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(41) Around the Table: Vulnerability and Position

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Level: Beginner / Intermediate

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General

When we first sit down at the bridge table and prepare for the auction to begin there are many things on our minds. Most of us take our cards out of the board, count them, open our hand, and begin to sort our cards and count our HCP. If this is what you are doing, then you are making a big mistake!

There is a very important preliminary step missing from the above process. When we sit down at the table and reach to take out our cards we should be thinking about two important things (not just visiting with our opponents.) These important factors to focus on are *Vulnerability* and *Position*. These two factors need to be in our minds before we examine our cards because they will shape our approach to the auction. Vulnerability and Position will determine how aggressive or conservative we will be from the very start of the auction. We should focus on these things even before we look at our cards in order to put us in the proper “mindset.”

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is an important factor to consider at the beginning of the auction, during the bidding, and throughout the play of the hand because it greatly affects our ability to evaluate the risks of taking action. Vulnerability helps us determine both the upside and downside of many of our actions – “Should we bid or shouldn’t we...”

Many players think that there are only 2 types of hands: Vulnerable or Non-Vulnerable. But there are actually 4 types of vulnerability for us to consider:



- *Favorable*
 - We are non-vulnerable; the opponents are vulnerable.
 - Most aggressive style
- *All White*
 - No one is vulnerable.
 - Normal style
- *All Red*
 - Both sides vulnerable.
 - Mildly conservative style.
- *Unfavorable*
 - We are vulnerable; the opponents are non-vulnerable.
 - Most conservative style.

It is not only our vulnerability that affects our decision making process, but the vulnerability of the opponents as well. This is because when the opponents are vulnerable their bonus for game is larger – so we can afford to take more risks in order to try to stop them from collecting this bonus.

Here are some actions where vulnerability will be important to consider:

- Opening Bids
- Preemptive Bidding
- Upgrading and Downgrading
- Overcalls
- Balancing
- Sacrificing (Extending Preempts)
- Doubling
 - Competitive Double – Takeout, Negative, Responsive, etc...
 - Penalty
- And more...

Position

Even more overlooked than the importance of vulnerability is the importance of position – the seat that we are sitting in. Our approach to the bidding can vary dramatically based on several factors related to our position at the table. Some of the issues that we consider related to position are:



- How many opponents might still have a good hand?
- Can partner still have a good hand?
- Constructive Bidding Goals
- Destructive Bidding Goals
- Competitive Bidding Goals

As a way of discussing these issues in detail let's briefly outline the 4 seats at the table and what our approach is in these positions:

- *First Seat*
 - Generally, this is our most aggressive seat
 - Aggressive because two opponents vs. one partner might have good hands.
 - We are about ½ point more aggressive in opening the bidding in the first seat than the second seat.
 - We are much more aggressive with preempts in first seat than second seat.
 - We freely upgrade and downgrade our hands using our best judgment.
- *Second Seat*
 - Most conservative seat in general
 - Conservative because only one opponent vs. one partner might have good hands.
 - We have sound opening bids in this seat.
 - Our preempts are more constructive and sound in this seat.
 - We upgrade less frequently in this seat.
- *Third Seat*
 - Most tactical seat
 - When partner is a passed hand we are free to take actions that are lighter or heavier than normal.
 - We can open the bidding light in third seat.
 - We can preempt heavy in the third seat.
 - The only player that can have a good hand is LHO.
 - We are free to upgrade our downgrade our hands to fit our desires.



- *Fourth Seat*
 - Complex seat - our bids have different meanings in this seat
 - When partner is a passed hand we are free to take actions that are lighter or heavier than normal.
 - We do not open the bidding at the 1-level light in the fourth seat (we can pass the hand out instead.)
 - We do not preempt in the fourth seat. Openings at the 2+ level are to play and we expect to make the contract (an opening hand with a long suit and no game interest.)

Note (Advanced): In the second seat we will open a little more aggressively with the spade suit, especially at MP. This accomplishes some preemption when our LHO has a good hand and it also helps partner make good decisions when using the Rule of 15 in the 4th seat (trying to decide if they should pass the hand out or open the bidding.)

Conclusion

As you can see, both vulnerability and position at the table are important parts of our decision making process. We have a lot to think about during the auction, so it is important that we think about the vulnerability and position before our focus moves to other parts of the bidding. By thinking about these things in advance we will put ourselves in the right mindset for making good decisions later in the auction.