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BBW Lesson #2: Responding to Partner's Opening Suit Bid

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When your Partner is the first player to open by bidding something other than Pass within an auction, you are called the "Responder". The "Responder" becomes the "**Captain**" of the partnership,¹ and is responsible for setting the final contract. The Responder, through Responder's bids, (1) provides the Opener with information about Responder's point count and card distribution, and (2) "demands" that Opener responds to Responder's/Captain's questions about Opener's holdings.

There are various scenarios for the remainder of the auction. As we consider these scenarios, always bear in mind that:

Bridge is a game of mistakes. You are going to make mistakes. Your Partner is going to make mistakes. Your Opponents are going to make mistakes. The keys to success in duplicate bridge do not involve you being perfect. Instead, the keys to success in duplicate bridge are to (1) make fewer mistakes than your Opponents, and (2) generously provide your Opponents with opportunities to make mistakes.

Your RHO Overcalls Partner's Opening Bid

RHO Overcalls with a "Sufficient" Bid. If your Right Hand Opponent (RHO) overcalls Partner's opening suit bid, you may then Pass. If you nevertheless bid in this situation, you are then showing a bigger hand than if you had bid following your RHO's Pass. Generally, you should bid following RHO's overcall, if you hold roughly 8+ HCPs, and certainly if you can support your Partner's opening suit bid, especially if Partner opened a Major.

However, always remember: *You can score a positive, and perhaps a larger, Total Bridge Score **by playing defense**, and setting your Opponents, especially if Opponents are vulnerable!* You have to think

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¹ If the Opener has information not known to the Responder, the Opener may then stage a "mutiny", and take back control of setting the final contract. For example, if Opener has a Very Big hand, Opener may stage just such a mutiny, either immediately, or further along in the auction.

of all the possibilities, when you are playing bridge!

RHO Overcalls with an "Insufficient" Bid. In online bridge, such as Bridge Base Online, software will not allow players to make certain illegal plays, proscribed under the ACBL Laws of Bridge, such as making "insufficient" bid, making a bid out of turn, or making a lead out of turn. However, these errors can, and do, occur in "human" (in-person) bridge.

In social bridge, if your RHO makes an "insufficient" overcall bid, it is strictly *de rigueur* and strictly required for everyone to then guffaw, stand up, wave their arms wildly, and repeatedly scream over and over again, "Insufficient."

This is not the correct reaction in duplicate bridge. When someone at your table when playing duplicate bridge makes an "insufficient" bid, say, and do, **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!!!** It is the sole and absolute responsibility of ONLY the LHO of the "insufficient" bid bidder to resolve the situation.

If the LHO of the person making an "insufficient" bid immediately puts down a Pass bid card, the "insufficient" bid is then accepted, and the bidding proceeds in the usual fashion. Alternatively, the LHO of the person can make any bid that is "sufficient" over the "insufficient" bid, thus again accepting the "insufficient" bid. This is often the most punitive choice, because the LHO of the "insufficient" bidder has enough points to respond to the Opener's bid, that partnership has a majority of the HCPs and should capture the contract, and that partnership can then pursue a contract at a lower level without having had to use up as much of the "bidding space."

As a final alternative, the LHO of the "insufficient" bidder may require that the bid be made sufficient. If the offender refuses to make the bid "sufficient," call the Director, who will then sort out the situation.

Your Responses if Your RHO Passes

Partner Opened 1C or 1D

If you hold 5 or fewer HCPs, generally you should Pass. A Pass in your seat is more *reasonable* if both (1) you do not hold a 4+ card Major, and (2) you hold a long suit in your Partner's bid Minor.

However, given that Partner opened, and therefore holds at least roughly 12+ HCPs, and may hold more, when you hold 6+ HCPs, your partnership holds roughly at least half the HCPs. You should be able to find at least a successful part score contract. All of the following scenarios assume that **you as Responder hold 6+ HCPs**.

1. If you as Responder hold 5+ Spades (even if you hold 5 Hearts), bid **1S**;
2. If you hold 5+ Hearts, but not 5+ Spades, bid **1H**;
3. If you hold 4 Hearts, and 4 Spades, bid **1H**;
4. If you hold 4 Spades, and not 4+ Hearts, bid **1S**;
5. If Opener opened **1C**, and you hold 5+ Diamonds, and not a 4-card Major, bid **1D**;
6. If Partner opened **1D**, and you hold 4+ Diamonds, and you do not hold a 4-card Major, bid **2D**.
7. If Partner opened **1C**, and you hold 5+ Clubs, and you do not hold a 4-card Major, bid **2C**.
8. If none of the previous conditions apply, and you hold 6+ HCPs, and a "square" or "flat" hand, bid **1NT**.

To review, if your RHO Passes, what do you bid if...?

One. Partner opens **1C**, and you hold:

S: A T 7 5
H: K 9 8
D: J 8 4
C: 9 8 6

Two. Partner opens **1C**, and you hold:

S: A T 5
H: K J 9 8
D: J 8 4
C: 9 8 6

Three. Partner opens **1C**, and you hold:

S: A T 7 5
H: K J 9 8
D: 7 4
C: 9 8 6

Four. Partner opens **1C**, and you hold:

S: A T 7 5
H: K J 9 8 6
D: 7 4
C: 9 8

Five. Partner opens **1C**, and you hold:

S: 7 5
H: 9 8 6
D: Q 7 4
C: A K J 9 8

Six. Partner opens 1**C**, and you hold:

S: 7 5
H: 9 8 6
D: A K Q 7 4
C: 9 8 6

Seven. Partner opens 1**C**, and you hold:

S: Q 7 5
H: J 8 6
D: A J T 7
C: 9 8 6

Eight. Partner opens 1**D**, and you hold:

S: Q 7 5
H: J 8 6
D: A J T 7
C: 9 8 6

Nine. Partner opens 1**D**, and you hold:

S: K Q 7 5 3
H: A J 8 6 2
D: 7
C: 8 6

Partner Opened 1H** or 1**S****

Partners prefer to play part or game or slam contracts in **NT** or a Major, rather than in a Minor, when such contracts are makeable, because these contracts yield higher Total Bridge Scores than contracts made at the same level in a Minor. This means that, when Partner opens with 1**H** or 1**S**, **you first, immediate, and primordial obligation** is to IMMEDIATELY support your Partner's bid Major when you hold support in the bid Major, as follows:

1. If you hold 4+ cards in Partner's bid Major, and 10+ HCPs, bid 3 of Partner's bid Major. This is called an "invitational" raise. You could instead bid game in Partner's bid Major, but doing so suggests that Partner "drop dead" with respect to further bidding. Thus, responding 3 is *stronger* than bidding 4!
2. If you hold **exactly 8-10 HCPs**, and 3 of Partner's bid Major, bid 2 of Partner's Major. This is called a "constructive" raise. You have now "limited" your hand, because Partner now knows within a very narrow range both (1) your point count, and (2) your card count in the bid Major. A very fundamental principle of bridge is that, "Whenever you have 'limited' your hand (e.g., by opening 1**NT**, by responding 2**H** when Partner opened 1**H**), NEVER, EVER, EVER again bid, unless your Partner by bidding again demands that you answer a question!" Whenever Partner opens a 1-level bid in a Major, and you bid anything other than Pass or 2

of that Major, you are denying to Partner that you hold 8-10 HCPs and 3 of the bid Major. Do not ever, for any reason whatsoever, even lie to your Partner about this!

3. If you hold **17-19 HCPs**, you as Responder can show your strong Big hand by both (1) bidding a new suit in which you hold at least 5 cards along with 5+ HCPs in your suit, and (2) gratuitously jumping an extra level in the bidding (e.g., Opener bids 1**D**, you as Responder bid 2**H**, or Opener bids 1**H**, and you as Responder bid 2**S**).²
4. If you hold **10+ HCPs, but less than 17**, but not 3+ cards in Partner's bid Major, but you hold 5 cards in another suit, you may bid your suit at the 2 level to show this holding to Opener. Both members of your partnership now know that together you hold 23+ points, and should be able to find a "fit" for a makeable contract. This bid by Responder "demands" that Opener **must** then (1) re-bid the originally bid Major, thus showing *at least 1 more trump card*, or (2) support Responder's bid suit, or (3) bid a third suit (usually holding 4+ cards with honors), or (4) bid **NT** if Opener holds stops in both unbid suits.
5. If you hold 6+ HCPs, and cannot support Partner's originally-bid Major, bid 1**NT** (and pray).
6. If you hold fewer than 6 or so HCPs, and you are not void in Partner's bid Major, Pass.

"The Law of Total Tricks"

Probably the most important idea in duplicate bridge, at least with respect to suit contracts, is "**The Law of Total Tricks**". The Law of Total Tricks was originally formulated by Jean-Rene Vernes in a 1966 book, and later discussed in an article by him in Bridge World a few years later. But this *very important* Law was popularized by bridge champions Marty Bergin and Larry Cohen (e.g., To bid or not to bid: The LAW of Total Tricks).

The Law of Total Tricks was developed primarily to guide how high to bid within a competitive auction (i.e., both Pairs are bidding). However, the admonitions of The Law of Total Tricks are applicable whenever *suit contracts* are being bid. "**The Law of Total Tricks**" **emphasizes the crucial importance of trump card counts, more than HCPs, when bidding suit contracts!**

"The Law of Total Tricks" says that **you can generally safely bid a suit contract at a level that is no greater than the number of trump cards your Partnership holds minus "book", or 6**. For example, if your Partnership holds 10 cards in a Major,

² This is called a "**Strong Jump Shift**." Some Partners instead play a "**Weak Jump Shift**," showing 7+ cards in the bid suit, and 2-7 HCPs. Playing a "**Strong Jump Shift**" versus a "**Weak Jump Shift**" is, as with many conventions, strictly a matter of "partnership agreement."

you can usually reasonably bid a Game contract, even if you are somewhat short of the number of HCPs normally required to make game. This Law, and its wisdom, is the reason why precision bidding, and honesty, in Partners showing each other **exact card counts** is so absolutely critical when bidding suit contracts!

"The Law of Total Tricks" does not mean you will always make a game contract in a Major when you hold 10 trump cards! And "The Law of Total Tricks" does not mean that you can only make a game contract only if you hold 8 trump cards. For example, you can make a game contract in a Major if your Partnership holds 8 trump cards, especially if you hold a 7-1 or a 6-2 split (thus requiring spending fewer on the Partnership's trump cards to draw Opponents' trump cards), rather than a 4-4 split, but you will need more HCPs to make game when holding fewer trump cards and a more even trump split within your partnership!

Responder Has Bid Something Other Than Pass

1. If you opened a Minor, and you as Opener hold 4 of Responder's bid Major, bid the Major at the 2 level, thus showing the "Captain" at least a 4-4 fit in that Major.
2. If you opened a Minor, and Responder bid 1**H**, and you hold 4 Spades, bid 1**S**. This may allow you to find a 4-4 fit in Spades when Responder holds both 4 Hearts and 4 Spades.
3. If you opened 1**C**, Responder bids 1**D**, and you hold a 4-card Major, bid that Major.
4. If you opened 1**C**, Responder bids 1**D**, and you do not hold 4 cards in either Major, and you hold 4+ Diamonds (thus your Partnership holds 8+ Diamonds), bid 2**D**.
5. If you bid 1**C**, and you hold 5+ Clubs (preferably 6), re-bid your Clubs to show the "Captain" that your original Club bid was "natural" (i.e., really holding Clubs), and not "artificial" (i.e., an artificial "convenient Minor" seeking a 4-card Major).
6. If you opened 1**C**, and Responder bids 1**D**, 1**H**, or 1**S**, and none of these conditions are met, bid 1**NT**, thus telling the "Captain" about your distribution, and letting the "Captain" then determine whether further bidding is prudent.
7. If you opened a Major, and Partner bids anything but Pass, and you hold 1 or more extra trump cards, re-bid your Major to show at least *1 additional card* in the bid Major. This will allow your Partnership to find a 6-2 split in a Major, which is preferred over a 4-4 or a 5-3 trump split, as previously explained
8. If you opened a Major, and Partner "supports" your Major at the 2 level, use the "Rule of 5" to decide whether to stop, or instead bid game. The "Rule of 5" (see "Esther Bridge Lesson" #7 'Rule of 5') says, "If you open a Major, and Partner responds with a 'constructive' raise (8-10 HCPs with 3 cards), add together the number of missing Aces, Kings, and Queens you hold across all suits, and if the number is 5 or less, bid game." If the number is 6,

you are on the margin for making a game contract. However, if in a short suit you are missing any of the top 3 honors, you may wish to only count yourself as missing top honors equaling the number of cards you hold in the short suit (e.g., if you hold a singleton 5 of Diamonds, count this as missing only 1 of the top 3 honor).

The Importance of "Playing the Room"

When you and Partner are sitting North/South in the "B" section of a game with both an upper-level "A" Open game section, and a lower Limited "B" section, such as a 249er section, when sitting in the 249er section you are not competing against the "A" section players, even though they are playing the same Boards as the "B" section players. And sitting North/South you are not competing against the "B" section players who are sitting East/West in your "B" section. Nor are you playing against computers, chairs, or hypothetical players.

Instead, you are competing against the very real, specific people actually sitting "in the room" in the same direction with you. And you **must** take your knowledge of these actual people into specific account when you bid, and when you play.

This means, for example, you can get a competitive advantage by successfully taking risks in bidding, or play, that your competitors "in the room" will be unlikely to take. But this also means that you will not be punished, at least not severely, for avoiding risks when your competitors "in the room" also are unlikely to take such risks.

For example, lower-level players are unlikely to bid slam, so if you bid and make a slam contract, you will likely be uniquely advantaged by doing so. On the other hand, if you fail to bid a makeable slam in a lower-level competition, you are unlikely to be severely punished for being timid, because your actual competitors are also likely to be timid. Other examples include bidding or not bidding game when the "Law of Total Tricks" says you can probably make game even without full game-going points, or failing to Double for Penalty when you think you will set a contract, because Limited game players almost never Double for Penalty! Consciously think about "playing the room" when you bid, and play!

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