

2 September

Bidding strong 4441 hands

Rakesh Kumar

As we all know, high card points don't tell the full story of the trick-taking ability of any given hand. So it remains a mystery to me why so many of our club members choose to open 2C – a space-wasting bid that needs considerable justification before it is deployed – to show just about all hands with 19+ (or 20+) hcp.

The modern standard "notrump ladder" has ample space for 19-21 (or 22) hcp balanced hands i.e. open 1x and rebid 1NT = 12-14 hcp; open 1NT = 15-17 hcp; open 1x and rebid 2NT = 18-19 hcp; open 2NT = 20-21 (or 20-22 if you prefer) hcp. Stronger balanced hands can open 2C and rebid 2NT; some also use a 2D opening followed by a 2NT rebid to further stratify very strong balanced hands.

What about unbalanced hands? Ask yourself whether you would open 2C with this hand:

♠Q
♥AKQ4
♦QJT7
♣AQ65

If you said yes, why? A 2C opening is, at the very least, a near-game-forcing hand. Say 19+ hcp and 4 losers with a very good 5-card major suit or (preferably) a good 6+ major suit; or 3 losers with a long, strong minor suit. The above hand has no long suit, so if you open 2C, where are your tricks going to come from? You need a fit and a few values with partner for this hand to become useful, otherwise you have losers everywhere ...

That's a consistent feature of strong 4441 hands – they play poorly without a fit, but very well indeed if a fit is found. So if partner has as little as the hand below, you will probably succeed in making 4H:

♠875
♥T765
♦A53
♣JT7

However, with no fit you will have to work hard *and* get lucky to make 3NT even if partner holds a better hand such as this:

♠A7543
♥65
♦6532
♣K7

The bottom line is: don't open 2C with a strong 4441 hand. You might consider faking 2NT if your singleton is an ace (or even a king) and your strength is within the high card point range for your 2NT opening. Otherwise, open one of a suit.

On Monday 2 September there was an extreme example of the virtues of not opening 2C with a strong 4441 hand. East held the above hand, while West had absolutely nothing – almost a genuine Yarborough, except for ♣10.

BD: 26 ♠KJ9		Dlr: E				
♥JT983		Vul: ALL				
♦A94						
♣J8						
♠87543		♠Q				
♥65		♥AKQ4				
♦6532		♦QJT7				
♣T7		♣AQ65				
♠AT62						
♥72						
♦K8						
♣K9432						
		N				
♣ ♦ ♥ ♠		T				
N	2	2	2	1	10	
S	2	2	2	1	0	20
E	1				10	
W	1					

As you can see, if East started the auction with 1D, there was a chance for good things to happen – if the opponents passed, 1D could be made and indeed was the only sound contract for East-West. However, if East started with 2C there was no hope. The table of results tells the story:

Contract	Result	Score	Frequency
2♥ by EW	-2	200	2
2NT by EW	-1	100	1
3♦ by EW	-1	100	1
2♥ by EW	-1	100	1
1♦ by EW	=	-70	1
2NT by NS	-1	-100	1
2♦X by EW	=	-180	1

♣♦♥♠

10 September

Getting to a grand slam

Rakesh Kumar

On Monday 9 September this monster hand turned up:

♠AK962
♥AK
♦AKQ9
♣J5

After West had re-counted her points three times to confirm that she really was looking at 24 hcp, she had to deal with a surprise of almost equal magnitude – as dealer, partner had opened the bidding with 1H!

What would you do at that point? One possibility is to be crazy brave and just bid 7NT. However, that's unsound – give partner an average opening of 12 hcp and it's just possible that the club ace is missing, in which case you would look pretty stupid. There must be a better way ...

Unfortunately your suit is spades and if you bid 1S (forcing) and partner rebids 1NT (quite a good chance) then you will really be stuck. Even though you have no intention of playing in hearts (6NT must surely make even if you are sleepwalking) you could try immediately bidding Roman Keycard Blackwood in opener's suit, then perhaps use additional bids to look for more information.

Say you bid 4NT and partner responds either 5C (if you are playing 14/30) or 5D (if you are playing 03/14) to show that he holds that missing ♣A. What next?

In fact your best bid is the next non-trump step to ask for the trump queen. If responder holds it, he should bid his lowest-ranking king, otherwise he signs off as cheaply as possible. Why would you bid this way? Well, if partner has ♥Q and ♣AK then 7NT must surely be a good bet. Indeed it was – no betting involved as there were 13 top tricks!

BD: 6	♠J87	Dlr: E
	♥7654	Vul: EW
	♦T872	
	♣T3	
♠AK962	♠Q4	
♥AK	♥QJT98	
♦AKQ9	♦543	
♣J5	♣AK4	
	♠T53	
	♥32	
	♦J6	
	♣Q98762	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	
					T	
N						1
S					24	12
E	4	6	7	7	7	3
W	4	6	7	7	7	

Note that if playing 14/30 the next non-trump step inquiry is 5D, which is much more user-friendly than 5S, which is what you need to bid if playing 03/14. If you were looking for a borderline slam in hearts on a quite different hand, you might be in trouble if responder didn't have the queen, because you would be committed to slam anyway. That's why all expert players have switched to 14/30.

On the day, no one bid a grand slam. Sigh ...



1 October
Crashing honours
Rakesh Kumar

How would you play this 3NT? The deal turned up on Monday 30 September.

♠7653
♥AJT9
♦J
♣QT95
♠AQ2
♥K
♦AK9862
♣K84

Your auction was pretty straightforward: 1D-1H-3NT. Your LHO led ♠J and when you played low from dummy, RHO played ♠K, so you won with the ace. What now?

As declarer, one of the first things you need to do in a notrump contract is count your tricks. You have 2 spade tricks, 2 top diamonds, a heart and potentially another one if you can reach dummy in clubs, plus perhaps 2 club tricks. That's still short of the 9 tricks that you need. What's more, you only have one more spade stopper, so if that king was a singleton and LHO has a 5-card suit, things could get awkward.

Perhaps you should have ducked the first trick to find out more about the lie of the land ... anyway you didn't, so now you have to find a source of additional tricks.

Diamonds are unlikely to break 3-3 but if they are 4-2 with a doubleton honour, things will be easy – cash ♦AK, then play ♦9 to force out the remaining honour and you will have 5 diamond tricks. On that line you will have at least 9 tricks.

However, when you play ♦A, LHO drops the queen! Clearly RHO has 5 diamonds and your source of tricks now isn't ...

What about those hearts? You can't take a heart finesse so is there a better way to tackle the suit?

Yes, there certainly is – play ♥K from hand and overtake with the ace! Then play ♥J to give up a heart. When you reach dummy in clubs, which will surely be possible given the holding of ♣Q1095, you will be able to score 3 heart tricks (rather than just 2) to go with 2 spades, 2 diamonds and eventually 2 club tricks. All you have to hope for is that LHO doesn't have *both* the ♥Q and the ♣A to go with a 5-card spade suit. If s/he does, then after your spade stopper is knocked out, LHO will be able to cash 3 winning spades, which is one too many.

Fortunately for you, the two critical cards are split between the two hands. When RHO comes in with ♥Q s/he has no spade to return, as you can see from the full deal, now in its correct orientation:

BD: 30 ♠K		Dlr: E	
♥Q54		Vul: None	
♦T7543			
♣J763			
♠7653		♠AQ2	
♥AJT9		♥K	
♦J		♦AK9862	
♣QT95		♣K84	
♠JT984			
♥87632			
♦Q			
♣A2			
♣♦♥♠		N	
		T	
N			6
S		8	19
E	4 4 2 3	4	7
W	4 4 2 3	4	

There were lots of crashing honours on this deal but the most significant crash was deliberate by you, to get to dummy in hearts. That's a play worth remembering ...



5 November

Southern Highlands Congress 2024

Rakesh Kumar

Our popular annual Congress was held over the weekend of 2-3 November and was again a great success, even though post-COVID table numbers have remained lower than hoped for. Special thanks to the many SHBC committee members and volunteers who helped with the organisation, as well as to Jo Goodacre for the marvellous catering!

The format for both days was as usual 6 × 9-board matches with IMPs scoring. Both the Swiss Pairs on the Saturday and the Teams on the Sunday were once again ably directed by Jeff Carberry.

In the Swiss Pairs, the winners in the 10-table Open section were Helena Dawson - David Weston, closely followed by Sandy Carter - Nerida Gillies, with Wing Roberts - Mick McAuliffe in third place. The award for best regional pair went to SHBC members Tony Lye - Stephen Brabyn. The Restricted section, which pleasingly had as many tables as the Open, was won by Lucy D'Ambrosio - Kevin Hughes, with SHBC members Kirsten Hartley - Simon Elderfield in second place and Maggie Havyatt - David Havyatt coming third.

Swiss Pairs rewards hyper-aggressive bidding of games, putting the defenders to the test. Slams *always* swing IMPs at Swiss Pairs, so pushing for slam contracts is also a good idea. With that in mind, here are two hands for you to consider. Firstly, after your LHO passes, partner opens 1D promising 4+ cards and RHO overcalls 1S, what will you bid with this hand?

♠K9
♥K52
♦JT9
♣AJT97

Secondly, after partner opens 1D as dealer, then raises your 1H response to 3H, what will you do next?

♠K987
♥AJ74
♦Q7
♣KQ2

The board associated with the first question is shown on the following page.

BD: 10	♠K9	Dlr: E	
	♥K52	Vul: ALL	
	♦JT9		
	♣AJT97		
♠AQJT2		♠65	
♥AT43		♥9876	
♦8		♦Q643	
♣Q65		♣842	
	♠8743		
	♥QJ		
	♦AK752		
	♣K3		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
		T	
N	5 5 1 2 5		12
S	5 5 1 2 5	13	2
E			13
W			

With the North hand, a fairly normal response to 1D after the 1S overcall would be 2NT, promising some 11-12 hcp and a stopper in spades. However, at Swiss Pairs, being normal is rarely rewarded. With a possible source of tricks in clubs plus high hopes of tricks from partner in diamonds, a direct bid of 3NT is a potential winner. Of course, it might not make, but the reward for a vulnerable game is substantial.

In fact with clubs 3-3 and both club and diamond finesses working, 11 tricks were not difficult after a spade lead, despite the 4-1 break in diamonds. In the Open, 4 pairs out of 10 did bid 3NT, but none did so in the Restricted.

Aggressive bidding was similarly rewarded on the deal featured in the second problem. For the jump raise, partner is promising some 15-17 hcp or the equivalent, so as you hold 15 hcp you should look for slam. It proves to be cold:

BD: 15	♠K987	Dlr: S	
	♥AJ74	Vul: NS	
	♦Q7		
	♣KQ2		
♠QT6432		♠AJ5	
♥63		♥982	
♦K84		♦JT5	
♣86		♣T754	
	♠		
	♥KQT5		
	♦A9632		
	♣AJ93		

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	
					T	
N	4	6	6	1	3	15
S	4	6	6	1	3	5 6
E						14
W						

However, only 2 pairs found the slam in the Open section – we didn't get there after Julie Bierling successfully interposed a 2S weak jump overcall, derailing the auction. No none in the Restricted section reached slam.

In the Teams, the winners were Vicky Lisle - Ian Lisle - Helena Dawson - David Weston. In second place were Catherine Chaffey - Jake Andrew - Fiona Fawcett - David Hudson, while Clare Filmer-Ramsay - Cassandra Mitchell - Michael Young - Mary Poynten were third. The best regional team was Juliet Robert - Julie Bierling - Lynda Kings - Paul McLean of SHBC.

Of the many interesting hands that arose, here's one that illustrates the quite different approach to card play one might adopt in an IMPs-scored event, where making the contract is crucial and overtricks don't matter as much. East opens 1S, South makes a borderline 2H overcall, West raises to 2S and North jumps to 4H. West leads ♠2 to East's ace and the ♠K continuation is ruffed. Now how should South play?

BD: 22	♠7654	Dir: E				
	♥KT86	Vul: EW				
	♦A					
	♣AJ54					
♠Q32		♠AKJT9				
♥3		♥Q97				
♦KT764		♦J98				
♣T632		♣Q8				
	♠8					
	♥AJ542					
	♦Q532					
	♣K97					
	♣	♦	♥	♠	N	
					T	
N	3	6	2			12
S	3	6	2	5		13
E		1	1			10
W		1	1			

There are lots of options, but the safest involves not touching trumps. Instead South should play a diamond to the ace, ruff a spade to hand noting the fall of ♠Q, ruff a diamond, play a club to the king and then ruff another diamond noting the fall of ♦J. At this point, declarer has taken 6 tricks and these cards remain:

BD: 22	♠7	Dlr: E
	♥KT	Vul: EW
	♦-	
	♣AJ5	
♠		♠T9
♥3		♥Q97
♦KT		♦-
♣T63		♣Q
	♠-	
	♥AJ5	
	♦Q	
	♣97	

Declarer needs 4 more tricks but does not know about the location or distribution of the outstanding trumps. If she attempts to continue the cross-ruff, there is the risk that an opponent will over-ruff with the queen and play back a trump, which will be ruinous. There is a solution, however – declarer can cash ♣A, then ruff the last spade with the ace and the last diamond with the king. When ♥10 is played off dummy, declarer's jack is established as the 10th trick. Of course it is possible to make more tricks if you know where all the cards are, but at IMPs you want to be sure rather than sorry.

In the tournament, 4H was bid at 10 of 16 tables, but only 4 made it. Would you have managed to do so?



12 November

Establishing a long suit

Rakesh Kumar

Overtricks win matchpoints, so at our club sessions, you should always be on the lookout for opportunities to develop an overtrick or two. With that in mind, how would you play 4H from the East hand on the lead of a low diamond? North plays the ace and you ruff.

♠A762	♠K98
♥QJ92	♥A7643
♦J82	♦
♣AQ	♣K9876

As always, you need to count your winners and losers, then develop a plan for the play. Of course you are going to finesse in hearts and hope for a 2-2 break. That alone would be worth 10 tricks. Two more diamond ruffs in hand would get you up to 12 tricks, but you would still have a spade loser. Can you improve on that?

Indeed you can. Cross to dummy with a top club, take the successful heart finesse and draw another round of trumps. Now cash the other top club in dummy and when everyone follows, ruff a diamond and ruff a club. Ruff the last diamond back to hand and you can cash ♣K and the established fifth club to discard 2 spades from dummy! That allows you ruff your spade loser and make 13 tricks – see the full deal below:

BD: 16	♠QT3	Dlr: W
	♥KT	Vul: EW
	♦AQ76	
	♣T543	
♠A762		♠K98
♥QJ92		♥A7643
♦J82		♦
♣AQ		♣K9876
	♠J54	
	♥85	
	♦KT9543	
	♣J2	
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N
		T
N	1	11
S	1	14 10
E	5 7 5 1	5
W	5 7 5 1	

This was played on Saturday 9 November. Although almost everyone was in 4H, only Gai Ritchie timed the play successfully, which earned her a top.

Later that afternoon, another interesting deal came along. After a 1S opening by North, the auction often proceeded 1S-2C-3C-3NT, with South rather optimistically hoping for diamond stoppers in the North hand. On a heart lead, South has little choice but to take the diamond finesse – when this works, she must cash out for 9 tricks, because once the opponents get in again, it's all over.

♠JT953
♥6
♦AQ4
♣AT75

♠A
♥K87
♦9873
♣KQJ63

However, what if North-South instead choose to play in 5C? Although 3NT rules at matchpoints, at IMPs that would certainly be a better idea. On a heart lead to the ace and a spade switch which declarer wins, how should South play?

In fact this is again a deal on which declarer can establish a long suit:

BD: 24 ♠JT953 **Dlr: W**
♥6 **Vul: None**
♦AQ4
♣AT75

♠K874 ♠Q62
♥Q92 ♥AJT543
♦KJT6 ♦52
♣82 ♣94

♠A
♥K87
♦9873
♣KQJ63

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
T

N	6	4	1	3	3	11	
S	6	4	1	3	3	9	7
E							13
W							

After crossing to dummy with ♣A and ruffing a spade high, South can return with ♣10 to draw trumps and ruff another spade. Now a diamond to the queen, finessing successfully, is followed by a third spade ruff, establishing the fifth spade. The losing diamond is discarded on ♥K and dummy is high. Declarer makes 12 tricks, which even at Pairs would outscore those in 3NT!

On the day, no one played in 5C. Those who played in a part-score in clubs did not find the above line, as all made 11 tricks.

Next time you are in a suit contract with enough trumps between the two hands, take a close look at the possibility of establishing an extra trick in a 5+ card side suit ...



26 November

Is your glass half full?

Rakesh Kumar

Partner deals and opens 1D. Your right-hand opponent passes. You hold:

♠AKJT8764
♥A2
♦54
♣T

What possibilities are you considering?

To some extent, the answer to that question depends on whether you are a "glass half empty" or a "glass half full" person.

Those in the former category might think "oh dear there's a misfit, but even though I have just 12 high card points I do I have a good long suit, surely we can make game in spades".

Those in the latter category think of higher things. Especially if they have some concept of the losing trick count: this hand has a mere 5 losers, an average opening has 7 losers, and $24 - (5 + 7) = 12$ tricks possible. Really all that's needed is to check on aces or keycards. As it turned out, only one was missing:

BD: 18	♠5	Dlr: E		
	♥QJT75	Vul: NS		
	♦QJ			
	♣K9875			
♠AKJT8764		♠Q		
♥A2		♥K94		
♦54		♦AK986		
♣T		♣6432		
	♠932			
	♥863			
	♦T732			
	♣AQJ			
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N		
		T		
N	1	1		9
S	1	1		12 12
E	3	6	2	7
W	3	6	2	

So the slam in spades is cold – even though partner doesn't have any spade length, declarer doesn't have to rely on dropping ♠Q because partner does have that card, as well as every necessary card in the red suits.

However, when this board was played on Monday 25 November, only Jan Fennell and Barbara Boag found their way to the slam. That was against us, of course, so they scored a well-earned top and we scored an absolute zero.

But what were all the others souls in the West seat worrying about, I wonder? Try bidding 'em up – it can be fun!

