

Begin contract bridge with Ross

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Class Five

Bridge customs.

Misdeals.

Supposedly the dealer should mindfully place crisp new bridge-sized cards (as opposed to that gauche poker-sized deck) one at a time in front of each player, knowing confidently that each will have precisely 13. But the cards may be old, sticky or slippery, and the dealer may not be so mindful. A clue that the dealer has faltered may arrive when the dealer finishes the deal not with himself, but with another player. It also may happen if the dealer makes more than one error, so finishes correctly, but still does not give each player the right number of cards.

To guard against this, each player is supposed to count his or her cards before looking at them. (Admittedly, we usually forget to do this.) So what happens when someone notices he or she has 12 or 14 cards?

First, some people groan, particularly those who have good hands. (And those who have pathetic hands secretly cheer.) Secondly, everyone throws the cards in, and the hand is redealt. Thirdly, everyone berates the dealer: we gave you one job, *one job*...

A yarborough.

You never want to suffer this, yet inevitably the laws of randomness say that you are going to now and then. A *yarborough* is a hand in which no card is higher than a nine. Some players try to invoke the "rule" that if they receive a yarborough, they can throw in the hand and declare a misdeal. There is no such rule. It may be great consolation to the person with zero points, but think about it: if someone has no points, someone else probably has a whole lot. By throwing in the hand we deny the lucky powerhouse holder the

opportunity to make a rightly-deserved game or slam—and someday, that person may be you.

Postmortems.

This slightly ghoulish term refers to an effort to review the play of the hand after it's finished. Ostensibly those who like postmortems say it's a good way to learn. Perhaps, but often it's also a good way for smug players to pin blame on a partner or harangue an opponent for purported "mistakes," or to parade their superior memory of the cards. Postmortems are not exactly bad bridge etiquette, but many players (like me) loathe them, possibly because we can't ourselves remember which card has been played two tricks later, say nothing of after the whole round. And we don't much care for that tiresome bickering either. Chill out, man.

Duplicate bridge.

We all admit right up front that chance plays a role in what we are playing, "party bridge." Some people just have a hot night, getting opening count after opening count. Other people can't seem to squeeze out a hand higher than six points. But that's just the luck of the cards, right?

Well, in bridge it doesn't have to be. Duplicate bridge wrings every bit of chance from the game, guaranteeing that winning partnerships really are better players, and sticks those big "Ls" right on the losers' foreheads (well, metaphorically). It does so by requiring every table to play the same hands. Tricks are not gathered, but each person shows the card he or she wishes to play, then lays it face down in front of him. That keeps each hand together for the next table.

Of course, this requires at least two tables (eight people) so that comparisons can be made. For each table the host sets up (usually) four hands. Each hand is placed in a square metal device with four slots, called a *bridge board*. Dealer is arbitrarily assigned; no one actually shuffles or deals. Vulnerability is also arbitrarily chosen, and scoring is somewhat different from party bridge.

Tables play the specified number of boards. Then the boards are exchanged with those from another table in a system to assure every team has played every board.

Most serious bridge clubs play only duplicate, but some players abhor it. Why? They'll give you reasons. But the truth is that when all chance is removed from the game, there's no one to blame for bad outcomes but yourself. Except your partner. Hence the inevitable contract bridge club partnerships who seem to spend more time screaming at each other in the postmortem than they do reminding themselves that it's only a game, for God's sake.

Bidding: Finding additional points.

In previous lessons we discovered that we count points in our hand based on high cards: A=4; K=3; Q=2; J=1. But we also noted that it's important to have more than only high cards: we also benefit from length in a suit and, except in no trump, shortness (doubleton, singleton, void) in a suit. So if these things are valuable, why don't we put a point count on them?

In fact, we do. I noted earlier in passing (and I'll bet you forgot) that most players also value their hand based on length or shortness. How they do that depends on the partnerships. Some only value length. Some only shortness. Some only after a finding a fit. Some never ever. But here we cover the most common standard, and I think it usually works pretty well for achieving accurate contracts. These are called *distributional* points.

- For each card in a suit above four, add one point to your count.
- For a doubleton, add one point.
- For a singleton, two points.
- For a void, three points.

How do we do this? Most modern players **add points for length** above four as soon as they pick up their hand. Most **add points for shortness** only after they've found a fit.

Example (x=card lower than a jack):

♠ AQxxx
 ♥ Qxx
 ♦ Axx
 ♣ xx

You have 12 HCP. But you can add one point for the fifth spade, so 13. Open one spade.

If your partner supports your spade, he or she has at least three. You have a fit. Now you can add a point for your club doubleton. You now have 14 pts instead of 12.

This may make the difference between a game and a part score. Suppose opener holds this hand:

♠ AQJxx
 ♥ Qxx
 ♦ Axx
 ♣ Kx

Opener counts 16 HCP plus one for a five-card suit, so 17. If partner supports spades, you can add a point for the doubleton, so now your hand is worth 18. Can you bid game? Not if responder holds only six points: $6+18=24$. But if he holds eight or nine, $8+18=26$, enough for game.

Responder holds this:

♠ Kxx
 ♥ Jxxx
 ♦ x
 ♣ Qxxxx

Looks like a fairly pathetic six HCP. But note that as responder, you have five clubs. Many responders will add a point for that. That makes your hand worth seven.

You also have a singleton diamond. And you can support your partner's opening bid of one spade. Now you can revalue your hand, adding two points for the singleton. Why? Because declarer only needs to get rid of that one diamond. After that he can trump possible losing diamonds in dummy. So now you've promoted your hand from six to nine. Should partner have opened with better than minimum, he'll bid three spades (invitational), and at nine, you can bid a game instead of settling for a part score.

Bidding minor suits.

I realize we harp about trying find a major suit contract, or no-trump, instead of a minor suit contract, so that we can pick up more points and an easier game. But sometimes you just don't have the cards for that—but you do have some pretty hot minor suits (clubs or diamonds). Well, better a minor contract than no contract. Example:

♠ Axxx
♥ Kxxx
♦ Qxx
♣ KJ

You have no five card major, and not enough points to open one no trump. You open one diamond, the longer of your minor suits. Your partner holds:

♠ Jxx
♥ QJx
♦ KJxxx
♣ xx

The hand has eight HCP, up to two distributional points, no four-card major to explore for a major fit (because opener can't have five), but a nice diamond suit. Responder knows that opener can bid a minor suit with only three cards in that suit (two if bidding clubs). But even if

opener has that minimum, responder has five. That's eight total. A fit! With five or more in a minor suit responder can support opener's minor suit bid at the two level:

1♦ - 2♦

Suppose opener actually has a few extra points, and so bids three diamonds:

1♦ - 2♦ - 3♦

Responder can add a point for the doubleton. He now has 11 points. Should he bid four? Note that in a minor suit you need **to bid five** (promising to take 11 tricks) **for a game**. To make that you need a minimum of 28-29 points between partners. Opener has shown at least 17 for his rebid, so you have 28 together. Tah-dah! Well, maybe just tah. The thing is, many players would still let the contract go at three. In theory you have enough for five, and your diamonds are indeed good, but you'd really like to see a singleton, or something higher in a side suit, to reach to five.

Why not bid four? Because for 20 lousy points you have to work a lot harder to bring in that extra trick. Not worth the pain and suffering. Four of a minor suit is the Rodney Dangerfield of bridge bids, unless you have 20 points below the line and you need 80 more for a game. Doesn't happen often.

As you may see, point-count offers a guide, but still, there's no substitute for the effort of cogitation, a pinch of courage, and the smile of lady luck.

Strategy.

Following the lead, dummy is laid on the table. Careful declarers pause now to plan strategy. To begin, you do one of two things: count your losers or count your winners.

Most bridge books recommend that in a trump contract you count losers. If the number of losers totals more than you can afford, you need to find a strategy to eliminate them.

Most bridge books recommend that in a no-trump contract you to count winners. If your winners don't reach your bid, you need to find a way to develop more winners.

Let's consider trump contracts.

The bidding:

South	North
1♥	2♥
3♥	4♥

North (dummy)

♠ A762

♥ Q97

♦ 4

♣ 98653

South (declarer)

♠ KQ3

♥ AK865

♦ A93

♣ 74

Notes on bidding: Note south opened with 17 pts, 16 + 1 for length in hearts. North promised 6-9 (some players count 6-10) and a fit. South's hand now can be reassessed to 18 pts. Game is possible! But it depends on responder's points. South invites game, bidding three. North considers that with the fit he now has nine points, including distribution. That's on the high side of the range, so he bids four hearts.

Declarer counts losers. I usually begin counting in my own hand. I see eight; a spade, three hearts, two diamonds and two clubs. Then I look to see if I can eliminate some of those in dummy.

Dummy has the ace of spades. Exxxcellent! That eliminates one loser. As I only have three spades, after playing the three high cards I can trump spades in my hand.

In hearts dummy has the queen, eliminating the losers, presuming a normal break. Recall that opponents must hold five hearts if we hold eight. The odds favor one opponent holding two, the other three, called the *break* or *split* of the suit. So if we play the three high cards in three rounds, we'll have no losers in spades.

Okay. We still have two diamonds and two clubs to lose. Can we afford to lose them? Note we have bid four hearts. That means we have to take 10 tricks, so can only lose three. We have to find a strategy to eliminate one loser.

Can we do that in clubs? Not likely—opponents have all the high cards. What about diamonds? Here's where the singleton matters. We play the ace of diamonds. Then we play two more diamonds, trumping them from the board. Tah-dah! Not only have we eliminated one of our losers, we've eliminated two! We get one overtrick.

Consider that we said earlier declarer should try to draw trumps immediately. But this is an exception. We'll need those trumps in dummy to trump the losing diamonds. After we do that, then we can draw trumps.

To recap, before playing the first card from dummy, declarer should pause and ask herself these questions:

1. How many losers do I have in my hand?
2. Which of these do I have absolutely zero chance of eliminating?
3. What can I do about the others? Possibilities:
 - Trump them.
 - Discard them.

- Try a finesse.

4. Do I have any reason not to draw trumps right away?

A review of classes one through five.

So far we've covered some peculiar jargon and amusing customs of bridge. We've considered how we rate our hands based on the point-count bidding system. We've offered direction on bids to make with minimum values as well as better-than-minimum values. We took a look at the bridge scoring system, and some fundamental strategies to help us win tricks. We also considered basic ways the opponents can counterattack.

You now know that basics. You're ready to play some bridge! But we still need to consider those occasions when we get a whole lot of points, and how to handle peculiar hands. Big hands don't happen often (about every 11th or 12th hand), but when they do, we need to pounce. Coming up....