Amit #4

Bridge Theory for the Practitioners

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4. Never Say Never

In my last column, I evaluated the “8-ever, 9-never” rule from the point of view of raw probability calculations. As I have shown there, the difference in percentage between dropping the queen and the finessing for the queen is not substantially large when we hold 9 cards in the suit.

As the raw probability calculations are so close, some experts follow empirical rules in such situations. One such rule is known as Culbertson’s Law of Symmetry. This asks (see Vivaldi and Barracho’s book referenced in my last column) to play for the drop when our two hands together contain an even (or zero) number of singletons in other suits and to finesse when our two hands together contain an odd number of singletons in other suits. This rule does not have any mathematical basis, however. Vivaldi and Barracho say that the rule seems to work in practice because of defective shuffling. So I use the rule in my club games and Swiss team games (when I know that cards are not shuffled enough times) but not in tournament Matchpoint contests where computer hands are used.

Some other experts use what is known as the Blackwood Theory of Distribution. This asks first to calculate our total holding in the shortest suit. Then, if our combined holding in our shortest suit is:

5 cards, or 4 cards dividing 2-2; play for the drop.
4 cards divided 3-1 or 4-0 or fewer than 4 cards: finesse.

Again, I do not think this has any mathematical basis whatsoever. But, according to The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge edited by H. G. Francis et al.; 6th edition, ACBL press (I haven’t bought the new 7th edition yet), this rule has been empirically tested and found to work well. Caveat Emptor!

I can continue doing this dry discussion of probability ad infinitum but Bridge is more than that; much more than that. The more I study hands and brilliant plays made by experts, the more I get convinced that counting is the life blood of bridge. Probability tables help, percentage plays are sometimes necessary, but without counting no one is able to take the quantum leap from an average bridge player to an excellent player. Mike Lawrence wrote somewhere ‘I do not like to look at sterile tables of information’ and our own John Oxley spelled out his secret when he said to me in a tournament I played with him sometime back (Check here to see how we did in that tournament: http://web2.acbl.org/tournaments/results/2008/10/0810025.htm): ‘this counting thing really works’.

To this end, I will tell you about a hand where the right play would make or break a grand slam. Of course, the declarer has to figure out what that right play is, playing for the drop or finesse, holding 9 cards. Without further adieu, here are the hands (Spades, Hearts, Diamonds, and Clubs in that order):

K 4 3 2	A T 6 4 (North)	A Q 8 5 4	---
A T 9 7 6	K Q J 8 7 5 (South)	3	6

The bidding went:

North	East	South	West
1D	2C	2H	6C
6H	Pass	Pass	7C

Pass*	Pass	7H
all pass		

*Forcing pass at the 7-level showing 1st round control of Club (A or void)

West led the 2 of diamonds and East played the 7 on the A. Clearly, the success of the grand slam depends on the spade suit. If the spades are 2-2, South should play for the drop but if the spades are 3-1, South has to hope that the singleton is an honor and then hook the other honor. The South hand was played by Camillo Pabis-Ticci, one of the mighty Italians of the Blue Team era. Rather than depending on ‘sterile probability tables’, he worked thusly to figure out the count of the East hand:

Trick 2.	Ruff a D with H-K.
Trick3.	Heart to the A.
Trick 4.	Diamond ruff.
Trick 5.	Heart to the ten.
Trick 6.	Diamond ruff.
Trick 7.	Another round of trump.

East’s hand is now clearly known. He has come up with 3 hearts, 4 diamonds, and should have 5 clubs from the way he bid. So he has only 1 spade. Pabis-Ticci then played the A of spades and when the J dropped from East hand, he knew that West holds the queen and thus he finessed for the queen backwards, ‘9-never’ notwithstanding.

References: I found this little gem titled ‘Nine Never?’ in the book “Bridge with the Blue Team” by Pietro Forquet (Victor Gollancz publications, London, 2000). This book has many, many such gems.