8 September

London buses

Rakesh Kumar

Perhaps grand slams are a bit like London buses – you wait ages for one and then two come along at once! Certainly after a long break, there were two in the same session on the Monday of the Pairs Qualifying on 7 September, together with a whole lot of other wildly distributional hands. For an example of the latter, take a look at this:

BD: 15	♠AK952 ♥AJ432 ♦ ♣T94	**Dlr: S** **Vul: NS**
♠ ♥KQT76 ♦Q85 ♣KQ653		♠J743 ♥985 ♦K62 ♣A82
	♠QT86 ♥ ♦AJT9743 ♣J7	

When is the last time you saw 3 voids in different hands? When South chose to open 3D, that's where North-South played – the contract shouldn't make but it might. North can make 4S on a cross-ruff, but in practice that proved to be too hard for most. On a few occasions, West played in hearts, twice doubled in 4H which went for -800. Ouch!

Neither of the grand slams was particularly easy to bid. There were reasonable prospects of getting to one on this deal but it did depend on your methods:

BD: 8	♠965 ♥KT986 ♦K92 ♣85	**Dlr: W** **Vul: None**
♠A8 ♥AQJ54 ♦864		♠KQJ43 ♥ ♦AQ
♣KQ6		♣AJT943
	♠T72 ♥732 ♦JT753 ♣72	

If you are happy to open 1NT with a 5-card major and have agreed to play minorwood with 14/30 responses, the auction might be: 1NT-2H (transfer to spades)-2S-3C (forcing to game)-3NT (or maybe 3H along the way? in either case denying 3-card spade support)-4C (minorwood, much too strong for a mere game, now looking for 6C)-4H (0 or 3 keycards, obviously 3)-4S (do you have the queen?)-4NT (yes, but no outside king)-7C (knowing that ♥A will provide a discard for ♦Q if needed, although this auction might actually trigger a diamond lead into the AQ).

After 1H-1S life is much more difficult. No matter … ignoring the grand slam in clubs, Margaret Malcolm and Fiona Khoo found their way to the unbeatable 7S!!

In my opinion the grand slam on this extraordinary deal was unbiddable:

BD: 17	♠ ♥AKJT86532 ♦Q73 ♣3	**Dlr: N** **Vul: None**
♠KT543 ♥7 ♦T4 ♣JT764		♠A876 ♥Q9 ♦J98 ♣Q952
	♠QJ92 ♥4 ♦AK652 ♣AK8	

Three pairs found their way to the perfectly reasonable 6H. One might get there by opening 1H and feeling happy when partner bids 2D, but unless playing that a 2/1 bid is game forcing the rebid is awkward. One might say "points, schmoints" and open 2C because there are only 4 losers in a heart contract. One might even open 4H – really an underbid – and then partner might decide to move with two ace-kings.

Getting to 7H is quite another story, but Anna Zaranski and Richard Burrells did so. What's more, they were doubled, thus getting their absolute top twice over!!

Distributional hands can be lots of fun …

♣♦♥♠

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15 September

Missing the bus

Rakesh Kumar

Tony Lye and Steve Brabyn were convincing winners of the Pairs Championship this week, with a 66.7% score in the 4-table Howell Final held on 14 September. Interestingly, although they have won many club titles over the years – including twice winning the Monday Championship – this is the first time that they have won the Pairs. Congratulations!

Last week I wrote about grand slams and suggested that having two of them available in a single session was rather like waiting for London buses. This week, the Monday afternoon session offered another impossible-to-bid grand slam. However, there really was no good reason not to get to a small slam on the deal, yet most of the field in both the Pairs Final and the Plate missed the bus altogether and played in game, making 13 tricks.

Perhaps this might have had something to do with slam bidding methods. To introduce you to the potential problems, let me ask how you would bid these two hands after partner opens 1NT promising 15-17 hcp:

Hand A	Hand B
♠J62	♠J62
♥AKT74	♥AKQT74
♦KQ7	♦KQ7
♣K4	♣4

With hand A, of course you will start with 2D, a transfer to hearts. What now? If partner has a minimum hand with 15 hcp and only 2 hearts, you want to be in 3NT; if she has 15 hcp and 3 hearts you want to be in either 3NT or 4H, depending on whether she has an outside doubleton; if she has a maximum hand with 17 hcp and 2 hearts you want to be in 6NT; but if she has a maximum hand and 3 or more hearts then perhaps 6H will be best. How do you cater for all of that?

The answer is to rebid 4NT as a quantitative response i.e. to agree that 1NT (by partner) – 2D (by you) – 2H (by partner) – 4NT (by you) is *not* asking for keycards in hearts! It specifically says that you have a slam-invitational hand with 5 hearts – with a minimum 1NT opening lacking 3-card support, partner can pass and the contract is likely to be absolutely safe.

You might say that's all too complicated; you and your partner are perfectly happy to use 4NT only as Roman Keycard Blackwood. Well, good luck getting to the right contract with hand A, although you won't have a problem with hand B …

Of course if you do agree to play a quantitative 4NT in the sequence above, you then have the converse problem, namely how to bid hand B correctly. That requires another agreement. If 2D/2H are transfers to hearts/spades respectively, what does a 4D/4H response mean for you? Many play this as *either* a transfer to game in

hearts/spades, with a modest but shapely hand i.e. some 7-9 hcp and a reasonable 6+ suit *or* as the first step on the way to slam, in which case after opener has accepted the transfer, responder continues with 4NT. These 4-level transfers are known as Texas transfers (variants of this agreement using 4C/4D also exist). That approach might have worked quite nicely on this deal:

BD: 16	♠AKQ4 ♥965 ♦A54 ♣A52	**Dlr: W** **Vul: EW**
♠T9875 ♥2 ♦J8632 ♣T8		♠3 ♥J83 ♦T9 ♣KQJ9763
	♠J62 ♥AKQT74 ♦KQ7 ♣4	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	1	5	7	6	7
S	1	5	7	6	7
E					
W					

17	
1	7
15	

Of course a simple "4NT is always keycard" approach would also have succeeded. However, only one pair in each of the Pairs fields reached slam (in the Final, that was Steve and Tony) which was disappointing to see. The South hand has a self-sufficient suit and only 5 losers so opposite a 1NT opening which is typically 6-7 losers, there is a very high likelihood that a small slam will be easy. The grand slam is unbiddable because it depends on North holding ♠Q, which South can never find out about.

♣♦♥♠

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22 September

Mini-buses?

Rakesh Kumar

This column continues the "bus" theme of the previous two – if you haven't seen those, one was about grand slams perhaps being a bit like London buses, with none for ages and then two in the one session, while the other was about missing the bus altogether by not bidding a reasonably straightforward small slam.

This time, the deals from the Monday afternoon session on 21 September are both slams on relatively few high card points, hence the designation mini-buses. In both cases, reaching the slam is in the first instance quite unlikely. However, as low-hcp slams are only ever possible because of distributional hands, there's often quite a bit of competitive bidding, especially if it's hearts *vs.* spades, which can push the bidding along. That would certainly have applied to both of these deals.

Here's the first example:

BD: 25	♠96 ♥T3 ♦KJ7642 ♣Q76	**Dlr: N** **Vul: EW**
♠AJ87 ♥J98652 ♦5 ♣K8		♠3 ♥AKQ74 ♦A93 ♣T953
	♠KQT542 ♥ ♦QT8 ♣AJ42	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N T
N	3		2		6
S	3		2		9 13
E		6		3	12
W		6		3	

If North passes, which is what will happen unless you play a weak 2D opening, East will open 1H and South will overcall 1S. Now there are several possible alternatives. West might jump to 4H, in which case the auction will come to an end. Or West might realise that with only 7 losers, but effectively 5 losers with a known 11-card fit, there is slam potential. Perhaps a 2S bid showing a good raise might work, or maybe a 4D splinter showing a shortage with 4+ support would be even better.

Either way, it's still not an easy slam to bid. Tony Lye and Steve Brabyn were the only ones to reach it.

The second example would have involved much more competitive bidding. If you play 5-card weak two-bids, East has a hand perfectly suitable for such an opening when vulnerable against not vulnerable opponents. If you don't but your opponents do, the South hand is also a great example of a 5-card weak two bid at favourable vulnerability. My partner did open 2H and the opposition bid all the way to 5S, over which I bid 6H as a sacrifice. However, you can see that it turned not to be one!!

BD: 22	♠9 ♥KQ7652 ♦AK43 ♣43	**Dlr: E** **Vul: EW**
♠AQ87654 ♥J8 ♦QT ♣Q8		♠KJT32 ♥ ♦J9752 ♣AJT
	♠ ♥AT943 ♦86 ♣K97652	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N T
N	5	6			12
S	5	6		11	10
E			4		7
W			4		

As I said a couple of columns ago, distributional hands can be lots of fun …

♣♦♥♠

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29 September

Takeout doubles

Rakesh Kumar

Everyone knows about takeout doubles. Or do they? Unless very strong, the doubler should promise shortage in opener's suit and tolerance for the other suits i.e. 3+ cards. However, it's not unusual to see folks at our club double on any 13+ hcp hand without a 5-card suit worthy of an overcall i.e. including hands with no shortage in opener's suit and lacking tolerance for one of the outside suits. That of course is one of the Seven Deadly Sins discussed back in April 2024 – in fact it's the first of those *viz.* Lust.

While I don't like the idea of making a takeout double without shortage in opener's suit, I really do like the idea of doubling with ideal 4441 shape and fewer high card points. How low can one go? Well, perhaps 9-10 hcp with good enough shape …

Say you hold this hand, vulnerable against opponents who are not vulnerable, and hear RHO open 1D in third seat:

♠J987
♥AQ2
♦8
♣QT964

Would you make a takeout double on that? You have only 9 hcp and only 4-3 in the majors. And partner is a passed hand. And the vulnerability is against you. However, you have a singleton diamond. You might find a 4-4 spade fit. Or if partner does bid 1H, there's no law against her holding a 5-card suit. And the long clubs might become a source of tricks. So you should!

Hugh Frame has obviously caught on to that idea, because on Monday 28 September he was sitting East on the deal below and doubled:

BD: 3	♠K6 ♥KT5 ♦AJ932 ♣J73	**Dlr: S** **Vul: EW**
♠QT42 ♥J943 ♦KT4 ♣K2		♠J987 ♥AQ2 ♦8 ♣QT964
	♠A53 ♥876 ♦Q765 ♣A85	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	3			2	12
S	3			2	9 9
E	1		1	2	10
W	1		1	2	

At every other table, North-South declared, usually in a part-score in diamonds, although one pair played in the higher-scoring contract of 2NT. However at our table, after Hugh's double and South's raise to 2D, West now bid 2S and thus East-West successfully bought the contract. That was already a win for them, compounded by the fact that other than on double-dummy defence, they will always make an overtrick!

Shape beats points almost every time …

♣♦♥♠

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11 October

SHBC Teams Championship 2026

Rakesh Kumar

Our annual Teams Championship was held on Saturday 10 October. This year, the turnout was lower than hoped for, but it was nevertheless a very successful day, with lots of interesting deals and an excellent lunch provided by Jo Goodacre.

A couple of the "Useful Bidding Agreements" discussed in a series of presentations earlier this year were relevant to reaching the correct contract on the two deals I've selected for discussion. Firstly, you hold the hand overleaf. As dealer, partner opens 1D. What will you do?

♠ 8
♥ AK7
♦ K987
♣ K8732

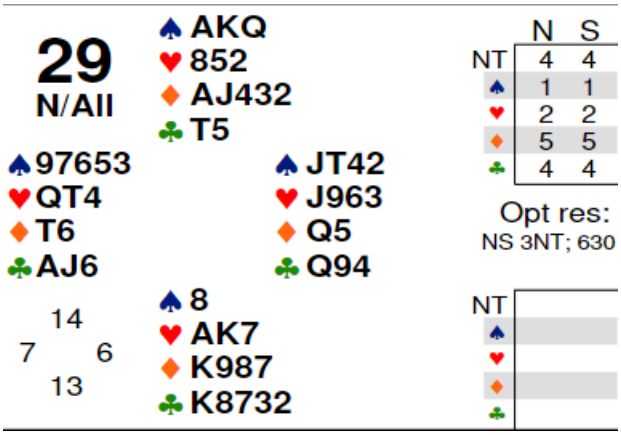
Secondly, partner deals and opens 1H, then jumps to 3D over your 1S response. This is your hand:

♠ AJ75
♥ J
♦ 9865
♣ AKT9

What now?

With the first problem hand you might respond 2C, but that hides your diamond fit. Moreover, while you have a hand that is strong enough to force to game, your suits are "empty" and neither 11-trick game is appealing – playing in 3NT might be a much better prospect if partner has a suitable holding in spades.

Finding out about that is not a problem if you have agreed to play inverted minor raises (see this Lessons page). You can respond 2D promising 4+ support and 10+ hcp, then hope that partner can bid 2S to show a stopper. As you can see from the full deal below, that's exactly what partner will do:

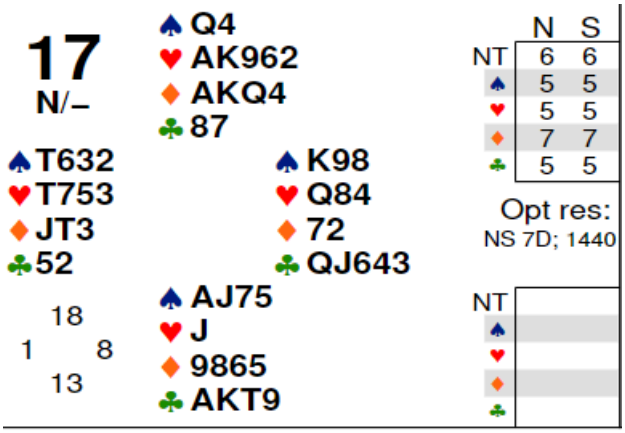


As South, you can now happily jump to 3NT. With diamonds 2-2, this proves to be an easy contract, but most of the field did not reach it. Note that if you respond 2C instead, partner has no real choice but to rebid 2D. Do you really want to try a potentially very fragile 5D now? No one did.

On the second hand, after partner's jump rebid you have a good fit in diamonds, with 7 losers including two aces and a king, while partner should be promising 5 or fewer losers. Losing count arithmetic suggests 24 – (7+5) = 12 tricks possible, so you ought to be looking for a diamond slam. The issue is to check for keycards without going past 5D if partner has just two.

If you have agreed to play "minorwood" (see this Lessons page) then again that isn't a problem. You ask with 4D, partner replies 4S showing 0 or 3 (obviously 3) and with no keycards missing, you can bid 6D even without asking about the diamond queen.

In fact partner turns out to have ♦Q as well and 13 tricks are makeable via the spade finesse, but you don't want to play in a grand slam on a finesse – reaching 6D is more than good enough.



These deals illustrate the value of good bidding methods/agreements to get to the best contract. To quote John Montgomery, author of *The Revision Club System*: "You can't win the hand in the play if you have already lost it in the bidding, and you can win a hand in the bidding in such a way that the play becomes trivial."

♣♦♥♠

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