

Using Your Judgment

There are many times when you must make a decision where the conditions and the bidding leaves you in a true quandry. Almost every rule for bidding comes with the caveat: "bids are only suggestions, you must use your experience to make judgments. The following examples should help in sharpening you judgment skills. A part of this judgement hinges on what we call secondary honors or intermediate cards. The primary honors are, of course, the A and the K! Intermediate values are the JT9. Note the Q is missing from these categories, it's a cusp card. A protected Q or J is considered a secondary honor.

Prefer the 4-4 Fit

Often enough to make it worth mentioning you will be faced with the choice between two suits, one with a 4-4 fit and the other a 5-3 fit. Obviously if one is a Major and the other a Minor the choice is easy, we prefer Majors over Minors. But when there are both Majors or both Minors we want to choose the 4-4 fit. Why? The 5-3 fit offers potential long suit tricks, after the trump is drawn. An generally it makes little difference which suit is stronger if their honor strengths are close. Let's see how that works

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| ♠KQ43 ♥QJ982 ♦54 ♣A7 | ♠A962 ♥AK4 ♦987 ♣Q32 | Bidding: 1♥ – P – 1♠ – P; 2♠ – P – ? The Responder knows there is a double fit, and SHOULD CHOOSE THE 4-4 fit with 13 hcp bid 4♠. We can see that both Major suits have 9+ HCP total, and 8-cards each. |
| With 5 outstanding you should expect both to break 3-2 which means there are no losers in either suit. You have 3 potential losers in ♦ and a loser in ♣ one of the ♦ losers can be trumped making the contract safe. However, with Spades as trump you can still hold ♦'s to 2 losers and if ♥'s break 3-2 your two long suit winners cover the 2♣ losers the contract making 5, and with the ♥J making 5 is assured even if ♥'s break 4-1. The only way this ♠ contract fails to make 5 is when ♥'s break as Jxxx – x, a 20% chance. Make the ♠Q the ♠8 and 4♠ is guaranteed and 4♥ can't make. Another example. | | |

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| ♠K3 ♥KT43 ♦A7653 ♣AQ | ♠AT8642 ♥A864 ♦86 ♣2 | Bidding: 1NT – ? Responder could easily bid 4♠, but nothing is lost by first bidding Stayman. Responder does have at least 4 in each MAJOR and 8 HCP. Openers rebid shows 4 ♥'s there is a double Major suit fit. Choose the 4-4 fit! Again there is an expected 3-2 split and even though there might be a trump loser and a possible ♠ loser, once those losers are cleared there are 3 ♠ tricks to eliminate 3 of the 4 ♦ losers, one a loser on loser. The results are 1♠, 1♥, and 1♦ loser. |
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Minor suit Game Contracts

As we know, our bidding system is geared toward finding Major suit contracts first, then to detour to a NoTrump contract. The emphasis is often so strong that many completely avoid the Minors. You shouldn't! Let's see what characteristics a hand should have that helps us decide that we should attempt a Minor Suit game contract.

A 9-Card fit – just like the 8-card fit offers the extra trick that says you should choose a Major suit Contract over a No-Trump Contract, the 9-card Minor suit probably adds a trick for that 5-level contract.

A Singleton or Void in a side suit. This is one time that shortness in the long trump hand might make a difference.

Lack of secondary honors in the side suits. Secondary honors have the ability to stop an opponent from gaining too many notrump tricks. Note that a protected J still allows the opponents to get 3 tricks in the suit. Here's an example that fits the bill.

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| ♠AQ843 | ♠8 |
| ♥5 | ♥AQ74 |
| ♦AQT4 | ♦KJ975 |
| ♣K7 | ♣843 |

Note that despite the 25 HCP total, in NT, you have at least 3♠, 2♥ and 2♣ losers. Contrastly you have only 7 winners and need two precarious additional tricks to make the contract. Let's see how the bidding should go. 1♠ – P – 2♦ – P; 3♦ – P – ?

The Opener with a 4LTC hand that meets most of our requirements smartly supports partners likely 4♦ holding. Responder has all the requirements a singleton, no intermediate values in clubs and a likely 9-card fit, should bid 5♦. The bid might not succeed, but has a better chance than 3NT.

There's a notion we should embrace, it is: "If you are thinking of bidding 4 of a minor as a potential contract, you might as well bid 5 and enjoy the game bonus if you are successful.

Looking at this situation from a defensive point of view, what is a good opening lead? The answer: a trump lead, And repeated trump leads whenever defense gets on lead. Why? Note the requirements for bidding 5 of a minor! Singletons stand out as a weakness to be covered by repeated trumping. Removing Trump from both offensive hands removes the possibility for declarer to do that.

Over/Under Bidding!

Despite all the conventions and bidding tools we have we sometimes find ourselves trying to decide to bid game or Pass. Here are some considerations that should help in making the judgment in cases like these.

High cards in Partners suit are assets.

High card points in the opponents suit (except the A) and should be subtracted!

High cards in unbid suits may be useless, and should be discounted!

Intermediate cards in trump suit or in a long suit in a notrump contract are assets, no HCP but still an asset.

Extreme shapes (especially 5-5 and 6-5 hands) especially when there is a singleton or void in an opponents suit is an asset. LTC takes this type of asset in consideration. It suggests an overbid.

Flat hands are a detriment, and should suggest a Pass or underbid.

Let's look at an a few examples:

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| ♠KT3 | ♠AQ7 |
| ♥AT973 | ♥842 |
| ♦K6 | ♦AJ975 |

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| ♣Q82 | ♣843 |
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The bidding: 1♥ – P – 2♦ – P; 2N – P – 3♥ – P; ?
The bidding suggests that responder has 10+ HCP and a heart fit.
But Opener has a minimum hand (12HCP, 13PP) If responder is

at 10/11 HCP there's not enough! Here Opener has a fitting honor in responders suit, the asset first on our list. Despite the possible HCP situation 4♥'s is an excellent gamble. Note also that the likely opening lead (a ♠) will be into his K, a sure trick, even if Partner has a lesser holding than shown.

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| ♠KT3 | ♠AQ7 |
| ♥A9753 | ♥842 |
| ♦J8 | ♦AQ975 |
| ♣A82 | ♣843 |

The bidding: 1♥ – P – 2♦ – P; 2N – P – 3♥ – P; ?
The bidding suggests that responder has 10+ HCP and a heart fit.
HERE Opener still has a minimum hand (12HCP, 13PP) but the honor in patnrn's suit is suspect, and the texture of the trump suit is not as good. Both good reasons to Pass.

In both cases the hands were semi-flat which is “STEE..rike 3” in the 2nd case.

The Real Estate Factor

We are all familiar with the Realtor's mantra: Location, Location, LOCATION! The the next to last example we already saw one case, an unprotected K in a suit led by our LHO. That makes that K worth a full 4 HCP, just like an A, a sure trick. Likewise for the declarer hold AQ(x), Qxx, Kx(x) yield more trick taking value to the hand than the HCP count implies, especially in a notrump contract. This situation arises quite often when our Partner opens with a Minor and we do not have a 4-card Major. It's called positional value!

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| ♠AT32 | ♣Q74 | When Partner opens 1♣, we might be tempted to bid our ♦'s. It's apparent that there will be no fit in a Major so we should be heading toward a NoTrump contract. Our holding in the Majors indicate that we can likely expect an extra trick (or two) from it and that we should be the Declarer. |
| ♥A975 | ♥K4 | |
| ♦Q8 | ♦AJ9754 | |
| ♣A82 | ♣84 | |

The likely lead will be a card from a Major suit – Just what we want especially a ♥(what if Partner didn't have the ♥A?). Note that in the absence of the long suit, the natural response, with 10-12 HCP would be 2NT.

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| ♠AKT32 | ♠43 | When Partner opens 1♠, the natural response is 2♦. Opener doesn't have a good rebid. The ♥Q5 doesn't promise a trick, but it has better positional value if opener is declarer. If it doesn't yield a trick in Notrump it likely won't in a suit contract, and it is more vulnerable if it is in the dummy. With partner showing 10+ HCP your minimum hand being at the top has enough HCP to meet the rule of 23. But even if you were at 12, the rule may not be adhered to, but the positional value of the Qx drives the decision. |
| ♥Q5 | ♥A43 | |
| ♦Q82 | ♦A974 | |
| ♣K82 | ♣A84 | |

Choosing NoTrump with Major Suit Fit

Yes there are cases where it's right to choose NT over a Major. None of the cases include “Cause I like to play No Trump!” It is often in IMPs or Matchpoint contests, like most team games are. These are the things to look for.

No Singleton and Void, remember that short suits are anathema to No Trump!

No obvious way to gain a trick through ruffing! That means a flat hand 3334, → no shortness!.

Stoppers in unbid suits, can include some secondary values!

Let's look at an example:

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| ♠T32 | ♠KQ4 | When Opener mentions 1♥ you inspect your hand and see that you have double stoppers in two of the other 3 suits and good intermediates in the 3 rd . You have a |
| ♥AQT32 | ♥J43 | |

♦A82 ♦KQ4 flat hand so can't, as dummy, gain a trick through trumping! It's time to think

♣A2 ♣KT87 NoTrump. Let's look at the example hand. There are 6 top tricks and an additional trick in ♠'s after the A is forced out. The ♥ suit (partner's suit) has the 2 needed tricks for a 3NT contract, and offers a 3rd even a 4th additional trick so the potential scores in NT are 430 and 460 versus 420 for the suit contract. Note that if the ♥K is finesse-able it is going to be in that position regardless of the contract. It makes no difference the NoTrump score will always be higher than the Suit contract score.

Seven Card Fits

As we have said in the olde days it was not uncommon to find yourself playing in a game contract with a 7-card fit. Even “yesterday” (at the height of Bridge popularity – the Goren days) 7-card fits in a Major suit contract were common occurrences. Holding seven cards means that the opponents have 6 and the most probable split is 4-2 meaning that an opponent has the same number of trump as the declarer. NOTGOOD! This was the reason for the introduction of Standard American's 5-card Major. But there are times when there is no 8-card fit and Notrump is not desirable. What to do??

Here's the guidelines: If you have 2-card support that includes an honor it's not all bad – consider supporting partners 5-card Major suit. An example is in order:

♠AQT32 ♠K3 With the guideline in place let's look at the bidding: 1♠ – P – 2♣ – P;
♥Q5 ♥A4 2♦ – P – ? Responder is sure the points for game are present but there is
♦K843 ♦Q84 hardly the possibility of a fit and NoTrump, based on 2 doubletons, is
♣K4 ♣A974 unattractive. With a doubleton honor in partner's suit responder chooses to show
delayed support, Opener at the top of its bid continues to game, 4♠. The power of the two hands,
like in the olde days, brings the contract home! Here are your homework problems. How do you
play the hand if the opening lead is a ♥? How do you play the hand if the opening lead is a ♣?

If you have reached this point through reading everything that precedes this chapter you have been exposed to all the tools needed to explore for slam. I say this because to simply bid slam, not because you've used these tools but, because you think it might be there is tomfoolery. Many think that Ace-Asking (either Gerber or Blackwood) are the only tool, that is not true, it is generally the last tool.

How do I Know?

The first indication that a slam contract might be in the offing is obtained through an assessment of the playing strength of the two hands. The assessment can be done through either (1) Total HCP or (2) Losing Trick Count(LTC); preferably both. It generally takes 33+ HCP for a Small Slam and 37+ for a Grand Slam. Thus if your total HCP is in the neighborhood of 33 HCP the Slam exploration is in order. You determine both HCP and LTC from the bidding, the easiest example is when a Partner Opens with 2NT or 2♣ and you hold 10+ HCP. This is why it is so important that one understand The 3 is led is from the dummy's J643 and you hold QT2. You should play the 2, there is a chance that declarer is holding AK9x and may attempt to finesse the 9 but (with 3 honors) that is unlikely. By playing low you have assured yourself 1 trick in that suit. Another example, this time the declarer leads low from hand. The dummy holds Q83 and you K95. You may be tempted to play the 9 – forcing the Q – but that is wrong! It is true that you effectively hold 2 honors (K and 9) but now is not the time to split your honors (that's for a little later), just remember “low on low” in second seat!

Honor led from Dummy

When an honor is led from the Dummy it is often correct to cover that honor, but it is also just as often wrong to do it. Knowing when to cover is a what makes you a better player. You might have heard the rules “cover an honor with an honor” and “cover the second honor” if the lead is from a two honor holding. We'll dissect those for a better understanding. There are two other rules that are dependent on how many honors you have that are higher than the honor that is led.

1. You have 2 honors higher than the honor led – play the higher of your two honors. Example: The lead is the J from the Dummy's JT65 and you hold AQ3. You should play your A. If declarer later plays the T you should cover with the Q. It may lose to the K, but if Partner originally held 3 to the 9, the 9 is now a winner. You have held declarer to one trick in the suit. You can check out this logic by laying a suit out as shown above and then divide the remaining 6 cards evenly between the other two hands. You will see that no matter how those 6 cards are divided, the explained strategy maximizes the tricks for the defense.

Another example. The lead is the T from dummy's T94 and you hold KJ7. Here you should play the K and when the 9 is played you play the J.

2. You have only 1 honor higher than the honor led you hold up on the lead of the first honor and play your honor on the lead of the second honor.