

## If 'the 5-level belongs to the opponents' ..... who owns the 6 level?

There are two main aspects to bidding – system and judgement.

System – whether you play a weak or a strong no-trump; 4 or 5 card majors or weak, intermediate or strong jump overcalls for example – also has an element of partnership style within its framework. You may play a weak no-trump, but you may also decide that it can contain a 5-card major. You may also play that raising partner from 1M to 2M may be done on a 3-card suit. For others this would be a big no-no and they will respond 1NT. This is style.

Judgment on the other hand, is a less tangible commodity. It is however, the area of bidding that separates we club players from those that play at the higher levels of our sport; they judge the various bidding situations far better than we do. We are confronted with bidding judgement decisions on almost every hand we play. In the uncontested auction the decisions are perhaps easier but nevertheless the simple sequence 1NT - 2NT - ?, for example, requires us to re- evaluate our hand and make a 'judgment call' of 3NT or pass.

The contested auction increases the level of judgement required to 'get it right' even further and no more so perhaps than at the 5 level.

The following auction...      1♠ – 2♥ – 2NT\* – 4♥      \* Good raise to 3♠ or better  
4♠ – 5♥ – P – P  
?

... or similar will be familiar to all of us. You, of course, are vulnerable and your opponents are not and they have used this fact to push you out of your 'bidding judgement' comfort zone, forcing you to guess.

Whatever your hand, Pass is probably not an option; so you are left with a philosophical 'shrug of the shoulders' Double and hope to get some of the match points (who knows, 4S may be destined to fail, and you will get a really good score) or go for gold and bid 5S in the hope that Partner has exactly the right cards but in so doing risk a poor score when she hasn't. Your opponents however, are in a win-win situation. If you double they lose less (-100,-300,-500) than the 4♠ was destined to score; if you bid on they may go plus or if you make it then they will get the same score (-650) they probably would have had if you left them to play in 4♠.

It is these decisions or guesses – when either call could be the right one on any given hand but there is a high chance of getting it wrong - that has led to the saying that 'the 5-level belongs to the opposition'. Bidding 5 over 5 is more often than not a losing decision – but not always, hence the need for 'bidding judgement'.

A hand from the first league match of the season illustrates the problem I have been talking about.

The East-West pair were a top-level county pair and East, appreciating that North - South were likely to bid and make 4S, applied maximum pressure with a pre-emptive raise to 5 Hearts(!) putting South to a guess.

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ Q1087  
♥ 3  
♦ A95  
♣ AJ964

N-S		Vul	
N	E	S	W
1♦	- P	- 1♠	- 3♥
3♠	- 5♥!	- ?	

What would you do here? As South you would have undoubtedly bid 4 spades but 5 spades? At our table South passed, and North elected to take the money and Doubled. 5♥ minus 2 and +300 proved to be the par result, a score duplicated at one of the other tables.

The full deal:

♠ 9	♠ AJ65
♥ KQ10652	♥ J
♦ 842	♦ K1076
♣ Q53	♣ K1087

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ K432
♥ A9874
♦ QJ3
♣ 4

♠ Q1087
♥ 3
♦ A95
♣ AJ962

4♠ is no lay down. Declarer needs to negotiate both the bad trump split and find the Q♣ but should probably get it right and make for +620. A loss on the board? No a gain, when both the opposition pairs played in 5♣. Now, needing only 3 rather than 4 tricks to beat game there is much less incentive to bid 5♥. 5♣ had 3 inescapable losers and went down.

If the 5-level belongs to the opposition, then who owns the 6 level? is a question I can't recall being asked. Probably because it doesn't happen very often that both sides are happy to play at the 6-level, however, this is exactly what happened at two tables in the first round of the County Stanley Trophy, an imps-based scoring competition. The bidding on the hand in question was amusing at my table because before South made his final bid, he physically counted out on his fingers the cost of his forthcoming penalty – and valued it worthwhile! A good piece of judgement on this occasion with the added complement to his opponents that they knew what they were doing and were likely to make their slam. The hand and bidding are below.

♠ A1084
♥ 862
♦ 32
♣ 9642

	N	
W		E
	S	

♠ -----
♥ KQ53
♦ AQJ10764
♣ AJ

♠ KQ76532
♥ A104
♦ 9
♣ Q10

E-W		Vul		Dealer E	
N	E	S	W		
	1♦	- 3♠	- Db1*		
4♠	- 6♦	- 6♠	- Pass		
Pass	- Db1				

\*Perhaps not everyone's choice but better than the alternatives in my opinion.

Result: 6♠\*-4 for -800 and the par score (however, a gain of 5 imps on the Butler to N-S).