

BRIDGE YESTERDAY

Unimaginative bidding

Back in the 50's I lived in Schenectady, NY, and spent most of my weekends playing in tournaments in the upstate New York area. There many differences between bridge in those days and today, one of which was the format of sectional tournaments. Then tournaments always ran from Friday afternoon to Sunday night with separate single-session men's and women's pairs events on Friday afternoon, a one-session mixed pairs on Friday nights and two-session open pairs and board-a-match team of fours on Saturdays and Sundays respectively. All events involved match points, and bridge players' mentality was strongly oriented in that direction. Knockout teams, which mostly existed only at national tournaments, were still played at total points.

The Saturday open pairs was especially enjoyable. The afternoon session was a qualifier, with about half the field being eliminated and consigned to the "consolation game" that evening. The championship session was thus a strong game, and one met mostly only the best players. It's a pity that this form of competition no longer exists, having been taken over by single session "stratified pairs" and the like which admittedly increase attendance but at the expense, alas, of enjoyable bridge!

There were also major differences in bidding those days, some of which I've touched upon in my previous articles. Since few artificial bids other than Stayman, Gerber and Blackwood were in common use, it was considered important for a bidder to give a precise description of his or her hand early in the auction. For example, playing notrump openers as 16-18, a balanced 19-20 point hand was shown by opening in a suit and then jumping in notrump.¹ Most players concealed four-card major suits in order to describe their point-count appropriately, expecting partner to "check back" by bidding a four-card major. Sometimes when partner forgot to check back, weird things happened. Here's a hand I played with my friend Joe Skype about 1955:

KJ108
Q1052
K7
862

975
J97
QJ103
1043

42
643
654
AKJ97

AQ63
AK8
A982
Q5

E-W were vulnerable. Sitting South, I opened a diamond, Joe bid one heart and East passed. (Nowadays many players might find a vulnerable two-club overcall, but not in 1955.) Anyway I jumped to 2NT showing my balanced 19 and Joe, neglecting to check back, bid 3NT. Ray Brown, one of my regular partners, was sitting West and led the diamond queen, despite my opening bid. It didn't take me more than a second or two to realize we were in the wrong contract. It was obvious that barring something like a 5-0 spade break we were cold for 11 tricks at spades (and without a club lead, 12 tricks if hearts behaved) whereas there were at most 10 tricks at no trump. Another match-point disaster! What to do?

One possibility was simply to collect my nine or ten tricks hoping for the 5-0 spade break. I could have played a round of spades to find out, but I didn't want to give away any information about the hand, let alone give the opponents time to think. So I led a club off dummy at trick two. This was a legitimate play for an overtrick, my hope being that East held the King and West the ace and that West would duck, playing me for KQ10(x). Or, alternatively, that East would duck from AKx(x) expecting me to finesse against the Jack. East, taken by surprise and wanting to follow in tempo, played low and my queen held the trick, so I ran home with my 11 tricks for an excellent board. Twice South arrived at four spades, making six after a diamond led. The rest of the field got to the same contract played by North

and lost the first two tricks (only). Note that my play risked absolutely nothing since -50 would have produced the same number of match points as +430, namely none!

It's clear that Joe and I should have discussed this auction before we sat down to play, but people didn't do that much in those days. Today even casual partners talk about bidding sequences like this before they begin play, so that both players are on the same wavelength. When all is said and done, the fact that partners today have thrashed out the meaning of most standard bids before beginning play may be the main difference between bridge today and yesterday.

1. I should mention that by 1954, after the Roth-Stone system became familiar, almost no expert players opened with four-card majors, and by about 1956 they all used weak opening two-bids.