

THE  TIMES

IMPROVE YOUR BRIDGE GAME

Andrew Robson



**'No one else has the capacity to explain Bridge
more clearly than Andrew' – OMAR SHARIF**

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INTRODUCTION

This is one of the few Bridge books aimed at the social or less experienced player, as opposed to the tournament player. If you long to improve, but find yourself repeating the same mistakes and perhaps not even knowing that they are mistakes, then this book is for you.

In the short opening section, 'The Game', I set out the keys to holding your head up high at the Bridge table. Incorporated into each of the three subsections – Bidding, Declarer Play, Defence – are all the tips. Each tip is numbered, enabling you to cross-reference it with the relevant deal in the main body of the book.

The pages that follow are based on my Friday column in *The Times*, entitled 'Common Mistakes for the Less Experienced'. Each page contains an instructive deal and a salutary lesson: what happened when the hand was played at the table, and what should have happened. The analysis ends with the numbered tip.

You can read 'The Game' first, in its entirety. Or you can flick back and forth from the numbered tip in 'The Game' to its deal in the main body of the book. Alternatively you can pick a deal at random, with the option of cross-referencing each tip in 'The Game'.

I hope you enjoy the book and find it instructive. If you are not a regular *Times* reader, you can access my daily column from *The Times* online www.timesonline.co.uk. For more information about myself and my Bridge School in South West London see www.andrewrobson.co.uk.

THE GAME

Bridge is the most widely played game in the world, and surely the best. It is endlessly fascinating at whatever level it is played, from complete beginner up to world champion. Even experts never truly conquer the game – a blessing, or Bridge would go the way of Noughts and Crosses. As if to emphasize this, Computer Bridge is lagging behind Computer Chess or Backgammon. The skills required to be a top Bridge player are so many and varied.

A microcosm of life, Bridge combines competition (against the opponents) and co-operation (with partner). Perhaps the single most important joy of the game is this partnership element. From the moment you pick up your 13 cards to form your 'hand', you try to convey messages to partner about it. This communication of information in the first phase of the game – the bidding (or auction) – leads to one partnership (the one making the final – higher – bid) contracting to make a designated number of tricks in their chosen trump suit. Then the play begins – will they prevail, or will they be prevented from achieving their trick target? A few minutes later, a totally new deal begins and with it a whole new set of challenges.

SECTION 1: *Bidding*

INTRODUCTION I will be teaching a simple version of English Standard Acol, incorporating a 12–14 ‘Weak’ notrump and Four-Card Majors. I have focussed primarily on the first stages of an auction: if the first few bids are accurate, a sensible contract will normally be reached.

THE BASICS When first looking at your hand, count the high-card points (ace = four; king = three; queen = two; jack = one). An average hand will contain ten points (an ace, a king, a queen and a jack). Also look at your distribution. Are your suits of relatively similar length (‘balanced’), or is there some disparity (‘unbalanced’)?

You must then try to describe your hand to partner during the first phase of Bridge: the bidding (or auction). There are two objectives of the bidding: you must ascertain (i) whether you have a mutually compatible trump suit, a ‘fit’ (eight or more cards in one suit between the partnership), and (ii) how many of the 13 tricks for which to aim with that suit as trumps. Bids must increase, starting from 1♣ then 1♦, 1♥, 1♠, 1 notrump (NT), 2♣, 2♦....7NT. Adding six to the number of the bid made tells you the number of tricks for which you have contracted. Thus 3♣ means that you must win nine tricks (or more) with clubs as trumps.

Clubs and diamonds are known collectively as the minor suits. They score 20 points each trick (over the six), so bidding and making 5♣ and 5♦ is required to score ‘game’ (100 points). Hearts and spades the majors, score at 30 points each, so 4♥ and 4♠ win game. Notrumps – literally playing without a trump suit – score slightly more than the suits: 40 for the first trick (over six), reverting to 30. Thus 2NT scores 70 points and 3NT gives game. The three most attractive game contracts are 3NT, 4♥ and ♠. Holding 25 high-card points between the partnership is a good guide for attempting one of those games. After winning the game, you become ‘vulnerable’: half way to rubber (the first side to two games). If you now fail in a contract, your opponents receive 100 per trick as opposed to 50. Playing Duplicate Bridge (or Chicago – four deal Bridge) a bonus is given for making a game: 300 (non-vulnerable) and 500 (vulnerable). In Duplicate an extra 50 points is added to the score resulting from making part-score. Thus Four Hearts bid and made (non-vulnerable) scores 300 (the non-vulnerable game bonus) + 120 (the tricks) = 420. Two Hearts making three (i.e. one overtrick) scores 50 (part-score bonus) + 90 (tricks made) = 140. Note that overtricks score at trick value (i.e. 30 a trick for notrumps and majors; 20 for minors).

OPENING THE BIDDING Dealer starts the bidding. If he has a bad hand, he does not open the bidding, instead saying ‘No Bid’ or ‘Pass’. If he has a little above average or better, he opens. Typically he will open One of his Longest Suit.

Question: What is a little above average?

Answer: Always open the bidding with 12 or more points. You should also open when holding slightly less with a useful shape. Use The Rule of 20, which states that you should open when the number of cards in your two longest suits added to your high-card points totals 20 or more ([Tip 1](#)).

With a choice of two equal length suits, open the higher ranking ([Tip 2](#)), except with precisely four

cards in both majors in which case prefer 1♥ (Tip 3).

NOTRUMPS That you can win game in notrumps with just nine tricks gives it a huge significance and arguably the most important opening bid (and perhaps the most common) is 1NT. This shows a balanced hand and 12, 13 or 14 points.

Question: What precisely is a balanced hand?

Answer: It is a hand with no void (a suit with no cards), no singleton (a suit with one card), and at most one doubleton (two cards). There are just three balanced distributions: 4432, 4333 and 5332.

With one of the above shapes and 12–14 points, you **MUST** open 1NT (Tip 4). It is a very precise bid, so don't open 1NT with more than 14 points, even if balanced (Tip 5), and do not open 1NT with an unbalanced hand, even if holding 12–14 points (Tip 6).

RESPONDING TO ONE NOTRUMP When responding to partner's 1NT opener, bear in mind that, because you know so much about partner's hand, you as responder are in charge. Partner will not bid again unless you make a strong bid. Although there will be occasions where responder needs more information, essentially the basic principle is:

1NT opener: 'This is what I've got'.

Responder: 'OK – I know so much about your hand that I can place the final contract right now.' (Tip 7).

Note that it is much better to have a go at the nine-trick game of 3NT rather than the 11-trick game of 5♣ and 5♦ (Tip 8). Also note that you should never bid to increase the size of the part-score: thus raising 1NT to 2NT invites 3NT, rather than trying for 70 points as opposed to just 40 (Tip 9).

RESPONDING TO ONE-OF-A-SUIT When partner opens One-of-a-Suit, he could have anything from 12 points (even less if he satisfied the Rule of 20) up to 19 (with 20 or more he would open at the two-level). Because he could have as many as 19 points, you as responder should keep the bidding open with at least six points (Tip 10).

The top priority response is support – always support partner with a known eight-card major-suit fit (Tip 11). And the stronger your hand, the more you should bid in support. Use the Responder Line (Tip 12), noting that no supporting bids, even jumps, force partner to keep bidding (Tip 13).

When you have less than four-card support for the suit opened, you should try to find a fit in another suit – the general principle being to bid your longest suit at the lowest level. Thus avoid precipitate leaps to 2NT (Tip 14) and 3NT (Tip 15). Also, to avoid a very common mistake, you should prefer a four-card suit at the one-level to the nebulous 1NT response (Tip 16). Note that with two four-card suits, you should prefer the cheaper (Tip 17).

The level of the response must be considered, however. Whereas a one-over-one response can be made with just six measly points, a two-over-one requires a modicum of extra strength. The partnership is already at the eight-trick level and has no guarantee of a fit. A useful guideline is The Rule of 14 (Tip 18): respond in a new suit at the two-level when your total high-card points added to the number of cards in the suit you are planning to bid gets to 14. Otherwise respond 1NT (Tip 19), the only occasion you should respond notrumps to a one-of-a-suit opener.

OVERCALLING If an opponent opens the bidding, you become the overcalling side. You do not need a

opening hand to overcall, merely one chunky suit of at least FIVE cards (Tip 20). It is worth overcalling on relatively weak hands: even if you do not ultimately declare, you have disrupted the opposing auction and indicated a lead to partner. On the other hand, there will be some hands of opening strength that should not bid after an opponent's opening (Tip 21), especially with no five-card suit (Tip 22).

The knowledge that partner has at least a five-card suit for an overcall means that three cards are sufficient for support (Tip 23). And the more cards you have in support, the higher you should bid – straight away (Tip 24).

Bidding 1NT as an overcall over the opponents' one-of-suit opener, however, is more dangerous – you might be sandwiched between two strong hands. So a 1NT overcall shows a strong hand (15–19 points), more than a 1NT opener (Tip 25).

OPENER'S REBID Returning to the opening side, arguably the most pivotal bid in an uncontested auction is opener's rebid. It is this bid that gives much more specific information, both about shape (whether or not the hand is balanced) and strength.

A balanced opener should plan to bid/rebid notrumps (Tip 26), whereas an unbalanced opener should not (Tip 27). The three balanced distributions are 4432, 4333 and 5332 (Tip 28). With 12–14 balanced, you open 1NT; with 15–19 you open a suit and plan to rebid notrumps at the appropriate level (Tip 29), although you should in preference support with four cards in responder's major (Tip 30). The only time you cannot make your notrump rebid is if your right-hand opponent makes a higher bid. You should then pass (Tip 31).

An unbalanced opener has three choices of rebid after responder has changed the suit: supporting responder's suit, repeating his own suit, or trying a new suit. As usual, the top priority is support. You can use the Opener's Support Line (Tip 32), or, in certain situations, the Losing Trick Count (Tip 33). Without support, you should try to avoid repeating your first suit with fewer than six cards (Tip 34). The only time you may have to repeat a five-card suit is when it is cheaper to do so than introduce a new four-card suit. If introducing this second suit would force responder to the three-level in order to give preference back to the first suit, you have 'reversed'* and should have a decent 15 points or more (Tip 35).

When repeating a suit – implying six cards – you must remember to jump the bidding with 16+ points. Use the Opener's Repeat Line (Tip 36). Repeating a suit does normally show six cards, so you do not need to bid it a third time to confirm your sixth card (Tip 37). But note that just because you have six cards in a suit does not mean that you have to repeat it – it is better to bid a cheaper four-card suit than repeat an anaemic six-card suit (Tip 38).

Finally, let us consider the third option for an unbalanced opener with his rebid: introducing a new suit. Although it can create awkwardness for the (mercifully rare) 4441 shape, it is sensible to assume that bidding two suits shows (at least) a five-four shape. Put another way, you should not bid a second suit with just four cards in the suit you opened (Tip 39). Normally, you bid a new suit at the lowest level. But because responder is allowed to pass the new suit rebid with an unpromising six or seven points, if you want to force the bidding to game as soon as you hear partner respond, you must jump to your second suit (Tip 40).

RESPONDER'S REBID After opener has rebid, responder knows a huge amount. If opener has rebid notrumps (Tip 41), repeated his suit (Tip 42), or supported, responder knows the precise point-count

and can act accordingly. Only when opener has bid a new suit does responder know less about his strength. When that happens (i.e. the first three bids are in different suits) it is responder's job to show his strength with his rebid (Tip 43), using the Responder Line (Tip 44).

Sometimes there is no good option for responder, and a return to opener's first suit should be regarded as preference (often on a doubleton) rather than genuine support (Tip 45). Sometimes there more than one good option: with two fits, he should prefer the major to the minor at game level (Tip 46).

Two of the commonest mistakes here are responder forgetting to jump with 10+ points when repeating his suit (Tip 47), and forgetting that three cards in opener's first suit make a fit (Tip 48).

DOUBLE The literal meaning of double is to increase (by at least double) the size of penalty should the contract fail, but at the risk of increasing the opponents' reward should the contract succeed. However until partner has bid, you cannot really judge whether or not their contract (if a suit bid) will fail; therefore such doubles are for 'take-out' (Tip 49).

Double – for take-out – is one of the most useful bids in Bridge, and one of the most underused. It is a popular bid with partner too, as it asks *him* to describe *his* hand: 'What do you think over there?' The double of a suit opening bid shows: Shortage in the suit opened, at least Opening values, and Support for all unbid suits (Tip 50). Assuming the next hand passes, partner *must* respond to the double (Tip 51). Until partner has made a positive bid, even later round doubles are for take-out (Tip 52); so if you don't want partner to bid (because you are happy defending), don't double (Tip 53).

If partner has made a positive bid, however, your double is for 'penalties'. All penalty doubles express the opinion that you think the opponents are going to fail in their contract, with the accompanying increase in score. Partner will therefore generally leave in a penalty double. Because it is nonsense to be short in the suit bid when it is notrumps, the double of a 1NT opener is for 'penalties' (Tip 54). This – by far the most common penalty double you will encounter – will only be removed by partner when holding a hand that is both very weak and very shapely (Tip 55).

Two of the commonest mistakes in respect of the take-out double are failing to double (for take-out) after the opponents have bid two suits with four or five cards in both unbid suits (Tip 56); and failing to jump in response to partner's take-out double with nine(+) points (Tip 57).

Perhaps the commonest mistake in the penalty double area is doubling the opponents too readily. They may then either retreat to safer havens or stay put and make the contract because you have revealed that you have good trumps (Tip 58). Better to keep quiet.

After the opponents double, you can redouble. This is an expression of confidence; but be wary of redoubling a contract you think you will make if you have reason to think the opponents might then wise up and bid on (Tip 59). Redouble is better restricted to those occasions in which an opponent has doubled partner's opening bid and you have 10+ points (Tip 60), but no good fit (Tip 61).

PRE-EMPTIVE BIDDING Bidding at a relatively high level with a weak hand and a long suit robs the opponents of bidding space on a deal where *you* do not need it (you have only one playable trump suit). The standard situation is a three-level opener, showing a seven-card suit and less than opening values (Tip 62). The suit must be good (Tip 63), but you should have as little outside the suit as possible and you certainly do not need an ace (Tip 64). With an eighth card in your suit (one more trick), open at the four-level (Tip 65).

To pre-empt after an opponent has opened, you need to make a double-jump (1♣ – 3♥) i.e. to miss

out two lower levels of your suit (Tip 66). A single jump overcall (1♣ – 2♥) is a strong bid (Tip 67). Whether opening or overcalling pre-emptively, note that you have shown your hand so should not bid again (Tip 68).

Meanwhile, the partner of the pre-emptor should simply ‘put up or shut up’ (Tip 69). Because the pre-emptor will be profoundly short outside his suit, partner should value aces (especially) and kings but attach little value to outside queens and jacks (Tip 70). Sometimes, partner may consider raising pre-emptively (with a poor defensive hand), and the more cards he has in the pre-emptor’s suit, the more bold he should be, generally bidding to the ‘level of the fit’ (Tip 71).

Pre-empting is fun – although you will occasionally get caught for a big penalty. Defending against opposing pre-empt is less fun – you have to start at a high level and the splits are likely to be bad (Tip 72). However, do not be too frightened to enter the bidding – in spite of the high level; bear in mind that one opponent is very weak, so your partner rates to hold some values.

A reasonable rule of thumb is to double (for take-out) if you would have doubled a one-level opener in the suit (Tip 73); and overcall 3NT if you would have overcalled with 1NT over a one-level opener bearing in mind that it is especially important to have a stopper in the pre-emptor’s suit. There is a good chance of being able to shut the pre-emptor out of the play (Tip 74). But without a stopper (you cannot bid 3NT), or a good suit (you cannot overcall), or insufficient length in the other major(s) (you cannot double), you have little option but to go quietly (Tip 75).

TWO-LEVEL OPENERS Whereas the three-level is reserved for weak openers, the two-level is used for strong ones. 2NT is the only bid that can be passed by partner, and should be opened with a balanced hand (including a 5332 shape with a good five-card suit) and 20-22 points (Tip 76).

2♦/♥/♠ openers show unbalanced 20-22 point hands with good five/six card suits. But be prepared to upgrade a powerful-looking hand with just under 20 points if it has ‘eight playing tricks’ (Tip 77). You are sometimes stuck when you have 20-22 points with a good club suit, as 2♣ shows any 23+ point hand. In this case it is better to open 1♣ and hope the auction does not continue pass-pass-pass (Tip 78).

2♦/♥/♠ openers must be kept open a round by partner, even with nothing (Tip 79). With fewer than eight points, make the conventional negative reply of 2NT (Tip 80). The negative reply to 2♣ is 2♦ (0-7 points), on grounds of economy (Tip 81). These negative responses prioritise – such that all other bids (positives) show eight(+) points (Tip 82).

SLAMMING The ultimate goal in the bidding is to bid and make all 13 tricks on a deal – a grand slam. This is generally inadvisable – it’s tough enough to make all 13 tricks, let alone to bid for them and risk losing everything if even one trick gets away.

More reasonable is to bid for 12 tricks – a small slam – which will be possible about one deal in fifteen. 33 partnership points is the guideline for contracting for a small slam – though less if there is a big fit and interesting distributions. A small slam is doomed, however, if the opponents have two aces (unless you have a void in one of those two suits).

Because of the importance of aces, the bid of 4NT ‘Blackwood’ is used to ask partner how many aces he possesses. But beware when clubs (and to a lesser extent diamonds) are trumps – the reply to Blackwood (5♣ = 0 aces; 5♦ = 1; 5♥ = 2; 5♠ = 3) may take you overboard (Tip 83). If the reply indicates that one ace is missing, go ahead and bid the small slam (Tip 84); to bail out in Five of the trump suit would be inconsistent with your decision to go slamming.

Blackwood is useful but, because it only solves the problem of how many aces partner has, only uses the convention if that is the key piece of information about which you wish to know (Tip 85). If you are interested in a grand slam and the reply to Blackwood indicates that all the aces are present, you can follow with 5NT to ask for kings. But because grand slams are generally to be avoided, it will rarely be right to do so (Tip 86).

Note that the Blackwood bidder is in control – do not overrule him (Tip 87). Finally note that 4NT is not always asking for aces. If the immediately preceding bid was in notrumps, it is a quantitative invitation to 6NT, asking partner if his hand is minimum or maximum for his bidding to date (Tip 88).

Bidding to a sensible contract is one thing. Making it is quite another...

* NB: There is much to be said for not playing 'reverses'. Although you will occasionally bid too high, at least you KNOW that partner has six cards when he repeats his suit (provided he opens/rebids notrumps with a 5332 shape).

SECTION 2: *Declarer Play*

Planning

Your side has outbid the opponents and, since you introduced the trump suit (or notrumps) first, you are declarer. After your left-hand opponent has made the opening lead, dummy is tabled. You say ‘thank you partner’, and then control both the dummy (next to play) and your own hand.

Do not rush to play from dummy (Tip 89), or unthinkingly make the seemingly obvious play (Tip 90). Instead form a plan. This involves counting top tricks (Tip 91), seeing how many extra ones are needed for the contract, and focussing on where to get those extra tricks. In notrumps, the quest for those extra tricks should be attended to immediately, whereas in trump contracts there is the issue of when to get rid of the opponents’ trumps.

Once the extra tricks have been garnered, the top tricks can be taken (‘cashed’). Care needs to be taken to ensure that you do not get stranded from a winner in the other hand. If you are leading from the hand with the shorter length, lead the highest card; if you are leading from the hand with the longer length, lead the lowest card (Tip 92).

Notrump Play

MAKING EXTRA TRICKS Counting top tricks before embarking on the play is particularly important in notrumps; only by doing this will you know how many extra tricks are needed. The three basic methods of setting up those extra tricks are (a) by force (flushing out an opposing higher card), (b) by length (exhausting the opponents of all their cards in a suit in which you have greater length), and (c) by position (finessing – trying to promote a card even though the opponents hold a higher card in the same suit).

Because length and positional winners both require the split and location of missing cards to be favourable, force winners – if available – are usually to be preferred, even in a relatively short suit (Tip 93). But length *is* crucial in notrumps – overlook a long, weak suit at your peril (Tip 94). Many notrump contracts boil down to a race between both sides to set up their long suits and it is imperative that you (and for that matter the defence) lead your long suit each time you win the lead (Tip 95). Finessing, a technique equally useful in trumps and notrumps, involves assessing which card you are trying to promote, then leading from the opposite side. The hope is that the opposing higher card will be in the hand of the opponent playing second i.e. sitting ahead of your card (Tip 96).

DUCKING Deliberately not winning a trick is called ducking and plays a major role in notrump play. If the opponents lead a suit in which you have just one certain stopper (a stopper is a way of stopping the opponents running through a suit), you have a decision to make: when should you use the card (assume it’s an ace – by far the most likely scenario)? By delaying winning with the ace, you can exhaust one opponent of all their cards of the suit (Tip 97). You should try to win your ace on that opponent’s last card (Tip 98). The Rule of Seven (Tip 99), will often give you the right answer.

AVOIDANCE PLAY The danger of the opposition running off a long suit is an ever-present one in notrumps (in trumps you can simply trump). Often, just one opponent can create such problems for you – in which case he is the ‘danger hand’ and his partner is the ‘safe hand’ (Tip 100). Look for ways to prevent the danger hand from winning the lead (Tip 101). If you can choose which opponent to make the danger hand, choose the one who will not win a subsequent lead (Tip 102).

SETTING UP A SUIT If you need to set up a suit (usually five or more cards) in one hand, you must make sure that you have enough entries (ways of reaching that hand). Tricks will normally have to be lost in the establishment process and note that it is almost always better to lose the first round rather than a later round (Tip 103). This ensures that the high cards in the suit itself are meaningful entries (Tip 104), thereby retaining better communications (Tip 105). Counting your top tricks – and therefore how many extra tricks are needed from the long suit – can affect how you broach the suit (Tip 106).

ANALYSING THE OPENING LEAD AND THE RULE OF ELEVEN The standard opening lead against a notrump contract is fourth from the top of the longest suit. In those situations you can use the mathematically foolproof Rule of 11 (Tip 107). Taking the (fourth highest) opening lead from 11 tells you how many higher cards than the lead are in the other three hands (Tip 108). You can see your hand and dummy’s and can work out how many higher (although not which they are) are with the leader’s partner. The Rule of 11 enables you to make strange-looking plays with later benefits (Tip 109). And in case you are wondering, after all this, why the opponents do lead fourth from the top and give you so much help, bear in mind that the opening leader’s partner can also use the Rule of 11 (Tip 110).

Other inferences can be drawn from the ‘fourth highest’ opening lead. The lead of a two indicates that the leader holds precisely four cards in that suit (Tip 111). When the lead is a three, look out for the two: if the leader does not hold it, again he has just four cards in the suit led (Tip 112). If he has just four cards in the suit led, he will not have five cards in another suit – or he would have preferred to lead that suit (Tip 113). If he led from a very feeble four-card suit, he is unlikely to have another four-card suit (it would be stronger): thus his shape is probably 4333 (Tip 114).

SUMMARY Count up your top tricks and plan to establish your extra tricks early. Look out for the three basic methods of establishing tricks in notrumps – by force, length and position. And don’t forget to analyze the opening lead – it can give you huge pointers.

Trump Play

DRAWING TRUMPS The key question is whether or not to get rid of (‘draw’) the opposing trumps at the beginning. If you need dummy’s trumps, perhaps for trumping your losers (Tip 115), then you must delay. On the other hand drawing their trumps removes the risk of the opponents trumping your winners (Tip 116). Drawing trumps is particularly attractive, somewhat ironically, when you have weak trumps, because it gets rid of two of their (high) trumps together (Tip 117). However, there is a middle route: you can draw all but one of their trumps. If the last remaining trump is higher than yours, leave it out. There is rarely any point in wasting two of your trumps to draw a trump that is going to win a trick anyway – The Rule of One (Tip 118).

TRUMPING IN THE DUMMY If you draw trumps, the trumps in your shorter trump length (typically, so let us assume, dummy) will not make tricks in their own right; they will fall under the longer trumps. Therefore if you can use dummy's trumps for 'ruffing' (trumping), the manoeuvre will create extra tricks. You will not generally be able to draw the opposing trumps first though, or dummy's trumps will be gone ([Tip 119](#)).

The process is to look for a suit that is shorter in dummy than in your hand, void it, trump your losers in dummy, and only then draw the opposing trumps ([Tip 120](#)). Trumping needlessly in your hand, however, shortens your trumps and risks losing control ([Tip 121](#)).

SETTING UP A SUIT Establishing a suit is often – mistakenly – associated only with notrumps. Yet it is even more profitable in a trump contract because you can set the suit up by trumping ('ruffing') and so avoid losers ([Tip 122](#)). It is usually correct to start setting up the suit as soon as possible – and that means before drawing trumps ([Tip 123](#)). As with notrumps, if you have to lose a trick, it is better (for entry-conserving reasons) to lose the first round ([Tip 124](#)). Even five small cards facing one small card can generate a trick ([Tip 125](#)), but there must be enough entries. The number of entries required is the number of times you need to trump, plus one to get back to the length winner at the end. In order to avoid squandering entries, lead to the lowest trump entry first ([Tip 126](#)).

THROWING AWAY LOSERS Whilst I recommend counting top tricks (i.e. winners) in both trump and notrump contracts, a quick tally of losers can help in trump contracts ([Tip 127](#)). When there are too many losers, look to see if there are any overlapping winners in dummy ([Tip 128](#)); if drawing trumps involves losing the lead, you must play out those winners first. Pay attention to the entry situation, perhaps overtaking a winner if the overlapping suit is blocked ([Tip 129](#)). Spotting blockages early is important: provision may need to be made right away ([Tip 130](#)). The pressure to throw away losers is reduced when you can draw trumps without losing the lead; losers can then be discarded on overlapping winners *after* the opposing trumps have been drawn ([Tip 131](#)).

SUMMARY The three basic occasions when trump-drawing should be delayed are (a) when you must trump in dummy, (b) when you have a side-suit to set up and (c) when drawing trumps involves losing the lead and there is a suit with overlapping winners. Otherwise it will normally be safer to draw trumps early in the play.

Memory Aids

Here are a few practical tips for those of you who find it hard to remember what has happened when playing.

We have all wished we were in a different contract. But do not play in the contract you wish you were in, rather than the one you are really in ([Tip 132](#)). Tell partner not to put a plausible (but incorrect) trump suit on his right as he tables dummy.

When winning with an ace-king, choosing the ace may confuse the opposition slightly more (leaving the whereabouts of the king unknown). But if you are prone to forgetfulness, it is better to win with the king. At least you will know later that your ace is high ([Tip 133](#)).

When keeping count of a suit, just count the missing cards. Work out how many cards are missing and reduce that number by one each time you see an opposing card. When you get to zero, the

opposition have run out ([Tip 134](#)). It will help you to think of those missing cards in terms of their likely split ([Tip 135](#)).

The best tip for improving your Bridge memory, however, is to play more. Indeed playing Bridge is proven to improve your memory both at and away from the table.

SECTION 3: *Defence*

Though defence is often regarded as the toughest part of the game, it can be the most satisfying. Nothing rivals the pleasure at conducting a successful co-operative defence with partner.

The Opening Lead

INTRODUCTION The single most important card the defence play is the opening lead, starting the defence on a course that is often irreversible. It is the only card played without a sight of dummy, so there is little information on which to work. However, the opening leader has heard the auction – both his partnership’s contribution and the opponents’ – and he ignores it at his cost ([Tip 136](#)). The importance of the auction in determining the opening lead is such that a bid can be made to indicate an opening lead ([Tip 137](#)), with little intention of winning the auction. Note that when leading partner’s suit, do not lead the old-fashioned top card unless you have a sequence or a doubleton ([Tip 138](#)).

VERSUS TRUMP CONTRACTS The natural temptation when defending is to try to take tricks quickly, cashing aces early. In general this is a mistake ([Tip 139](#)). However, ace from ace-king is the best lead of all ([Tip 140](#)). This is because you still hold the boss card of the suit and can decide whether to continue with it (the king), based on what you see in dummy and the signal partner gives you with his card. King from king-queen, queen from queen-jack and so forth are also long-term winners, combining safety with attack. Note that the top card of these sequences is led ([Tip 141](#)). Cashing an ace without a king, however, is usually unwise – and even worse is leading ‘away from an ace’ ([Tip 142](#)).

VERSUS NOTRUMP CONTRACTS Leading ‘fourth from the top of your longest – and strongest – suit’ against notrumps is the oldest maxim of all, dating back to the pre-Bridge days of whist. But do not be a slave to it. If your longest suit is headed by three touching high cards, or two then a gap of one card before a third, lead the top card ([Tip 143](#)). Similarly, lead top of an internal sequence ([Tip 144](#)). When leading from a long weak suit, lead a high card (‘lead high for hate’) rather than the fourth from the top, to discourage a continuation from partner ([Tip 145](#)).

After the Lead

‘TOP’ DEFENCE Be a ‘TOP’ defender. The ‘T’ stands for Trick Target. Never lose sight of how many tricks you need to defeat the contract. If you only need one more trick and have an ace to lead, lead it ([Tip 146](#)). The ‘O’ of being a ‘TOP’ defender stands for Observe Dummy. When in doubt, look for dummy’s weakest suit ([Tip 147](#)). It is almost never right to lead dummy’s long, strong suit ([Tip 148](#)) even if you are leading through dummy rather than around to it. The ‘P’ of being a ‘TOP’ defender stands for Partner. Ask yourself what (on earth!) is he doing – and try to follow his defence ([Tip 149](#)).

SECOND AND THIRD HAND PLAYS On a low card, the defender playing second should generally play low (Tip 150). But he should usually cover an honour with an honour (Tip 151), because he is drawing out two opposing high cards for one of his. However, he should wait to cover the second of two touching honours (Tip 152).

When you are playing third to the trick, partner has already played a card (the lead). You need to play high, in order to prevent declarer from winning a cheap trick (Tip 153). With touching highest cards, you should play the lower (Tip 154). Partner (i.e. the leader) can draw valuable inferences from this (Tip 155). If dummy has an (unplayed) picture card, however, you should generally keep a higher card to beat that card (Tip 156). If dummy plays an honour on partner's lead, it will generally be correct for you to cover with a higher card, unless there is no hope of promoting a lower card (Tip 157).

SIGNALLING When you are *leading* (the first round of each suit), the motto (for spot cards i.e. nine and below) is 'Lead High for Hate, Lead Low for Like' (Tip 158). When *throwing*, however, either on partner's lead or when discarding, the motto is 'Throw High means Aye, Throw Low means No' (Tip 159). Although the seven, eight and nine are usually high, and two, three and four usually low, you may have the wrong spot cards to convey the desired message; so partner must scrutinise the spot cards carefully before decoding your message (Tip 160). Also, avoid knee-jerk signals – such as playing top from two. First ask yourself whether you really want him to continue (Tip 161).

The signals we have been discussing are referred to as 'Attitude Signals' – giving your attitude to the suit partner led. Although they are by far the most important, giving 'count' on a suit declarer is leading can be crucial (Tip 162). The mnemonic for the Count Signal is HELO: High = Even; Low = Odd (Tip 163).

A final signal to add to your repertoire is the 'Suit Preference Signal', best limited (at least initially) to situations where you are leading a suit for partner to trump. The lead of a high spot card asks for the return of the higher-ranking suit; and the lead of a low spot card asks for the return of the lower-ranking suit (Tip 164). Forget it at your peril (Tip 165).

DISCARDING When you cannot follow suit (and cannot/do not wish to trump), you must discard. You have twin goals: (1) to keep the right cards in order to prevent declarer from scoring extra tricks which he should not be allowed to make (more important when declarer is on lead) and (2) to send the right message to partner (more important when partner is on lead).

Focussing on keeping the right cards, various principles will help, such as 'keep equal length with dummy' (Tip 166). Try to work out declarer's shape, so you can keep equal length with him too (Tip 167). If the defence need to keep two suits, then each defender should guard a different one (Tip 168). When declarer is running off a long suit, try not to void yourself of a suit or, when you reveal your absence of cards, the remainder will be marked with partner (Tip 169).

Moving to sending the right message to partner, you have a choice of throwing high in a suit you want him to lead (Throw High means Aye); or low in a suit you do not want him to lead (Throw Low means No). Particularly in notrumps, it will generally be right to preserve the suit you want led and to throw low in a suit you do not want (Tip 170). But make your discard count – do not throw low from a suit partner was never going to lead (Tip 171); and discard the clearest card you can (Tip 172).

SUMMARY Defence is more than observing mottoes such as 'second hand low' and 'third hand high'.

TOP defence involves focussing on the number of tricks needed to beat the contract, looking at dummy to see from where those tricks are coming, and, especially, co-operating with partner in the joint quest.

THE DEALS

Bidding

Deal 1

I am an advocate of the Rule of 20, which says that the bidding should be opened when the number of points in the hand added to the number of cards in the two longest suits gets to twenty or more.

Dealer: South		Vulnerability: Neither	
	♠ 4 2		
	♥ A Q 7 4		
	♦ A 7 5 3 2		
	♣ 6 3		
♠ Q J 8 6		N	♠ 5 3
♥ 3 2		W	♥ 8 6 5
♦ J 9 8 4		E	♦ K Q 10
♣ A K 9		S	♣ Q J 5 4 2
	♠ A K 10 9 7		
	♥ K J 10 9		
	♦ 6		
	♣ 10 8 7		

What happened

At the table our first deal was actually passed out. Would you have opened any of the four hands?

What should have happened

South was the guilty party. The Rule of 20 opens his hand (11 points and a five-four distribution). In fact South has a more promising hand than many twelve- or thirteen-point hands. He has both majors, he has a powerful 5431 shape with honours in his long suits; he has good intermediate cards; and he has no rebid problems.

Whichever way you look at it, South should have opened the bidding. North-South would have speared to 4♥.

West leads ♣A, follows with ♣K, then switches to ♦4. Declarer wins dummy's ♦A and seeks to establish his spades.

He cashes ♠AK and then trumps a third spade with dummy's ♥Q (East discarding). He returns to ♠ and trumps a fourth spade with dummy's ♥A. He returns to his ♥10, draws East's last trump, cashes the established fifth spade, and merely concedes a club. 10 tricks and game made.

S	W	N	E
Pass(1)	Pass	Pass	Pass

(1) Mistake. South has a fabulous 11 point hand – and one that satisfies the Rule of 20.

Contract: Passed out

Opening Lead: –

S	W	N	E
1♠	Pass	2♦	Pass
2♥	Pass	4♥	End

Contract: 4♥

Opening Lead: ♣A

Tip 1

The Rule of 20: open the bidding when your high-card points added to the number of cards in your two longest suits gets to at least 20.

Deal 2

Our second deal addresses the issue of which suit to open. If one suit is longer, then that suit must be opened. Open 1♦ – even with ♠AKQ9 and ♦97532. The only way those small diamonds are likely to win tricks is if they are trumps. If opener has two suits of equal length, the rule is: *open the higher ranking* (the one exception will be covered next deal). By opening high, opener has the option of introducing his other suit more cheaply.

Dealer: South		Vulnerability: Neither	
	♠ K742		
	♥ QJ98		
	♦ 86		
	♣ 983		
♠ QJ98		♠ A1053	
♥ A1062		♥ K53	
♦ K103		♦ QJ7	
♣ J4		♣ Q102	
	♠ 6		
	♥ 74		
	♦ A9542		
	♣ AK765		

What happened

West led the ♠Q (top of an honour sequence), covered (questionably – East will have ♠A) by ♠K and East's ♠A. Declarer trumped East's ♠3 continuation and correctly led ♦2. East won ♦J and led another spade (best).

After trumping, declarer cashed ♦A and led a third diamond, trumping in dummy (the opposing 3–split revealed). He crossed to ♣K, cashed ♣A, then, correctly leaving the master ♣Q outstanding, he led an established diamond winner. East trumped and led a fourth spade (best). Declarer trumped with his last trump, cashed the fifth diamond, and then gave up to ♥AK.

Eight tricks. Not bad...

What should have happened

...but how South wished he had opened the right suit and thus finished a level lower.

S	W	N	E
1♣(1)	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♦	Pass	3♣(2)	End

(1) Mistake. Open the higher ranking of two equal length suits.

(2) Correctly returning to partner's first choice trump suit at the cost of raising a level.

Contract: 3♣

Opening Lead: ♠Q

S	W	N	E
1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♣	End		

Contract: 2♣

Opening Lead: ♠Q

Tip 2

Open the higher-ranking of two equal length suits.

Deal 3

Last deal, we ascertained that it is correct to open the higher ranking of equal length suits. So it is... with one exception. Prefer to open 1♥ when you have precisely four hearts and four spades. This gives partner a chance to support hearts with four (or more) of those, or respond 1♠ with four (or more) of those.

Dealer: North		Vulnerability: Both	
	♠ A Q 10 5		
	♥ K J 8 5		
	♦ K 4 2		
	♣ Q 3		
♠ K 9 4 3		♠ 8 6 2	
♥ A 7		♥ 6 3 2	
♦ J 10 8		♦ A Q 5 3	
♣ J 9 8 4		♣ K 10 7	
	♠ J 7		
	♥ Q 10 9 4		
	♦ 9 7 6		
	♣ A 6 5 2		

What happened

This deal taught North the error of his ways. The heart suit got completely lost.

Against 1NT, West led the ♣4 to dummy's ♣Q, East's ♣K and declarer's ♣2. East returned ♣10 and declarer decided to win ♣A this time. He led ♥10 at Trick Three, which held the trick, then followed with ♥4 to West's ♥A.

West cashed the ♣J9 (East discarding ♠2 and dummy discarding the ♠105). West then found the lethal switch to the ♦J.

Declarer ducked in dummy and ♦J scored, but when West continued with ♦10, he tried dummy's ♠K. No good – East won ♦A, cashed ♦Q, and then his remaining diamond. Declarer made the remainder but was two down.

What should have happened

Correct bidding sees North-South alight comfortably in 2♥. Any lead from East is helpful for declarer (North). At worst he should lose three diamonds, a club and the ace of trumps. Contract made.

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