

September 5, 2004

PREFACE

The Laws of Contract Bridge allow a limited vocabulary: the numbers one through seven, the four suits, double, redouble, and pass. With these fourteen words, and under the constraint that each bid must be higher than the prior bid, partnerships must exchange enough information to make intelligent decisions. Despite these obstacles, most auctions end in plausible contracts. To win, bidders must improve on the manifest competence of most players. If luck is unreliable, judgment and system must step forward.

The world of Contract Bridge offers many excellent bidding systems. These pages describe one species of a popular genus. Harold Vanderbilt used a forcing club system. So did Howard Schenken. C. C. Wei's primary contribution was to study the probabilities to conclude that 16 HCP was a better threshold for the forcing bid than Vanderbilt's and Schenken's 17 HCP.¹

Each system has strengths and weaknesses, benefits and burdens. To choose a system requires self-knowledge. Some players like to bid on light hands; others want solid values. Some prefer natural bids, others relish artificial bids and conventions. These preferences and others should control system choices. Our preferences are to get into the auctions early and often, to keep the bidding lower with stronger hands, and to use more conventions rather than fewer. Begin by imagining Precision played by Kaplan and Scheinwold rather than Roth and Stone and then add asking bids—oodles of asking bids.

Choosing to play Precision only begins the construction of a partnership agreement. One club opening doesn't come up that often. Partners must also agree on the range of the no trump opening, systems over no trump, the requirements for suit bids, the system they'll use for major suit raises, and if they use Precision, what does opening 1♦

promise.

We think it helps to consider a bidding agreement to contain modules. For most purposes, the construction of one module will not constrain the specifications in another. We have found, however, as we age, that memory can be a constraint. In response, we have tried to adopt common approaches across our modules. More than that, we have increasingly thought of auctions as conversations and sought to create a grammar and vocabulary for our discussions. That—and the aphorism, “Bidding is the anticipation of play”—have helped us find some success at sectional and regional tournaments. Mostly, we've had fun whilst we've been immersed in thought.

Your preferences are likely different. Depending upon the differences, you may choose to adopt our views with modifications or to reject them completely. These notes should, however, illustrate how preferences shape treatments and conventions. In particular, we wish to show how unifying principles in the construction of artificial bids can create a language based more in logic than arbitrary memorization. By building our 1♣ auctions around asking bids with consistent structures for their answers, we believe we have a different and worthwhile approach. We hope you will find it interesting and useful.

For better or worse, I am solely responsible for the text and format of these system notes. The content is the product of experience, analysis, and negotiation with my frequent partner Hugh Hendrickson. We have also benefitted from comments by Vern Myers as an observer and Bob Bleil as an occasional partner and careful reader.

It is not at all clear to me that we shall ever finish work on these notes. We began in April 1996 and have yet to polish a full first draft. By posting this work-in-progress, we invite others to try our ideas, to ask questions, and to offer critiques. Never finishing means that we are open to learning and that it is never too late for us to hear a better idea. To that end, please send your comments to clifford.allo.bk.67@aya.yale.edu.

Clifford D. Allo
South Hill, Washington

1. Goren & Wei, p. 8.

I. WHY PLAY AN ARTIFICIAL, FORCING CLUB?

A. The Forcing Club Clarifies All Auctions.

When we open all strong hands with 1♣, 2♦, and 2NT, all other opening bids are limited. When an opening bid is limited, we need fewer bids to convey an adequate description to partner.

With an opening no trump bid of 11–13 HCP, we need only one other bidding sequence—1♦ followed by 1NT—to describe all balanced openings. Similarly, we can cluster unbalanced hands into 11–13 and 14+. All this precision makes the vast majority of the hands easier to manage.

Additionally, when Opener has at most 15 HCP, Responder may pass without fear of missing game with as much as 7 HCP.

The next challenge is to determine how much strength to require for the artificial, forcing 1♣. Schenken wanted 17 HCP. C.C. Wei, however, observed that reducing the threshold to 16 HCP nearly doubled the number of hands without making a significant difference in the practical system construction. In order that the positive response be sufficient for game, all that is required is to make that threshold a little higher. Indeed, ignoring competitive auctions, there is a strong temptation to make the strong bid 15 HCP and the positive response 9.

B. Requirements for a Forcing One Club.

With the exceptions of 2♦ and 2NT that show strong balanced hands with 19–20 and 23–24 HCP, respectively, we open all strong hands, hands with 16+ HCP, with 1♣. The shape and strength of Opener's hand is immaterial. With 15 HCP and only four losers (not a LTC of 4)², it is permissible to open 1♣. Opener's 1♣ is forcing under all circumstances.

2. The distinction between LTC and number of losers is that Kxxx has an LTC of two but three possible losers even if the King lives.

C. Overview of Responder's First Bid.

If Responder lacks values, his first bid is an artificial 1♦.³ Upon hearing the bad news, Opener then describes his hand, and most auctions continue more or less naturally.

To have a positive response, Responder needs any 9 HCP, any 8 HCP with an Ace or a King, or any 7 HCP consisting of an Ace and a King. Any 8 HCP with a four card major is also worth a positive response. With a LTC of 8 and an Ace or King, 7 HCP may be enough. A square hand without a four-card major requires three controls or 9 HCP. Isolated Jacks and Queens should induce caution. Shape is valuable, but shape without entries may be worthless.

If Responder has values, shape determines his first bid.

Most Precisions use 1NT to show a balanced positive response. We found that responding 1NT frequently wrong-sided no trump contracts and required Opener to work too hard to find four-four, major suit fits. Instead, we reverse 1NT and 1♠. To avoid having Responder routinely declaring no trump contracts, Responder's balanced, positive response—including one or both four-card majors—is 1♠, no matter how strong. Opener can then learn more about Responder's hand using our systems of *Asking Bids*. Opener's rebid—either 1NT or a *Support Asking Bid*—will begin an orderly inquiry that discloses only that which Opener needs to know about Responder's hand.

If Responder's hand is unbalanced, his bid gives the first indication of his shape. Opener can then decide what he wants to know about Responder's hand and choose the appropriate *Asking Bid*. Most auctions continue with Opener asking questions and Responder providing further information until Opener can make an informed decision. Often, defenders know everything about Dummy and next to nothing about Declarer.

Most Precision systems require Responder to have five cards to

3. Our 1♦ response is always negative. Unlike many Precisions, our system does not have an *Impossible Negative*.

show a suit. The advantages of five card majors are well-established, but we believe the cost of those advantages is too high. Instead we show four card majors immediately if Responder's hand is unbalanced.

With four hearts, at least 8 HCP, and an unbalanced hand, Responder's first bid is 1♥. With five or more spades, Responder bids 1NT. With either or both minor suits, Responder bids 2♣ and with the rarer, unbalanced hand with exactly four spades but not four hearts, Responder's first bid is 2♦. If Responder's hearts are as equal or longer, he shows the hearts first.

Responder's 2♥, 2♠, 4♥, and 4♠ are weak jump shifts. Responder's 3♣—3♠ show three-suited hands with 14+ HCP. Four clubs is *Gerber* and 4♦ asks Opener for his point count. And 1♦ denies all else.

1. 1♦: Responder has less than 8 HCP and not enough shape for a weak jump shift.
2. 1♥: Responder has at least four⁴ hearts and 8+ HCP.
3. 1♠: Responder has 8+ HCP and a balanced hand.
4. 1NT: Responder has at least five spades and 8+ HCP.
5. 2♣: Responder has minor suit strength, 8+ HCP, but less than four hearts and less than four spades.
6. 2♦: Responder has 8+ HCP, an unbalanced hand, exactly four spades, and at least one minor suit.
7. 2♥ or 2♠: Responder has 4–7 HCP and a good six card suit headed by the Ace, King, or Queen, but with no void.
8. 3♣–3♠: Responder has 14+ HCP, three suits, and a

4. Introduced at the 1996 Tacoma Holiday Sectional by Hugh. I highlight this decision because it was our first substantial departure from standard Precision practices, because it led directly to our first use of *Tell Me More*, and because it was the only useful experience we obtained from an otherwise poor performance at a Sectional.

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| | | singleton in the suit bid. |
| 9. | 4♣: | Gerber (4 0, 1, 2, 3). |
| 10. | 4♦: | Responder's <i>Point Asking Bid</i> . |
| 11. | 4♥ or 4♠: | Responder has 2–7 HCP and a broken eight card suit. |

D. Our Bidding Language: Syntax and Idioms.

Our sequences can be long and involved and initially there is no shortage of memorization, but upon reflection, one can see recurrent use of a set of core concepts. Responder's first positive bid tells Opener whether or not Responder's hand is balanced. Opener has a quiver of questions to determine whether there is a major suit fit. If Opener has a strong suit, he can determine the quality of Responder's support. If Opener and Responder are both balanced, Opener can easily choose a contract. If Opener is balanced, he can determine whether Responder has a suit Opener can support.

Some of our conventions and treatments are borrowed directly from other versions of Precision. Others are modifications or analogies to familiar conventions. A few, we think, are original.⁵

When Responder shows an unbalanced hand with a major suit, Opener's *Tell Me More* provides an opportunity for Responder to show exactly four cards in the other major, to deny the other major or to show exactly five cards in his major. If Responder indicates minor suit shape, then Opener can check for support in the majors or inquire about Responder's minors.

5. Creativity is hard enough; originality is nearly impossible. In college, I wrote a paper that outlined what I thought were original ideas for urban development. My distinguished professor made no mention of prior art. Even though no one—not even my mother—liked my idea, I had the solace that however unpopular, it was mine. Now nearly 40 years later, I recently discovered a central illustration of my core idea in a little-read Sinclair Lewis novel published nearly 29 years before my paper. Worse, Lewis put the idea in the mouth of another cavil youth to illustrate his foolishness.

We generally follow the Kaplan-Sheinwold philosophy: we preempt when weak and try to keep the bidding low when strong. While we don't use inverted minors, we do use Bergen raises and preemptive minor suit raises over our weak no trump.

When opponents interfere, we make extensive use of *Sputnik—the negative double*—to show unbid majors. When opponents interrupt step bid sequences, we use DOP1 if the interference is below five of the agreed trump suit and DEPO if the interference is above five of the agreed trump suit.

We don't figure to play 2NT too often. We use it as an artificial raise in the majors, we use it as a relay in *Lebensohl* when opponents compete over 1NT. We use a *Scrambling 2NT* to compete. We use a *Forcing 2NT* over 1♣. And we use 2NT as a *Point Asking Bid* in many *Tell Me More* auctions. Each of these ideas will receive full description in the chapters that follow.

E. Evaluating Hands.

In all our decisions we use either the *Law of Total Tricks*⁶ or the traditional measures of 23 points and at least an eight card fit to bid three, 26 points and a fit to bid four, 29 points and a fit to bid five, 33 points and a fit to bid six, and 37 points to bid seven, whichever supports great action. Losing trick count (LTC) can help with close decisions. An opening bid is presumed to be seven or eight losers until proven stronger. A limit raise is eight losers. A constructive (mixed) raise is nine losers. A three-card raise is nine or ten losers. A forcing club opener should be assumed to be no more than six losers.

F. Opening Bids Other Than 1♣.

All our other opening bids are limited. If we open 1♦, 1♥, 1♠, or 2♣, we have the strength of either 11 HCP, three quick tricks, or no more than

6. See generally, L. Cohen, *TO BID OR NOT TO BID* (Natco Press 1992).

seven losing trick count (LTC). Our no trump openings—1NT, 2♦, and 2NT—are all narrowly limited. Only our preemptive bids have wider ranges. Our weak twos are 5–10 HCP and our threes are 0–10 HCP.

G. Assembling a Bidding System.

It is reasonable to view a full bidding system as modular. Our full bidding system has the following components: Our Club System, Our Major Suit System, Our No Trump Systems, Our Pre-Emptive Systems, Our Two-Club System, Our Miscellaneous Bids, and Our Interference Systems. These notes describe them all. We believe all our systems follow the same philosophy, and we prefer that consistency. Another partnership, however, might prefer try our One and Two Club Systems but use Two/Over One for major suit hands. Many choices are reasonable. Just be sure both partners are on the same page. And have fun.