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15 May 2018

Splintering to slam

Rakesh Kumar

As I said in a recent column, regardless of whether one is playing pairs or teams, bidding slams and making them is winning bridge. It's useful for a partnership to have a few "tools in the kitbag" to help reach odds-on slam contract that are based on distribution rather than solely on high card strength.

One such tool is a splinter bid, a double jump bid that promises support (usually 4 or more cards) and shortage in the bid suit. On Monday 14 May there was a hand where a splinter would have worked well:

BD: 8	♠AK42	Dlr: W
	♥K6	Vul: None
	♦K3	
	♣KJ765	
♠85		♠JT7
♥T8		♥95432
♦98542		♦AQT76
♣9432		♣
	♠Q963	
	♥AQJ7	
	♦J	
	♣AQT8	
		N
	♣♦♥♠	T
N	6 - 5 6 6	17
S	6 - 4 5 2	0 7
E	- 2 - - -	16
W	- 2 - - -	

North opens 1C, hears 1H from South and rebids 1S. At this point, South's hand blossoms. With a 4-4 spade fit, two sources of tricks outside trumps, and shortage in diamonds, South can smell a slam – but how does one explore this without going past game and perhaps ending up in a fragile or failing 5-level contract?

The answer is to jump to 4D. This promises 4-card spade support, a hand with slam interest (note that a lesser hand would simply bid 4S at this point) and shortage (i.e. a singleton or void) in diamonds.

The 4D bid allows North to re-evaluate his/her hand. South's bids suggest 4-5 hearts, 4 spades, 1 diamond and therefore 3-4 clubs. While North's diamond king is now probably useless, there will not be 2 diamond losers, so all that really matters is top controls in the other suits. An inquiry with 4NT Roman Keycard Blackwood will elicit 5S (2 + queen) and bidding on to slam will then become more or less automatic.

Clearly this wasn't a common auction: the board was played at 11 tables but only 2 pairs reached 6S. Interestingly, one pair reached 6NT by North, which happens to be completely unbeatable as the cards lie and thus a matchpoint top, although it certainly wouldn't be my choice of contract!

17 May 2018

May Interclub Teams

Rakesh Kumar

The Interclub Teams event for May was played at Bowral Golf Club and each of the four participating bridge clubs (Bowral, Berry, Kiama, Southern Highlands) fielded two teams. The format was 6 × 7-board matches against the 2 teams of the other 3 clubs. It was a good day for our club: the SHBC 1 team finished first and SHBC won the event on the aggregate VPs of the two teams. Berry came in second, followed by Bowral and Kiama.

Teams bridge is all about bidding close games and then trying to make them. Slam bidding is also crucial in short matches, while in longer matches the accumulation of IMPs from partscore swings can mount up as well. However, game swings are where the action is, so the partnership needs to bid with vigour and then hope either that the cards lie well or that the defensive position is just too difficult for the opponents to defeat the contract.

♠K7
♥JT432
♦A
♣T8754

So here you are, playing a teams event, and RHO starts things off by bidding a weak 2S. You pass, as does LHO, and partner bids 3C, passed back to you. What would you do?

While you think about that, here's a board where our opponents did exactly what was suggested above i.e. bid to the hilt and then challenge us to find the best defence. Put yourself in our shoes: after two passes, your RHO opens 1H, LHO responds in diamonds and RHO rebids hearts. They reach 4H and you (North) lead a top club honour. Dummy (East) goes down and this is what you see:

♠864
♥T32
♦K6
♣AKT82
♠A9
♥Q5
♦QT9874
♣Q96

Let's say that after partner discouraged on the first club, you decided to switch to a spade – this goes to the nine, partner's jack and declarer's king. Back comes a club and you take your other trick in the suit. Now what?

Returning to the first board ... yes, partner might have a good heart fit and 4H might be possible, but the practical action at teams is an immediate bid of 5C. It's true that you have "only" 8 high-card points, but you have an excellent fit for partner, can guarantee no losers in diamonds, have an apparently well-placed spade king, and there's that heart suit which might yet prove useful.

BD: 16 ♠K7 **Dlr: W**
 ♥JT432 **Vul: EW**
 ♦A
 ♣T8754

♠AQJ864 ♠T9532
 ♥65 ♥K87
 ♦T652 ♦Q983
 ♣J ♣2

♠-
 ♥AQ9
 ♦KJ74
 ♣AKQ963

					N	
	♣	♦	♥	♠	T	
N	7	2	6	1	6	8
S	7	2	6	1	6	8 5
E	-	-	-	-	-	19
W	-	-	-	-	-	

In fact partner had a monster hand opposite yours, but couldn't possibly visualise what you held, so couldn't bid the cold slam. Still, making 13 tricks for +440 was no bad thing.

BD: 14 ♠864 **Dlr: E**
 ♥T32 **Vul: None**
 ♦K6
 ♣AKT82

♠KT7 ♠A9
 ♥AKJ964 ♥Q5
 ♦52 ♦QT9874
 ♣54 ♣Q96

♠QJ532
 ♥87
 ♦AJ3
 ♣J73

					N	
	♣	♦	♥	♠	T	
N	1	-	-	1	-	10
S	1	-	-	1	-	11 10
E	-	2	3	-	2	9
W	-	2	3	-	2	

On the second board, did you switch to the diamond king? I didn't think so! It was just too hard for us to beat the contract: declarer got rid of a diamond on the club queen and 10 tricks rolled home. That was an excellent pushy teams bid by our opponents from Bowral (see over for the full hand).

As you can see, teams tactics are significantly different to matchpoint tactics, especially with respect to bidding thin non-vulnerable games. So I think there's a lot to be said for having more teams events and having more SHBC players participate, if only to broaden everyone's bridge horizons ...

29 May 2018

Bid more slams!

Rakesh Kumar

I've written before about the importance of effective slam bidding if one wants to win at bridge. On Monday 28 May, no one seemed to want to find their way to a cold 6D on this board:

BD: 2	♠	Dlr: E
	♥AJ92	Vul: N-S
	♦KJT84	
	♣AK84	
♠AQJ64		♠KT9752
♥QT6		♥754
♦32		♦6
♣J76		♣T52
	♠83	
	♥K83	
	♦AQ975	
	♣Q93	
		N
	♣♦♥♠	T
N	7 7 7 1 1	16
S	7 7 7 1 1	10 3
E	- - - - -	11
W	- - - - -	

In some ways it's a challenge in terms of both courage and methods. Firstly, would you open the South hand? It is a 7-loser, but with only 11 high card points and no shortage, many would choose to pass rather than open 1D. Secondly, if you do pass West will almost certainly pass as well, which means North will open 1D. Do you have methods for showing a 10-12 hcp raise with 5+ of partner's minor suit and no 4-card major? Some folks play what's known as criss-cross, where 1D-3C or 1C-2D shows exactly this sort of hand. If not, you might have to settle for a limit raise to 3 of the minor opened. This isn't likely to be so encouraging for your partner, who has a 5-loser hand opposite your notional 8-loser hand, so without good methods, slam might be missed.

If you do open, how will North show a strong hand with a fit and slam interest? Over a 1D opening by South, it's virtually guaranteed that West will overcall in spades. Normal folks overcall 1S, aggressive interventionists look at a suit headed by AQJ, note that the vulnerability is in their favour and delude themselves into thinking they're looking at a 6-card suit, so they bid a weak jump 2S.

North now has two options. One is to bid bid 2S (over 1S) or 3S (over 2S) to establish a game force. The other more sensible initial move is to make a negative double, to show the 4-card heart suit. If East passes (unlikely!) then South will rebid 2D, denying hearts or a spade stopper. This makes it easy for North to explore a diamond slam – after all where are South's values? However, if (when) East raises the spade overcall pre-emptively, South will almost certainly pass. Now North can cuebid spades anyway. Even if South treats this as a stopper ask, she/he has little option but to rebid diamonds at a minimum level, which should again get North-South to slam.

I believe this hand should provide you plenty of encouragement to open more vigorously and bid slams *much* more vigorously!!