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This Week in Bridge

(180) Visualizing Opener's Hand as a Defender

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Level: 1

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

When the opponents have a constructive auction where we are not bidding, then there is lots of information available to use as defenders. Some of that information is explicitly told to us by the bidding and some of it we must work out from inferences and by asking the opponents the right questions about the bidding agreements, usually at the end of the auction.

Here we look at how to visualize the Opener's hand during the auction – what sort of things we should be thinking about during the auction and what questions we should ask the opponents to help us better defend the hand.

Hand Type and Bucket (Strength)

One of the first things we should be making note of about Opener's hand is their *Hand Type*. Generally speaking, we know what type of hand Opener has by their opening bid and/or first rebid:

1. If they open NT or rebid NT, they have a *Balanced Hand*.
2. If they open a suit and rebid that suit (usually a 1-suited hand), they usually have an *Unbalanced Hand* (though it could be a *Semi-Balanced Hand*, 6322).
3. If they open with one suit and rebid another suit (showing a 2+suited hand), they usually have an *Unbalanced Hand* (though it could be a *Semi-Balanced hand*, 5422).

Opener's first bid and rebid also gives us information about the strength of their hand. We categorize these strengths into *Buckets* for opening the bidding:

1. 12-14 points, Minimum Opening Hand.
2. 15-17 points, Extra Values.
3. 18-19 points, Strong Opening Bid.
4. 20-21 points, Very Strong Opening Bid.



Cases of Hand Type and Buckets

Here are some examples where we visualize Opener's hand type and bucket/strength.

Examples

1♣ 1♠

2♠

Here Opener has shown 12-14 points, usually with 4-card ♠ support, and could have either a balanced or unbalanced hand, we do not know from their rebid.

Note: One question to ask the opponents in this kind of auction is if they frequently raise on 3-card support in this situation or if they rebid 1NT on balanced hands with 3-card support.

1♣ 1♠

3♠

Here Opener has shown 15-17 points, with 4-card ♠ support, and since they did not open the bidding 1NT we know they have an unbalanced (or semi-balanced) hand.

Inferences – Asking Questions

There are many auctions where, depending on the opponents' partnership agreements, Opener may choose to describe their hand differently. It is important to be aware of these situations as a defender and to be able to ask the opponents the right questions after the auction. It is important to find out this information so you can make the right inference while defending the hand. Let's go through several examples of these together to help you understand what questions to ask to get this valuable information.

Examples

1♣ 1♦

1NT

Ask if Opener has denied a 4-card Major when they show their balanced hand. You want to know if they bid their suits "Up the line" or they play "Walsh" style rebids – showing their hand type in this auction.

1♣ 1♥

1NT

Ask if Opener has denied a 4-card ♠ suit in this auction. This is similar to the above example; you want to know they extend the "Walsh" concept to this auction as well (often called *Extended Walsh*).

Knowing if declarer can have a 4-card Major suit on the side can help you know how to defend the hand by helping you know if you need to keep 4-card in that suit later in the auction.



Examples

1♣ 1♠
1NT 2♦
2♠ 4♠

Ask about the opponents' agreements about Opener's rebids in *New Minor Forcing (NMF)* auctions. Do they bid the other-Major first, partner's suit first, or bid their Major suits "up the line". Specifically, in this example, you want to know if Opener can have a 4-card ♥ suit. This may help you know what to lead.

1♣ 1♠
1NT 3NT

Ask the opponents what they open with 4-4 in the minors. This may help you know how if you need to "guard" the ♦ suit later in the hand, as if you have a 4-card ♦ suit you may have to decide what to discard and knowing if declarer can have a 4-card ♦ suit can help you make that decision.

1♦ 1♠
2♣ 2NT
3NT

Ask the opponents what they open with 4♦ and 5♣. If they never open 1♦ with that shape then you know that the ♦ suit is at least 5+cards and is a source of tricks to worry about.

1NT 3NT

Ask if the opponents frequently open 1NT with a 5-card Major. Ask if Responder has *Puppet Stayman* available as an option – that may help you know if they open 1NT with a 5cM frequently enough to have this tool.

2NT 3NT

Ask about a 2NT opening range, 20-21 vs. 19+21. This will help you know how many points to expect when you are defending the hand and counting Opener's points.

Conclusion

As a defender, it is important to visualize the Opener's hand during the auction. The Opener is the first player to give us information about their hand and often the opponent that best defines their hand, both in hand type and strength. To properly visualize Opener's hand, we must use the information told to us explicitly in the auction, but we also must make inferences in order to complete our picture of the opponents' hands. Knowing what to think about and what questions to ask is an important part of visualizing Opener's hand. Make use of all the information available to you to best defend the final contact.