

Begin contract bridge with Ross

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Class Two

Bridge customs.

- The first dealer is normally determined by choosing random cards from a deck. High card holder deals.
- The dealer asks the person to his or her right to cut the deck. The deck is cut toward the dealer.
- The dealer begins with the person to his or her left, dealing clockwise. Deal and play always move clockwise.
- While the dealer distributes the cards, his or her partner shuffles a second deck and places it to the right, ready for the next round.

Picking up your hand before all the cards have been dealt. One word: don't. It's a top etiquette faux pas, sorta like tucking into Thanksgiving dinner before grace. Or guzzling a beer in baseball during the National Anthem. Perilous.

The dummy.

We noted in Class One that bridge is always played with partners. The partnership that chooses the trump suit (or no-trump) does not play the hand as a team, however. Instead, one member of the partnership plays *both* his or her own hand *and* that of his partner. The partner's hand is laid face up on the table, so that the partner can see the cards. Of course, the opponents can also see those cards. This hand is called the *dummy*, and is laid down after the first player (to left of declarer) plays a card, called the *opening lead*.

The partner designated as dummy does not participate further in the playing of the hand. (I usually get snacks or another glass of wine.) In fact, bridge etiquette requires this partner to remain silent, and not grunt, scratch, snort, groan or screech in anguish as a response to a partner's purportedly foolish play. The dummy is permitted to say a

single sentence. As the partner reaches across to dummy to play a card, he can say this: “Partner, are you *sure* that is the card you wish to play?” But the dummy can’t explain further why he or she is saying this.

The person who plays his own hand and the dummy’s hand is called the *declarer*. Play of the hand begins to the left of declarer, and proceeds clockwise. The hand that takes a trick must lead the next card—even if that hand is the dummy.

Bidding.

Determining a trump suit.

Remember that a trump is higher than any other side suit card. Having adequate trumps is key to winning the hand. Partners work together to determine the best trump suit. Here are two rules:

- The suit should have eight or more cards distributed between both the hands.*
- The suit should have high cards (A,K, Q, J.)

*It is more important to have length than strength. If a declarer is short of trumps, the opponents will try to play him out of trumps and then take control of the hand, because they will be able to trump dealer’s side suits.

It would be great if each player could just chat about the hand with a partner, saying things like, “Well, gee, I have five hearts. That’s pretty good. How many do you have? Only two? Okay, let’s try spades then. No good? Well, what do you have a lot of?”

Not surprisingly, that’s not allowed in bridge. In fact, bridge only allows the following words to be spoken as a way to communicate with your partner:

- The numbers one through seven.
- The names of the suits: clubs, diamonds, hearts, and spades.
- No-trump.

- Pass.
- Double.
- Redouble.

We'll get to some of these later, but today we'll talk about suit bids. How do we communicate our hand with our partner using just these words, which we must utter in a decidedly neutral tone?

This is called *bidding*. And the process of bidding is called an *auction*. The winner of the auction sets the trump suit (or no-trump), plays the hand as dealer and dummy, and (he or she hopes) gets the points for winning that round. The successful bid is called a *contract*, hence *contract bridge* is the name of the game.

So. How do you determine what to bid? You rely on a *bidding system* that you and your partner have agreed to use. (Note that you must also tell your opponents what system you use, because everyone at the table has the right to know what a bid means, limited only by their ability to remember the system.)

The point-count system.

Some decades ago as contract bridge became popular people realized that it's hard to make bids when you have no real idea what your partner holds. So an oh-so-clever method was set up to calculate the worth of a hand based on *points*. The point-count system awards points to high cards as indicated:

A=4 pts.

K=3 pts.

Q=2 pts.

J=1 pt.

Distribution points.

Many players further refine this system by giving extra points for length, called a *long suit*. We may award a hand one extra point for a five-card suit, two extra points for a six-card suit, etc.

Note players may also give extra points for a small number of cards in a suit, called a *short suit*: one point for two cards (called a *doubleton*); two points for one card (called a *singleton*); three points for no cards at all in that suit (called a *void*). Why would a short suit merit points? Because you try to quickly divest yourself of those cards and begin trumping.

You can choose to give your hand extra points for a long suit or a short suit, or sometimes both. Partnerships may choose different systems; these will be discussed in Class Five.

Okay, so how many points do you need? Let's consider:

The deck has 40 high-card points, A,K,Q,J of four suits. That means an average hand contains 10 points.

You need to have better than average to open the bidding. Standard systems require you to have at least 13-14 high card points (HCP). Many players count points for long suits in an opening bid. Some also count points for short suits. I do count them if I and my partner determine that we have a *fit* (see below).

To *open the bidding* means that you are the first person at the table to bid. The dealer gets first choice. If he or she does not have sufficient count to bid, the response is **pass**. ("No bid" if you're playing the British system). Players take clockwise turns to determine if anyone has enough points to open. If no one does, the hand is "passed out" (I kid you not) and the deck is shuffled and re-dealt.

Suppose you have 13-14 points. What should your opening bid be? In modern bridge, most American players use the *five-card major* style. Remember, you want to play in a major suit (spades or hearts) if you can, because you can reach game with fewer tricks. The rule is this:

- If you have five or more spades, bid **one spade**. If you have five or more hearts, bid **one heart**.

- If you have neither five spades nor five hearts, bid either one club or one diamond (preferably the longer of the two), even if you only have three cards in that suit. (If you have both five spades and five hearts bid spades first, then hearts if your partner does not support your spades.)

What does this bid tell partner? A lot! You are saying, “Partner, I have at least 13 (and up to 20) points, and at least five spades (or hearts).”

Remember you should have at least eight of a suit to make that suit the trump. Now the partner can examine his or her hand. If spades are opened, and partner’s hand has three or more, eeeeexcellent! You have support for partner, a *fit* in spades.

To **respond** to an opening one-bid in a suit, then, here’s what you need:

- At least six HCP. If you don’t have that, it’s gonna be pretty grim making a contract, so pass, no matter how much agony is exhibited in your partner’s facial expressions.
- With more than six (but fewer than 10), and a fit, respond **two of partner’s suit**: 1 spade—2 spades.

If you do not have three cards or more in partner’s suit, bid **one no-trump**. This response tells opener, “I have six to nine HCP and weak support for your opening suit.” (Note: At this fairly weak level of point count, do not respond two of anything other than partner’s opening suit. The correct response if you can’t support partner’s suit is one no-trump.)

More on scoring.

Remember that only tricks after six (a book) count. So when you bid one of anything, you are telling players you expect to take seven tricks. Bidding the max (a “grand slam”) is seven, telling players you think you’re going to take all the tricks. Remember:

Spade and heart tricks=30 pts each (above six).

Diamond and club tricks=20 pts each.

No trump=40 pts for the first trick, 30 for each subsequent trick.

A game requires you to gather 100 or more points in one or more rounds. A *rubber* is two games, and rewards a large bonus.

So what happens if you bid two, saying you'll take two tricks above book (*the two-level*), and actually do so well you take four? Well, good for you, but only the first two count toward game: 60 pts.

100 pts

– 60 pts

=40 to go for a game.

You don't just lose those extra 60 points. They are added to your score. They just don't count toward the game. The extra points are called *points above the line*. You prefer to have all points count toward game, so wish you would have bid more. You *underbid*.

But.... what if you don't make your contract? Your opponents score points, bwah-hah! For every trick fewer than you said you'd make, your opponents win 50 points above the line. (Or a 100-point-per-trick penalty if you have already won a game and so are vulnerable.) Not making your contract is called *going down*.

We try to make games because that's what wins bridge tournaments:

Win two games in a row=700 pt bonus.

Win two out of three games=500 pt bonus.

Basic strategy.

Note that the last thing you want to see as declarer is some obnoxious opponent trumping in on your good side-suit aces and kings. To eliminate this possibility, most of the time declarers play trump right away in an effort to divest their opponents from those pesky cards. This is called *drawing trump*. If you can remember no other cards that have been played (like me, especially after that glass

or two of wine), at least remember how many trump are still out, so that an opponent doesn't trump in on you.

As an opponent, it's usually wise not to play an ace right away, unless you also have the king and perhaps queen. While the ace will likely get you one trick, you'll also signal clear sailing to declarer who may have the king, queen and jack, and so *establishing his suit*. Often it's better to hold up a round or two and keep declarer guessing.