

15 August

Bidding Tales from Coffs Harbour

Rakesh Kumar

Over the weekend that has just passed, three SHBC members played in the Open Teams at the Coffs Coast Gold Congress. In previous years this Congress was routinely booked out shortly after entries opened in April, but in the current environment of ongoing COVID the turnout was much lower – only 50 teams participated in the Open section, with another 20 in the Intermediate. Still, it was great to once again be playing face-to-face bridge in a sizeable event. There was a lot of catching up with friends to be done!

Of course there were many interesting and challenging deals over the 8 matches of 14 boards. I've picked out three that might be of interest to SHBC members, because they emphasise some of the differences between bidding tactics when playing Teams and when playing matchpoint pairs. Before I show you the full deals, try them as "what will you bid?" problems.

Firstly, your side is vulnerable and partner as the dealer opens 1H. With the hand below, you respond 1S and partner jumps to 3C. Having nothing else to say, you repeat your spades and now partner bids 3NT. What will you do?

♠KQT964

♥9

♦642

♣962

Secondly, with both sides vulnerable, you are the dealer and this is your hand:

♠

♥KT9862

♦KJT632

♣Q

What will you bid?

And finally, again with both sides vulnerable, you hold:

♠T

♥AT75


♦QJ542

♣AT3

RHO opens 1H as dealer. What will you do?

This is the deal associated with the first problem. Yes, partner has a good hand, with a stopper or stoppers in diamonds and no more than 2 spades. However, unless partner's holding is precisely ♠Ax you will have very little chance of running the spade suit in a notrump contract. Thus your hand might be fairly worthless and for safety – an important consideration at Teams – you must convert to 4S.

Board 18 ♠J
 Dealer E ♥AJ642
 Vul N-S ♦AK8
 ♣AJ85

♠32		♠A875
♥Q853		♥KT7
♦QT75		♦J93
♣KT4		♣Q73


♠KQT964
 ♥9
 ♦642
 ♣962

		Makeable contracts				
		♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
18		N	2	1	-	4 -
7	10	S	2	1	-	4 -
5		E	-	-	-	- 1
		W	-	-	1	- 1

In fact partner had only a singleton spade, but it was a useful one and 4S was relatively easy to make. However, across the Open field only 6 were successful in this contract. Another 4 played in it and somehow went down, while most of the field went 2-4 down in 3NT, losing lots of IMPs if their opponents did play in spades.

The deal associated with the second problem is on the next page. It's a fascinating South hand, isn't it? A timid person might open with a weak 2H bid, but timidity is a very bad idea at Teams – in principle this 6-6 hand has only 5 losers so if a fit can be found, partner doesn't need very much for game to make. And the vulnerable game bonus is valuable – so yes, this is a reasonable one-level opening on 9 hcp!

Board 23 ♠AQT943
 Dealer S ♥Q3
 Vul Both ♦AQ4
 ♣J6

♠K876		♠J52
♥J5		♥A74
♦875		♦9
♣A874		♣KT9532

♠
 ♥KT9862
 ♦KJT632
 ♣Q

		Makeable contracts				
		♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
15		N -	5	5	2	-
8	8	S -	5	5	2	-
	9	E	2	-	-	-
		W	2	-	-	-

In fact if South starts with 1H the auction should proceed quite simply:
 1H – 1S
 2D – 3C (fourth suit forcing to game)
 3D (denying a club stopper and showing at least 5-5) – 3H (doubleton support)
 4H!


Across the Open field, 20 bid and made 4H, while another 12 were successful in 5D, possibly reaching this contract because North rebid spades and therefore South could rebid diamonds yet again.

The third problem focuses on what constitutes a sensible overcall. At matchpoint pairs it's not unusual to overcall with 10+ hcp and a fairly ordinary 5-card suit, in the hope of winning the competitive auction. At Teams, there are a couple of questions to ask yourself: (1) Is my suit really good enough for an overcall, especially when vulnerable? (2) What exactly is my overcall going to achieve?

With respect to the first question, if you haven't heard of it before, let me introduce you to the "suit quality test". This suggests that the number of cards in your suit plus the number of honours (A, K, Q, J and 10, the last two only counted if there is also a higher honour) should equal the number of tricks you are trying to take.

The full deal is on the next page.

Board 10 ♠ J752
 Dealer E ♥ 863
 Vul Both ♦ A6
 ♣ J764

♠ K943		♠ AQ86
♥ 9		♥ KQJ42
♦ KT973		♦ 8
♣ Q52		♣ K98

♠ T
 ♥ AT75
 ♦ QJ542
 ♣ AT3

Makeable contracts

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
6	N	-	-	-	-
8 15	S	-	-	-	-
11	E	1	2	2	3 2
	W	1	2	2	3 2

South's suit has 5 cards and only 2 honours, so does not pass the suit quality test (the total should be 8 or more for a 2-level overcall). Moreover, if South does bid, what will be achieved if the opponents buy the contract? All that will do is help a good declarer place the high card points.

But there is an even greater risk, which is that if South overcalls, West and North might pass and East might re-open with a double. Now with the hand shown above, West will be delighted to convert the double via a penalty pass. Then even though North produces ♦ A6, the worthlessness of that miserable diamond suit will become apparent ...

Across the Open field, 7 went down in 2Dx, mostly for -500 although it could have been -800! When South remained silent, East-West usually reached 4S, which does not make on proper defence, so the unsound overcall had the potential to turn a possible plus into a large minus.



22 August

The notrump ladder

Rakesh Kumar

How do you deal with balanced hands in your bidding methods? Every partnership needs to reach agreement about its notrump "bidding ladder" which might, for example, look something like the table on the next page:

Open 1-of-a-suit, rebid 1NT	12-14 hcp
Open 1NT	15-17 hcp
Open 1-of-a-suit, rebid 2NT	18-19 hcp
Open 2NT	20-21 hcp
Open 2C, rebid 2NT	22-23 hcp
Open 2D, rebid 2NT	24+ hcp

You might move some of those ranges up or down by one high card point e.g. if you open 1NT with 15-18 hcp then the higher ranges all move up, while if you open 1NT with 14-17 hcp (as I do) then the lowest range becomes 11-13 hcp. The 2D-2NT sequence assumes you are playing a multi-2D opening, but if not, you might have to settle for rebidding an awkward 3NT after a 2C opening.

However, if you lump too many hands into 2C (e.g. all 19+ hcp hands) it becomes almost impossible to handle all of the strong balanced hands correctly. If partner opens 2NT showing 20-21 (or 21-22) hcp then if you hold 13 hcp, you belong in a slam. However, on Monday 22 August, this deal turned up:

BD: 24 ♠74		Dlr: W	
♥JT876		Vul: Nil	
♦J852			
♣65			
♠AQ5		♠KT862	
♥K2		♥AQ9	
♦AKT3		♦97	
♣A932		♣KJ8	
♠J93			
♥543			
♦Q64			
♣QT74			
		N	
♣ ♦ ♥ ♠		T	
N			2
S		20	13
E	6 5 4 6 6		5
W	6 5 4 6 6		

To my amazement, only 2 of 9 pairs bid to a slam and only one of those slams was actually a sensible contract – the other was an overbid to a grand slam, which made on a friendly lead.

If partner opens 2NT showing 20-21 hcp and you hold the East hand, what should you bid? 3H as a transfer, of course. What should West then do? A 20-21 hcp hand

with top controls, good 3+ support and an outside doubleton will make 4-of-a-major opposite almost any random 3 hcp and a 5+ suit. Therefore West should super-accept with 4S. Knowing that this is the basis for the super-accept, East can now roll out Keycard Blackwood, discover that the partnership holds all 5 keycards and happily bid 6S without further inquiry. It is of course possible to quite easily locate ♠Q and ♦K in opener's hand, but it's unnecessary as you won't have enough high cards between the two hands to play in 7S without an outside source of tricks.

I have some sympathy for the genuine matchpoint junkie, who even though unable to find out whether West holds ♥K might still have a punt on 6NT, looking for a top. But playing in game with the combined East-West hands leaves me bemused.

If you aren't confident you would at least get to 6S on this deal, it might be time for you to review your methods with your partner ...



29 August

Bidding an 8-card suit

Rakesh Kumar

On Monday 29 August the dealing computer was having fun – there were plenty of interesting bidding problems for both North-South and East-West! Here are two particularly distributional hands for you to think about, both of which feature 8-card suits. Firstly, with both sides vulnerable, you are looking at this as dealer:

♠QT965432
♥K9
♦8
♣Q2

What will you bid?

Secondly, with only the opponents vulnerable, you hold:

♠A74
♥97
♦KQJT9764
♣

Once again you are the dealer. What will you bid?

Both of these deals illustrate the importance of bidding up with an 8-card suit, being mindful of the vulnerability. On the first deal, the spade suit isn't much, so perhaps should be downgraded if vulnerable against opponents who are not vulnerable.

However, at equal vulnerability there's no reason to be frightened: it's a notional 6-loser hand, so a 4S opening is quite OK. The full deal is below. As you can see, if North opens 4S this gives East a huge headache. S/he might have bid 3NT over 3S, but that's no longer possible. A 4NT bid is takeout for the minors, while it takes lots of courage (or a bit of insanity?) to overcall 5H vulnerable with a suit that has no substance at all. That's why the Norths who did choose to open 4S played there!

BD: 13 ♠ QT965432 ♥ K9 ♦ 8 ♣ Q2	Dir: N Vul: ALL
♠ ♥ QJ54 ♦ AJ7 ♣ AT9653	♠ AK ♥ AT8632 ♦ K4 ♣ KJ8
	♠ J87 ♥ 7 ♦ QT96532 ♣ 74

However, as you can see from the table of makeable contracts, it is in fact possible for East-West to make 13 tricks in almost any denomination, although only one pair (Maryanne Bawden and Adi Shroff, the East-West winners on the day) managed to get to a slam.

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	T
N					1	7
S					1	12 18
E	7	2	7		7	3
W	7	2	7		7	

The second deal (on the next page) is also an interesting bidding problem, but for a different reason. East has only a 5-loser hand in diamonds so at favourable vulnerability, anything less than a 5D opening is wimpy. And if you're sitting West after partner's 5D opening, which virtually guarantees an 8-card suit, plus you hold 3 aces with prospects of additional tricks in hearts, you really don't have to think: raise to 6D!!

BD: 18 ♠KJT3 ♥863 ♦ ♣KT9853 ♠Q62 ♥AQJT ♦A8 ♣AJ62 ♠985 ♥K542 ♦532 ♣Q74 ♣♦♥♠ N T	Dir: E Vul: NS ♠A74 ♥97 ♦KQJT9764 ♣
--	--

N									7
S	1								18 10
E		7	3	2	7				5
W		7	6	3	7				

In fact this makes 13 tricks without breathing hard (take the heart finesse twice after drawing trumps, then pitch 2 losing spades on ♣A and ♥A). However, 6D wasn't bid at any table – most played in 5D and lost matchpoints to those who played in 3NT.



12 September

Off-shape notrump openings

Rakesh Kumar

Once upon a time, notrump openings were only allowed to be balanced shapes i.e. 4333, 4432 or 5332 – and many excluded 5332 shapes with a major suit from what was deemed permissible.

Nowadays, however, more and more players are choosing to open 5422 hands in the partnership agreed point range with a 1NT or 2NT opening, as appropriate. Some even open 4441 with a singleton top honour!

Why would you do so? Because 1NT and 2NT are so effective in conveying opener's strength and simultaneously denying a shortage.

If you open a 5422 hand with 1NT, does it matter if you don't have any honours in one of the doubletons? Not at all. Perhaps you should avoid opening 2NT with a worthless doubleton, but it is in any case highly unlikely that you will have such a hand.

What about if you have a 5-card major in the notrump opening and playing in that suit would be best for your side? There's a convention for that ... see below.

Opening a 5422 shape hand with 2NT might have solved a lot of problems on this deal from Monday 12 September:

BD: 10	♠J98	Dlr: E
	♥J98	Vul: ALL
	♦T8	
	♣A8632	
♠KQT32		♠A5
♥73		♥AKQT2
♦A95		♦KQ74
♣KT4		♣Q9
	♠764	
	♥654	
	♦J632	
	♣J75	
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N
		T
N		6
S		12 20
E	4 5 6 6 6	2
W	4 5 6 6 6	

If East starts proceedings with 2NT showing 20-21 hcp then reaching 6NT ought not to be too difficult. However, after a 1H opening, most of the field found it impossible. Only one pair (Jenny and Alan Maher – against us, of course!) reached the slam via a quantitative 4NT bid. Because 6NT cannot be beaten, they ensured we were awarded a zero for the board ...

What about finding your fit when opener has a 5-card major? That's no problem: after either 1NT (with a game-forcing hand) or 2NT responder bids 3C. Now opener rebids 3H/S with a 5-card suit, or 3D with a 4-card major, else 3NT with no major. The only memory work required is after opener rebids 3D – to keep the strong hand concealed, responder bids the major s/he *doesn't* have (i.e. 3H with only spades or 3S with only hearts) or 4D with both. This is known as puppet Stayman and it works.

So perhaps you'd like to experiment with some off-shape 1NT or 2NT openings? If so, perhaps you could first try this with 5-4 in the minors (either way) for a 1NT opening. Remember, however, that you should not open some number of notrumps when you have 5-4 in the majors (either way) because with that shape, you will never be able to tell partner about your hand.



22 September

Draw trumps or cross-ruff?

Rakesh Kumar

As declarer, the first thing you need to do when dummy comes down is to make a plan. It's also a very good idea to count your points and dummy's points, review the opposition bidding to try to work out the location of the missing points, and assess the opening lead.

The first part of making a plan is counting sure, likely and possible tricks. The second part involves looking for potential problems, especially if the contract seems secure.

So here you are, declaring 4S from the East seat on the lead of ♥K, the opponents having been silent throughout:

♠K98	♠AJ653
♥AT72	♥3
♦Q9732	♦A8
♣2	♣KQ874

Count your tricks. Assuming a 3-2 break in spades (68% probability) then if you draw trumps, you will have 4 or 5 spade tricks depending on whether the finesse works, plus 2 red aces and a club trick. That's well short of what you need.

Maybe you could play for an on-side ♦K and a 3-3 break in diamonds? That offers poor odds (36% probability for the break, reduced to half of that as you need the king to be on-side) so it isn't too attractive either. Incidentally, note that the probability of an odd number of outstanding cards breaking favourably is relatively high, whereas the probability is generally much lower for an even number of cards i.e. "odd numbers break evenly".

What about trying for 2 club ruffs in dummy? Then if spades break 3-2 you will end up with 4 spade tricks in hand (assuming you have to lose one trick to ♠Q) plus 2 ruffs, plus the 2 red aces and one sure club trick. That's 9 tricks and you have lots of extra chances. Firstly, the club ace may be on side and North may win it immediately, in which case your ♣KQ will yield 2 tricks. Secondly, the spade queen may be doubleton. Thirdly, clubs are likely to break 4-3 (62% probability – odd numbers break evenly) so even if the ♣A is with South, your last club may be established.

Therefore you need to win ♥A and lead a club immediately, then aim to ruff the likely heart return in hand, ruff a club in dummy, come back to hand with ♦A and ruff another club. After cashing ♠K and returning to hand with a second heart ruff, you can play ♠A and hope that things have worked out ...

The full deal, from Wednesday 21 September, is overleaf:

Unfortunately most declarers didn't manage to make their contract, presumably being in a hurry to draw trumps without having counted their tricks.

BD: 22	♠T74	Dir: E	
	♥964	Vul: EW	
	♦KJT6		
	♣AJ6		
♠K98		♠AJ653	
♥AT72		♥3	
♦Q9732		♦A8	
♣2		♣KQ874	
	♠Q2		
	♥KQJ85		
	♦54		
	♣T953		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
		T	
N			9
S			9 14
E	3 3 1 4 2		8
W	3 3 1 5 2		

As the cards lie, everything is favourable for East i.e. ♣A is on-side (and North must grab it when a club is led from dummy, otherwise the ace can be ruffed out) plus ♠Q is doubleton. That means that on the usual lead of a top heart, 11 tricks should be made.

In fact unless South leads a diamond – in which case on winning ♣A, North will be able to cash another diamond trick and give South a ruff – declarer should always finish with an overtrick. As the table of makeable contracts shows, 11 tricks are completely safe if West could somehow contrive to be the declarer, but of course that won't happen in real life!



29 September

When 4NT isn't Blackwood

Rakesh Kumar

The awful weather on 28 September meant that not many players turned up for the Wednesday evening session, but that became an opportunity to play Teams rather than matchpoint pairs. At Teams, overtricks are not much of a priority. Instead, what's most important is bidding to any possible game (especially when vulnerable) and defeating the opponents' borderline games.

With that in mind, what will you do with this hand when, with both sides vulnerable, your RHO opens 1H after two passes?

♠ 10 2
♥
♦ A K J 4 3
♣ A J 10 8 3 2

You have great playing strength in the minors and don't need partner to hold very much for 5C or 5D to make. Then again, it's risky to force to an 11-trick game with a 5-loser hand.

One possible approach is to simply overcall 2C, planning to reverse into 3D when the bidding comes back to you. That should show a 6/4 or 6/5 hand (or perhaps a very strong 5/4 hand) but the catch is that 2C may be passed out ...

Another possibility is to overcall an unusual 2NT promising both minor suits, then to raise partner's 3C/3D preference to the 4-level. That shows extra strength, at least a game-invitational hand, and might be the best approach at matchpoints.

However, at Teams there's no substitute for courage! You can make partner choose a minor suit game by overcalling 4NT – as an overcall this isn't asking for aces, it's forcing to 5C/D. On this deal a jump to 4NT would have worked well:

Optimum:
N 5D, N 5C; +600
LoTT: 18-18 = 0

♠ K 8 7
♥ A 10 8 6
♦ 10 7 6
♣ 9 5 4

Bridge Solver Online:
John Goacher
Double Dummy Solver Module:
Bo Haglund

♠ Q J 9 4 3
♥ J 9 7
♦ 9 5 2
♣ 7 6

♠ A 6 5
♥ K Q 5 4 3 2
♦ Q 8
♣ K Q

♠ 10 2
♥
♦ A K J 4 3
♣ A J 10 8 3 2

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	5	5	-	-	2
S	4	4	-	-	1
E	-	-	1	1	-
W	-	-	1	1	-

	7		
4		16	
	13		

Of course for 5C to make, a couple of things need to be right: trumps either have to break 2-2 or one of the opponents needs to hold a singleton top honour, plus the diamond finesse has to work or the queen needs to drop singleton or doubleton. However, everything is "just so" this time.

An interesting aspect of the deal is that if South overcalls 2C and reverses into 3D, a minor suit game can be beaten if West leads ♠Q rather than partner's suit (a heart lead allows South to discard a losing spade on ♥A). However, after a 2NT or 4NT overcall by South, the final contract is unbeatable because North is the declarer and it's no longer possible for the defence to win two quick tricks in spades.

