

Two suiters galore!

It's time to set aside rules and get back to the even weirder side of bridge, the bizarre distribution that makes bidding both fun and nightmarish. Last night players sitting North picked up this little gem: ♠QJ98654 ♥AK854 ♦K ♣---. After opening 1♠, they heard an overcall of 2♣ and then a forcing jump raise to 3♠ from South! How high is up?

North needs to know about the top 2 spades and the ace of diamonds. Regular Blackwood won't do because partner could have a "wasted" ace of clubs. A jump to 5 of the major would find out about the trump situation (partner passes with no high spades, bids 6 with one of the top two, and 7 with AK), but then the hand could be off the cashing ace of diamonds.

There are three ways to approach this bidding conundrum (four if you count the non-aggressive choice of signing off in 4♠). Instinctive bidders go for what they feel is the most likely contract they can make without counting on partner having the perfect hand—6♠. Scientific bidders use a 4♥ cue bid, hoping to hear 5♦. They will then bid 5NT as the Grand Slam Force, hoping that, first, partner will remember this bid that comes up once a decade for most of us, and, second, that partner has at least one of the top 2 spade honors. The pure technicians have memorized another little device called Exclusion Blackwood. They would jump from 3♠ to 5♣, asking partner to show the number of controls (it's a form of Keycard) held outside of the club suit. Diamonds equals none, hearts one, etc. Of course, this last approach requires that the opponents not leap in clubs themselves!

So, what was the best way to go? Actually, all of them would work because South held the magic hand of ♠AK7 ♥2 ♦A1083 ♣Q10754. North could pitch one heart loser, trump 2 and still draw trumps, making 7. We got to the small slam, as did one other pair, and my partner played it perfectly to make 7 for a top. We don't play Exclusion Blackwood, and it was late in the night when this one came up. I don't know what I would have said if cue bidding had started and then I heard 5NT. There had already been a number of puzzling hands (see below), and my brain was getting frazzled. I'm glad she kept it simple and just blasted into the slam, because it would not have been good at all for my self-esteem if I had forgotten what the 5NT was asking me and had passed!

My own distributional monster came along not long after I had overbid to an unmakeable slam because I put the perfect cards (see the comment above!) in my partner's hand. Sometimes I just let my imagination run away with me. Then, vulnerable against non-vulnerable, I picked up this: ♠--- ♥104 ♦KJ109764 ♣AK94. Dealer (LHO) opened 1♠, partner passed and RHO raised to 2♠. I was tempted again to blast away to 4♦ or 5♦, but the experience of the earlier overbid brought me back to my senses. Yes, partner *could* have some good cards, but weren't they more likely to be in the majors than the minors? And the opener could have a moose of a hand and partner might be broke. I can't double—I'll hear hearts or it could get left in, and I have maybe 2 defensive tricks (if partner has a diamond honor, I want to be on offense anyway).

The least of the evils was a weak-kneed 3♦. I figured I could bid again after they bid some more in the majors if partner couldn't find a double or bid. So, 3♦ and ... it was passed out! Wow, I thought. I didn't expect that. The opening lead was the 3♠ and dummy appeared with the following interesting cards: ♠AQ85 ♥QJ9 ♦8 ♣108752. The safe line is A♠, pitching a heart, then take the diamond finesse against the queen, hoping for a doubleton in RHO's hand. If I try the spade finesse and the king is offside, I'll have no entry to dummy after trumping and will surely lose 2 hearts and 2 diamonds. Adding to my dilemma is the fact that I don't have any idea

what the contract will be at other tables, so it's hard to say if +110 will get a decent score. Being a typical duplicate player, I took the greedy route! I called for the spade queen, and it won (after all, LHO opened in first seat, did not have the top 2 hearts [inferred from not leading a heart], and likely has doubletons in both minors [he passed instead of bidding or doubling]). After cashing the spade ace—and having gotten rid of both hearts—I led a diamond to the 10, and it won. I decided LHO had the ace and was holding off, waiting to see what to lead next or trying to give me a problem in trumps. After all, he had no idea I held 7 of them. So, do you lead the king of diamonds, hoping to smother a doubleton queen in RHO's hand, or do you lead small, playing for a doubleton ace with LHO? For once I guessed this common holding correctly, leading small and later picking up the trump queen with my king, making 6. At the other tables diamonds made 5 once and East-West played in hearts, also making a partial. What a weird game bridge can be.

These were just two of the 5 or 6 hands with wild distribution that came up, and they all were good tests of partnership bidding methods. They may be brain draining, but they're fun, and I hope we keep dealing them like this. I'll see you all on Monday, and we'll find out if that's the case.