

## **Ross's contract bridge class 2017: Sixth class review.**

### **Bridge customs.**

#### *Statistics and probability.*

A challenge of bridge that attracts some players is the enormous variety of possible deals. In fact, possible combinations of cards total 53,644,737,765,488,792,839,237,440,000. (The number from Wikipedia; sounds bigly to me.) Of course, some combinations of cards are more probable than others. How probable? Well, we can calculate that.

If you're the kind of nerdy type who really likes to base your play on probability statistics, you're probably also a quantitative researcher. Don't worry. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Many support programs are available—including bridge! You may indulge your passion to the extent you wish. What's more, players who make choices based on statistical probability—and not the squishy, seat-of-the-pants intuition that tends to emanate from us humanities folk—tend to win more games. In the play section below we consider general probability strategy, but here are some probabilities of common distributions to rev up the quant jocks.

Five cards of a suit held by opponents:

3-2 split: 68%.

4-1 split: 28%.

5-0 split: 4%, but 100% that declarer will respond with profanity.

Six cards of a suit held by opponents:

3-3 split: 36%.

4-2 split: 48%.

5-1 split: 15%

6-0 split: only 1%, but 100% that declarer will wail and gnash teeth.

### **Bidding: overcalls, intro to big hands.**

#### *Overcalls with minimum.*

I realize we've played pretty much as if the opener and responder always dominate the auction like an NDSU football team playing in Frisco. That's usually true. But not always. In both cases. If an opposing player dares to bid after opener or respondent, that bid is called an *overcall*.

We presume overcalls are not common, because an opener by definition (normally) holds more points than average. If the rest are distributed more or less equally, other players won't have more than about eight (14 pts for opener leaves 26 for the rest, divided by three). An average hand or less does not qualify for a bid, except in response to a partner's bid. But like the guy with his head in an ice box and feet in a furnace is, on average, comfortable, sometimes in bridge the cards don't fall as the rules of randomness would lead us to expect.

If an opponent holds near opening count (11-12 pts), he or she may choose to participate in the auction by making an overcall. This tells partner, "I have 11-12 points here. If you have some, we may be able to snatch the contract from the opening bidder." The opponent bids his best suit, normally a five-card major. (He needs 16-18 pts to overcall one no trump.)

The partner of the overcaller, knowing his colleague's count, assesses his own hand. It is possible he also has near opening count, which suggests the opener's partner has zilch, too bad, so sad. Maybe the opponents ought to be in game—or at least get a contract for part score. He may want to encourage partner by bidding.

Note the same requirement for five-card majors hold for the person making an overcall as for the opening bidder. For example, if the opener bids one heart (five or more hearts) and the left-hand opponent (LHO) holds 11 HCP and five spades (11 + 1 for distribution=12) he can overcall one spade. If he holds only four spades he can still overcall, but must find another suit.

The partner of the person who overcalls also plays by the same bidding rules as responder: with six to nine points he can either raise

partner's suit or bid one no trump; with more points he can bid his own best suit, even at the two level, or support partner's suit by jumping. Consider, of course, that the opener's partner may also be bidding. Everyone wants to get in on the action, if possible.

But let's reflect a little more on overcalls. An overcall after a natural opening bid (that is, not conventional—we'll talk more about conventions later) tells you that, honestly, you and your partner probably don't have huge points lurking. After all, opener has at least 13, and his partner seldom has a yarborough (odds against are 1,827 to 1). So competitors who overcall tend to think a little more conservatively, and may not bid to game, or invite game, if they really don't think the points are quite there. That's the minus side. On the plus side, if the opponents do manage to take the contract away from opening bidder, they know where the high cards are probably situated. That changes the 50-50 odds of a successful finesse—because you can be pretty sure who's holding that high card. (Warning: throwing in an overcall gives declarer the same information, should the opponents not manage to wrest the contract away from opener.)

#### *Overcalls with opening count.*

If you have more than 12 points, do not simply overcall (such as 1♥ - 1♠). If you have opening count, this is the bid: *double*.

We already were introduced to conventions as we considered responses to one no-trump. Remember ol' Sam Stayman? The *takeout double* is another convention. It does not mean what doubles normally are supposed to (that is, "I think you're going down, down, down, my friendly competitor, and we're gonna make you pay"). Instead, it tells partner this: "I have opening count. Please bid your best suit, and I'll see if we have a fit."

The takeout double is forcing. That is, unless there's an intervening bid, a partner must respond, even if he has zero points! So the response to the double says nothing about points, only longest suit.

If the responder (to the opening bidder) says something besides pass, then the partner of the person who bid the takeout double is off the hook. He or she may pass. But if that person holds six or more points, if he can he or she should bid anyway, based on the same responder rules.

*Big hands.*

Once in a while you pick up a hand that contains so much royalty you think you're at Buckingham Palace. How do you tell your partner that you are extremely well endowed?

If you have 21-22 points, open **two clubs**. This bid is conventional; it does not promise clubs. It says, "Partner, I have an amazing hand here, and I'll tell you more the next round."

Responder must bid, as two clubs is a forcing opening. Here are the responses:

0-6 pts: two no trump.

7 or more pts: bid your best suit, or...

Bid three no-trump.

On rebid opener shows his (presumably) five-card major suit.

Responder can support that suit if he has three or more, or if not, can bid three no-trump. Note: do not bid two no-trump if you have seven or more points, because that denies the minimum values you have. Consider: seven points may not seem like much, but your partner has 21-22. Together you have game.

If opener has just a passel of points in his little paw, and a balanced hand, he can bid:

22-24 pts: two no-trump.

25-27 pts: three no-trump.

(I have only gotten more than 24 points once in my entire bridge life, and I was so excited I had to excuse myself for the restroom.)

Should responder have more than seven points, he begins to count partnership totals. If it reaches 32-33, the partnership is in “slam territory”:

32-33 total pts: the partnership should eventually reach six, a **small slam** (promising to take all the tricks except one). You score 500 bonus points (non-vulnerable) and 750 (vulnerable) plus game.

37+ total pts: You have nearly everything. The partnership should bid seven, a **grand slam** (promising to take all the tricks). You score 1,000 bonus points (non-vulnerable) and 1,500 (vulnerable) plus game.

You may think the odds of a grand slam are low. They are (.7% for small slam). But nearly every time I play bridge, at least once in the evening a partnership actually does manage to take nearly all the tricks, the definition of a slam. Unfortunately they often did not have the prescience to bid it, so it doesn't count.

We'll cover large hands in more detail later, but I think it's worth addressing now confusion regarding opening bids at the two level. Some bridge players (like me) consider every opening of two in a suit (including clubs) to be strong (21-22 pts). But many players use a system of *weak two* bids. In this system, only two clubs is strong. All other two bids show actually less than opening count. To avoid confusion, I recommend at this point with a 21-22-pt. hand you open **two clubs**. It's always strong.

## **Strategy.**

### *Getting the breaks.*

The best bridge players—or so I'm told—rival blackjack players in that, one, they remember the cards played, and two, they know the odds. Earlier we covered learned some of this in passing. The odds of a finesse working—that is, that a particular opponent holds the card you're finessing for—is 50-50, or 50%. But you can improve the odds in your favor by observing the bidding and play. For example, you are declarer. The dummy holds:

♠ AQxxx.

An opponent holds the king. If it is the LHO, you can finesse successfully. If it is the RHO, you will lose your queen. Fifty-fifty, right?

Maybe. But you recall that in the bidding your RHO did not open. She also did not overcall. That suggests she probably has fewer than 10 points. Yet she has already played the ace and king of clubs, and a queen of diamonds. That's nine points. Could she also hold the king of spades? That would have given her 12 points, and she probably would have overcalled. So probably your LHO holds the king, and your finesse will win. Here is a possible spade holding:

North (dummy)  
♠ AQxxx.

East  
♠ Kxx

West  
♠ Jx

South (declarer)  
♠ xxx

But as important is knowing the odds of a suit breaking. Let's say you have this trump holding:

North (dummy)  
♥ AQx

South (declarer)  
♥ Kxxxx

If trumps break 3-2, you have no losers in this suit. But if trumps break 1-4, you will likely lose a trick, and you'll have to play the suit

four times to draw trumps. That leaves you with only one trump instead of two.

What if, alas, your trump suit comprises only seven?

North (dummy)

♥ AQx

South (declarer)

♥ Kxxx

You have six trumps out against you. If trumps break 3-3, your fourth trump will be good. But if they break 2-4, you will likely lose a trump.

When four cards are out against you, the odds favor a break of 3-1. When five cards are out against you, the odds favor a break of 3-2. When six cards are out against you, the odds favor a break of 4-2.

So what if you are lucky enough to hold nine trump, such as this?

North (dummy)

♥ Axx

South (declarer)

♥ QJxxxxx

You are missing the king. But if an opponent holds a singleton king, you can capture it by simply playing the ace. Should you? The odds say yes: slap down that ace, and the king may very well fall.

However, if you hold one fewer trump, eight instead of nine, do not play the ace. The odds are the king will not fall. Bridge players have a cute saying to remember this: "Nine ever, eight never."

*Eliminating losers.*

In the last lesson we noted that declarers in a trump contract should pause after dummy is tabled to count their losers. If they count too many to make their bid, they look for ways to eliminate them. One way, we noted, is to trump them. A second way is to try a finesse. Here's a third way: sluff them on winners. Example:

North (dummy)

♠ AKx

♥ xxxx

♦ xxx

♣ xxx

South (declarer)

♠ x

♥ KQJxxx

♦ KQJ

♣ Axx

The contract is four hearts. Count your losers: one heart, one diamond and two clubs. You will lose the ace of hearts and diamonds. But consider that singleton spade in your hand. If you play the ace and king from the board, you can sluff a club on the king of spades. Tah-dah! You have eliminated that loser, so now can make your contract!

But let's not get too smug. To make this work you have play carefully. The general rule suggests declarer should draw trumps right away. But if you do that you'll let the opponents in, because they'll take the ace of trumps. They may also take the ace of diamonds and can establish two club tricks. So before drawing trumps you need to play to the ace of spades, then play the king of spades and sluff a losing club.