

A Modern Competitive Bidding Style

A number of top partnerships worldwide use strong club systems. These systems are great for IMPs, as they allow for slow auctions that increase accuracy in game and slam auctions. That is the greatest weakness of traditional Standard American bidding (where you have to jump to show power and have less bidding space to both agree upon a trump fit and then explore accurately for slam).

But Standard American is quite effective at matchpoints. The system has been improved for over 80 years by experts worldwide. This collective work on the game has produced great theoretical improvements beyond the capability of any one or few experts.

Most of these improvements involve bidding conventions. But I don't like to discuss conventions at this monthly forum. Instead I prefer to discuss bidding, play and defense strategies. Many common bidding strategies today, such as 5-card majors (instead of opening 4-card majors), were not standard around 40 years ago. In the mid-1970s when I taught bridge, there were no 5-card major textbooks available, even though they were generally used in tournaments (except in England). Now in tournaments there are many other modifications and strategies are not so well known or accepted.

This month's hand is a wonderful example of a modern non-mainstream competitive modification to standard bidding. As you will see, it can be used aggressively in standard bidding. This competitive style is much more limited in strong club systems.

Playing in the evening duplicate at the Honors Bridge Center in New York City on May 1, 2006 with Gail Greenberg, I held this hand: ♠K98 ♥J62 ♦KJ6 ♣J743. Nobody was vulnerable and there were 2 passes to me. Would you bid or pass, and if you bid, what would you bid?

If you were playing IMPs, you should pass. Otherwise you excessively strain the range of the opening 1-bid. With an exceptionally wide range of an opening 1-bid, partner would be constantly guessing whether or not you "had your values" and would regularly compete too high in the bidding. He would not know when he should stop at a low-level part score, if he should try for game, outbid the opponents, or bid game. It is common knowledge that it is important to have greater values than these even for third seat opening bids. You might occasionally miss out on finding a part score, but you will be able to bid much more confidently on the higher scoring game hands.

Why would you even think of opening the bidding with this ugly 9-count at matchpoints?

There are two advantages to opening the bidding:

- 1) You throw the opponents into a defensive auction. If you and your partner never bid, the opponents can use all their bidding weapons to accurately bid to the best contract. But if they have to begin with takeout doubles or overcalls (perhaps at the 2-level), they are much more

likely to get to the wrong contract. This is a primary reason why 4-card majors has become very popular amongst tournament players when opening in 3rd or 4th position.

2) You get to make lead-directing bids. It is likely that your LHO (left-hand-opponent) has the strongest hand and therefore your partner is often going to be the opening leader. That makes lead directing bids very relevant.

One of the biggest downfalls of opening very light in 3rd position is that partner might compete to the 3-level and you go down. I use the Drury convention over 3rd and 4th seat major suit openings to try to stay no higher than the 2-level. In some partnerships I now also use Drury over 2♣ and 2♥ overcalls to avoid getting to the 3-level (2♦ over 2♣, and double over 2♥ are my Drury bids). And if I do open the bidding very weak in a minor suit, I am usually prepared to pass any response partner makes.

In this hand, I opened the bidding with 1♦. While in 1st or 2nd position I routinely open 1♦ with 4-4 in the minors, and 1♣ with 3-3 in the minors, and open my longer minor with 4-3 in the minors, in 3rd or 4th position I prefer to make lead directors when I open weak. (If I have full values for my opening bid and continue to bid to show power, then partner can expect me to have my normal distributional lengths in the minor suits).

This was the entire hand and auction:

	Dummy	Nobody Vulnerable			
	♠Q64				
	♥K93				
	♦A10732				
West (Gail)	♣Q7	East (Jeff)			
♠A1052		♠K98			
♥Q4		♥J62			
♦854		♦KJ6			
♣K1065	South	♣J943			
	♠J73	West	North	East	South
	♥A10875	Pass	Pass	1♦	1♥
	♦Q9	Dble	2♥	Pass	Pass
	♣A82	Pass			

In the absence of interference, the opponents would have reached the same contract. But, Gail said that she would have led a club. She only led a diamond because of my lead-directing bid. With a club opening lead, declarer would have won the club queen at trick one, and led a small diamond at trick 2, towards his queen. In summary he would have made 9 tricks.

But in real life, Gail led a diamond and I won the king. I shifted to the 9 of clubs and Gail won the king. Now Gail had to deduce what was going on. I had clearly opened the bidding with a 3-card diamond suit and was not 4-4 in the majors, therefore I had made a light lead directional

opening bid. Conventionally my club 9 discard promised either 0 or 2 higher clubs (I had chosen to lie about owning the club jack because I did not want to lead a low-attitude lead implying good clubs). Gail knew it was time to cash our winners, and had to decide to play me for either the spade king or the club ace. Could I have shifted to the club 9 from AJ9? The answer was absolutely not -- if I held those clubs I would have opened the bidding with 1♣, not 1♦. Gail proceeded to cash the spade ace, and even though my spade 8 did not look very encouraging (we played upside down count and attitude), she continued spades and we held declarer to 8 tricks, for a good matchpoint result.

One of the reasons that this matchpoint strategy works well, is because it comes up frequently. There certainly are detriments to playing this style, but it gets me a lot more good boards than bad ones. I hope my readers enjoy reading about this style of bidding.