you have a weak hand, it's almost always a good idea to transfer into a 5+ card major suit or a 6+ card minor suit – the latter of course is only possible if you and your partner have agreed to play minor suit transfers in some form.

What about if you have no 5+ card suit? Then you may be stuck with having to pass and pray. Unless, that is, you have 4 cards in both majors and tolerance for diamonds. Then provided you play simple Stayman, you can bid 2C and pass whatever partner rebids. That's what you should do with Hand A in the table below:

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	Hand D
♠T742	♠T742	♠T74	♠T74
♥QJ83	♥QJ83	♥QJ83	♥QJ83
♦J754	♦J74	♦Q754	♦A754
♣9	♣94	♣94	♣94

Of course this might come to grief if partner has 3=3=2=5 shape, rebids 2D and plays in a 4-2 fit when 1NT might not have been quite so tragic. However, most of the time, so-called garbage Stayman really does improve the contract.

Would you stretch the idea further? What about if you had 4-4 in the majors but only 3 cards in diamonds? That's Hand B in the table. And if you don't have 4-4 in the majors? That's Hand C. Garbage Stayman can still work with hands such as these, although the risk-reward ratio increases in both settings.

Once you get up to about 6-7 hcp, though, it's no longer a good idea to try a garbage Stayman bid. Now even though you might miss a 4-4 fit, pass is the best approach to achieving a plus score, especially since notrumps scores better if the same number of tricks is made. That was the case on this deal which turned up in the evening on Wednesday 25 October:

BD: 22 ♠86	Dlr: E
♥T6	Vul: EW
♦Q9	
♣KJ87652	
♠QJ92	♠T74
♥A94	♥QJ83
♦KJ82	♦A754
♣AQ	♣94
♠AK53	
♥K752	
♦T63	
♣T3	
♣♦♥♠ N	
T	
N 2	6
S 2	17 7
E 4 3 4 4	10
W 4 3 4 4	

Making 10 tricks in spades or notrumps requires dropping the off-side doubleton ♦Q, pinning ♥10 *and* reading the position in spades, so is rather against the odds. However, with some 22-24 hcp between the hands it's almost always a good idea to play in 1NT rather than trying to improve the contract by looking for a major suit fit.

