***This Week in Bridge***

**(179) Listening to the Opponents’ Auction**

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**General**

When we are sitting at the bridge table without enough values or shape to enter the bidding and we are just watching the opponents bid, it is important to not fall asleep. There is a lot of valuable information being exchanged by the opponents and this is the time we need to absorb it. Let’s look at what kind of information the opponents are exchanging and learn to think about the auction as a defender just as we would if we were bidding the hand. The information that the opponent’s exchange can be extremely valuable to you as a defender, helping you determine much about the opponents’ hands – HCP and distribution.

**Goals of the Bidding**

*Level: 1*

After one of the opponents opens the bidding, then Opener and Responder exchange information with two main objectives in mind – searching for a fit and trying to determine the combined values of the partnership. In searching for fit, Opener and Responder primarily focus on looking for a Major suit fit. While searching for this fit the opponents exchange information but must make sure to not let the auction get too high without enough values to feel “safe” at that level. Opener and Responder must balance exploring for a fit with keeping the auction at the right level – partscore, game, or slam.

**Asking Questions in the Auction**

*Level: 1*

In order to accomplish these goals Responder frequently asks Opener questions about their hand, while simultaneously describing their own hand. Responder’s bids can be thought of as asking Opener the questions needed in order to search for a Major suit fit and to explore for the proper level to play at (part-score, game, or slam).

*Example*

1♣ 1♠

This 1♠ bid can be thought of in the traditional way, showing 4+card ♠ suit and 6+ points, or alternatively as “forcing the auction” and asking Opener “Do you have a 4-card ♠ suit?”, the most ♠ that Opener is likely to have.

*Note: When Opener starts with bidding with 1♣ they usually have at most a 4-cards in a Major suit.*

Notice that Responder often starts the auction by searching for a Major suit fit, if they have interest in finding one. If Responder does not have a 4-card Major then they are not particularly interested in searching for a fit and turn their focus to making sure the partnership gets to the right level of Notrump (Sometimes Responder will show a minor suit, but this is usually only with extreme length or strength.)

* With 12+ points and no interest in a Major suit fit (no 4-card Major) Responder has enough points to insist on game without any additional values for Opener.
  + 1♣ 3NT.
* With 10-11 points and no interest in a Major suit fit (no 4-card Major) Responder needs some extra values from Opener for game to be a good contract. Responder asks Opener if they have any extra values by bidding 2NT.
  + 1♣ 2NT. “Do you have a little extra values?” (About 14+ points). If so bid game, if not stop in a partscore, likely in 2NT.
* With only a few values, 6-9 points, points and no interest in a Major suit fit (no 4-card Major) Responder usually bids 1NT, saying to Opener “I’m not interested in game unless you have a remarkable hand. Let’s play it in a partscore.” Often that partscore will be 1NT.

Responder asks Opener questions about their hand to determine where to take the contract – asking about their Major suit length and/or their overall strength. As a defender, we should keep these questions in mind (thinking about what “is asked” and what “is not asked”) in order to understand what is going on in the opponents’ auction. For example, if Responder does not bid a Major suit, then they likely do not have a 4-card Major suit. Keep this in mind when defending the hand.

**Further Questions by Responder – 2nd Round of the Bidding**

*Level: 2*

To accomplish the goals of finding a fit and exploring the proper level, Responder may ask Opener for more information about their hand on the second round of the bidding. When Responder has been successful at finding a Major suit fit then their next goal is to determine at what level to play the contract. Let’s look at example of how Responder follows up in the bidding.

*Example*

1♣ 1♠

2♠ \_\_?

In this auction Responder has found a fit and now needs to determine the right level to play the final contract opposite a minimum (12-14 point) opening hand.

* With 6-9 points Responder passes happy to play the hand here.
* With 10-11 points Responder asks Opener “Do you have any extra values?” by inviting game. Responder has options for how to invite game. Though the meaning of these bids may vary by partnership agreement all deciding between playing a game or stopping in a part-score.
  + 3♠
  + Bid a new suit at the 3-level.
  + Bid 2NT

Responder continues to search for a Major suit fit when one is not discovered on the first round of the bidding, often by using a conventional bid like *New Minor Forcing* or *4th Suit Game Forcing.*  These bids are used when Opener has denied 4-cards in Responder’s Major suit, but might still hold 3-cards in that suit.

*Example*

1♣ 1♠

1NT 2♦\*

This 2♦\* New Minor Forcing bid is artificial and asks Opener if they have 3-card ♠ or to give more information about their hand.

*Example*

1♦ 1♠

2♣ 2♥\*

This 2♥\* 4th Suit Game Forcing bid is artificial and asks Opener if they have 3-card ♠ or to give more information about their hand.

*Note: Both of these bids require Responder to have a good hand because they are likely to push the auction towards game.*

As defenders we should keep in mind when these tools are used and when they are not used. We can make inferences about what is “going on in the auction” by thinking about what the opponents are doing. We need to remember what values each player has shown (especially the opponent that becomes the declarer) and recall any information about the shape of the hands the opponents have given us.

**Conclusion**

When we are not bidding in the auction and are just listening to the opponents’ bidding, we should think about how they are exchanging information – what they are trying to accomplish in their communication and what tools they are using to accomplish these goals (usually trying to search for a Major suit fit without getting the bidding too high). This is the first part of understanding the opponents’ bidding and preparing ourselves to defend the hand. Think about the HCP and the distributions that are being described by both opponents while you have nothing else to do - pay attention when the opponents are bidding and listen to their auction!