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Bidding Matters

The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders

8. They consider partner's potential problems (continued).

"Stoppers? We don't need no stinking stoppers!"

You may have heard this retort at the bridge table (or said it yourself). It's a take on the line from the classic film *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, usually invoked by a declarer who has bid notrump with no honors in the opponents' long suit.

An unscientific stab is sometimes the only way to reach 3NT, but it's not your preferred strategy if you have room for more careful investigation. In auctions where you and partner have made three natural bids, you can ask for a stopper in the fourth suit by bidding it. The search becomes trickier when there are two potentially unstopped suits, as here:

<i>You</i>	<i>Partner</i>
1♣	1♠
3♣	3♦
?	

♠A42 ♥QJ8 ♦10 ♣AKJ1095.

This jump rebid often leads to a difficult auction, so it's important to have clear agreements about the follow-ups. Any rebid by responder should establish a game force, and

since the most likely game is 3NT, it's more valuable to play a new-suit bid as a notrump search rather than a checkback for the major.

When there are two unbid suits, partner will bid the one where he has a stopper. Here, 3♦ doesn't ask for spade support. It shows diamond cards and asks you to bid 3NT with a heart stopper. Partner may hold:

♠K953 ♥643 ♦KQ8 ♣Q72.

Responder can show extra length in his major by rebidding it, which is forcing. If you instead treat his 3♦ as a checkback for spades, your third bid would be 3♠ and partner would still be in the dark as to which game to play.

Some auctions won't give you room to pinpoint which of two suits you can stop:

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>
1♥	2♦
2♥	3♦ (invitational)
3♠	

♠K103 ♥3 ♦AQJ984 ♣763.

Partner is looking for 3NT, but you can't be sure which suit is the problem. There wasn't room below 3NT for him to show club values and ask about spades, so you have to read 3♠ as, "I'm missing a stopper somewhere." His hand may be:

♠64 ♥AK6542 ♦K6 ♣A82.

A practical solution is to agree that when only one of two unbid suits can be shown at the three-level, a bid of the available suit (the major) asks for a stopper. That means 3♠ is a search for spade cards, so you have an easy 3NT bid. Even without that agreement, though, you may be able to divine partner's problem by imagining his thought process.

With many hands that lack club stoppers, partner may find reasons to bid 3NT on his own. Holding:

♠A8 ♥AK6542 ♦K6 ♣842,

for example, he'll expect the opening leader to favor the unbid major, which makes a club attack less worrisome. He'll also reason that since you've shown short hearts and fewer than four spades, you rate to have moderate club length. Even if you lack a club honor, the opponents may be able to run only four tricks.

Checking for stoppers can be necessary even in auctions where you've already made a natural notrump bid.

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>
1♣	1♥
1NT	3♣
3♠	

Partner is moving toward game, not slam, and showing doubt about the strain or level. Your jump raise suggests distributional values (else you would have invited with 2NT), so he may fear that your shortness is opposite his weak suit.

Partner's 3♠ shows spade strength and diamond weakness — a hand such as:

♠AQ9 ♥K7 ♦1052 ♣AJ976.

If you have a diamond stopper, you should bid 3NT.

Without one, you'll have to retreat to clubs. When you do, remember that partner asked two questions: Can we play 3NT? If not, can we play 5♣? If you can't answer "yes" to the first question, be sure you bid your hand's full value when you answer the second. With:

♠1082 ♥AQ83 ♦3 ♣K10843,

take the pressure off partner by jumping to 5♣. You have minimum point-count, but the singleton opposite partner's weakness makes this hand worth a game bid. Switch your spades and diamonds, and you'd bid just 4♣, which partner can pass. □