

The Advancing Player



Match Point Strategies

One of My Readers Requested this Topic – So Here it Is

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We'll start with the bidding.

One principle is that we compete fiercely at the two level and only go to the 3 level when we think it is "right." In order to compete to the 3 level, we should have: (1) an extra trump (so the Law of Total Tricks may help protect us); or (2) shortness in the suit the opponents are bidding - so extra distribution to aid us; or (3) extra strength. Beware of bidding on with the extra strength criteria when your hand is very balanced.

Balanced hands are generally better at defense than offense. Usually, if the distribution is working in your favor, your opening hand will have only six losers by Losing Trick Count.

Examples: with all of the following hands, you open 1♠; LHO bids 2♥; partner bids 2♠;

| You | LHO | Part | RHO |
|-----|-----|------|-----|
| 1♠ | 2♥ | 2♠ | 3♥ |
| ? | | | |

- With ♠KQJ10x ♥Axx ♦Kxx ♣xxx, pass. You have an ordinary opening hand of seven losers by Losing Trick Count. You do not have an extra trump, nor shortness in hearts.
- With ♠KQJ10x ♥x ♦AKxx ♣xxx, be willing to take the push to 3♠. You have a singleton heart (and only six losers by LTC).
- With ♠KQJ10xx ♥xx ♦Axx ♣Kx, you have an extra trump (and six losers by LTC), so taking the push to the 3 level is reasonable.

Another principle: We do not allow the opponents to play two of a major when they want to play 2 of a major on FIT auctions. Please remember, if they do not have a fit, we do not usually have a fit. On misfit hands, prefer to defend! An auction of 1♠ by LHO; pass by partner; 1NT (Forcing) by RHO; pass by you; 2♣ or 2♦ or 2♥ by LHO; pass by partner; 2♠ by RHO is not a FIT auction. It is a misfit auction. RHO is taking a "false preference" and normally has only two spades. Do not balance. (If you or your partner had great distribution, you would have bid earlier.)

By contrast; 1♠ on your right; pass by you; 2♠ on your left; pass by partner; pass by RHO is a FIT auction. You should almost always balance by making a takeout double for all three unbid suits; bidding a 5 card suit of your own; or bidding 2NT – asking partner to "pick a minor." If you balance, three good things could happen:

1. you push them to the 3 level where they go down
2. you make a part score yourself
3. your side goes down less than the value of 2♠ making.

By contrast, only 1 bad thing could happen: you go down (perhaps doubled) for more than their part score. If you push them to the 3 level and they make, you break even.

So, the only times you would not balance would be:

1. you are vulnerable and have a truly horrible hand that is mostly defense (e.g., lots of Queens and Jacks)
2. you are playing against a pair who you know chronically underbid, and you suspect that they may be missing a game
3. your HCP are so well placed and you know that their trumps are breaking badly, so you are content to defend in 2♠ rather than risking going down at the 3 level. [An example would be you holding ♠AQ10x ♥Kx ♦A10x ♣1098x when the spade is opened on your right and they reach 2♠. You do not have a hand to balance when LHO bids 2♠ and partner and RHO pass.]

Another principle: Tactics between the heart and spade suits are very important. I tell all my partners: “Do not bid 3♠ unless you are willing to defend 4♥” (when opponents are competing in hearts). Also, “Do not bid 4♥ unless you are willing to defend 4♠” (when opponents are competing in spades. In other words, do not push the opponents into a game that they might make – but would not have bid if you had not pushed them up!

North opened 1NT (15-17) and everyone passed. I led a fourth-best spade. [Sequences must be three cards against notrump. Queen would be an incorrect lead in this case.] Declarer tried the ♠8 from Dummy (her best hope), but partner covered with the ♠9 – another correct play. I have led the ♠5 – presumably my fourth-best card. That means [Rule of 11] that there are six cards above my ♠5 in partner’s hand, Dummy, and Declarer’s hand. Partner can see three in his hand and two in Dummy. Ergo, Declarer has only one spade above the ♠5. It is highly likely to be the ♠A.

Declarer ducked the ♠9 and West continued with the ♠K to Declarer’s ♠A. Declarer next played the ♥4 to the ♥10 in Dummy as I gave count with the ♥3 and partner (West) gave count with the ♥2. [Count is given when Declarer or Dummy initiates a suit, unless you are winning the trick.] Declarer then played a low club to her ♣Q and I won with the ♣A.

Counting HCP

Time to count High Card Points. I have seen the ♠A from Declarer’s hand. Her play to the ♥10 in Dummy [and partner’s count card] reveals that she started with ♥KQJ4. Her play of the clubs makes it very likely that she has both the ♣K and the ♣Q. That adds up to 15 HCP. She might also own the ♣J, but she cannot hold the ♦A or ♦K with what she has already shown (or inferred).

I cash two good spades and North is squeezed on the fourth round of spades. She can let go of the ♣10, but then must give up a diamond if she wants to keep all her heart winners. I play the ♦Q, which holds as expected, and a diamond to West’s ♦A and ♦K (as the ♦J falls from Dummy). Since Declarer has discarded a diamond (from her original ♦10987 holding), Partner’s ♦2 takes a trick as well.

Down two.

About half the field was down 1. About half the field was making 1NT (with two pairs making 2NT).

Hand #2

Dealer: North

Vulnerable: None

| | | |
|--------|--------|--------|
| | ♠10983 | |
| | ♥KQ3 | |
| | ♦QJ3 | |
| | ♣A92 | |
| ♠AJ6 | | ♠KQ2 |
| ♥J642 | | ♥107 |
| ♦94 | | ♦AK108 |
| ♣Q1076 | | ♣KJ85 |
| | ♠754 | |
| | ♥A985 | |
| | ♦7652 | |
| | ♣43 | |

North opened 1♣ and I overcalled 1NT (15-18 as an overcall) in the East seat. South passed. West invited with Stayman. [We would pass a 15-17 opening notrump with a mediocre 8 HCP at match points, only inviting when vulnerable at IMP scoring. However, I can have one more point here, so partner invited.]

I denied a major with 2♦, and West bid 2NT. Despite two 10s my hand was less than inspiring, with only one Ace and wide-open hearts. As I duly alerted the opponents, since we play 4-way transfers, my partner can only invite through Stayman, so his 2♣ bid did not guarantee any 4-card major.

The lead was a fourth-best heart, won by the ♥Q in the North. North continued hearts which is wrong. North can see that playing hearts will eventually set up a trick for the ♥J in Dummy. A general principle of defense is to try to get your other defensive tricks before you take tricks that will develop trick(s) for Declarer. North could shift to a spade knowing that I have no more than three spades, thanks to my denial of a major, so declarer has a theoretical chance to develop one spade trick by force.

North can actually tell that South does not own the ♠K or ♠Q. Dummy has 8 HCP; North has 12. That is 20 HCP. South is known to have the ♥A since East did not kill the ♥Q at trick #1. Therefore, the most South can have (in addition to the ♥A) is one Jack – or nothing.

So, East is known to hold the ♠KQ; ♦AK; and ♣K. The only unknown card is the ♣J. However, with the ♣10 in Dummy, Declarer will get three club tricks once the ♣A is gone, as she can finesse to Dummy's ♣10 if need be. North should expect East's most likely shape is: 3-2-4-4. That is the most common hand pattern in bridge, and East is known to have exactly two hearts from the lead, and probably three spades due to the Stayman denial. Declarer has three sure spade tricks, but only three since neither East nor West has that fourth spade. Two diamond tricks bring the total to only eight tricks.

So, North's best shot is to lead a low diamond at trick 2. Two good things could happen:

- (1) South could own the $\spadesuit 10$, in which case N/S will have their five tricks to hold the contract: 1 diamond; one club; and three hearts [taken after they get the other tricks].
- (2) East could decline to finesse for both diamond honors the first time. If North feels the diamond is too dangerous, she can exit at trick #2 with a passive spade trick.

Ironically, the same math will make Declarer more likely to finesse North for both diamond honors – if she stops to count HCPs at trick #1. That is one reason to play the diamond immediately – before Declarer might have stopped and thought things through. When North wins the $\heartsuit Q$, she is likely to hold the $\heartsuit K$ as well. She would be unlikely to play the $\heartsuit Q$ from $\heartsuit AQx$ with $\heartsuit Jxxx$ in Dummy. Therefore, South has the $\heartsuit A$. So, in order for North to get to 12 HCP, she needs both the $\spadesuit Q$ and the $\spadesuit J$. (Of course, some people open balanced 11 HCP hands, but it is not common.)

If Declarer figures out the HCPs around the table, she will always come to nine tricks, but N/S should refrain from making it too easy for her.