

CONSIDERING NEW CONVENTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Most of the talks in this series have dealt with a specific aspect of bidding (e.g., weak 2 bids [you've had 2 somewhat different versions], overcalls, take-out doubles, etc.) or a specific aspect of play (e.g., opening leads, discards, etc).

I'm not going to follow this pattern. Instead I want to discuss how you should decide whether to adopt a new convention, and if you do, how you should prepare your partnership before putting it on your card. We'll look at some conventions (or groups of conventions) to illustrate the process. My comments will be independent of whether you play SA or 2/1. That doesn't necessarily mean that the arguments for or against adopting a specific convention are the same in both systems.

Why are there so many conventions today compared to a few decades ago. I think the rise of popularity of duplicate bridge is likely the main reason. In rubber bridge, playing for money, players wouldn't risk an occasional minus 500 to improve their results on part scores by 50 or 100. In duplicate you fight for part scores so there is much more competitive bidding and fewer undisturbed auctions. The competitive auctions lead to bidding problems for which people have devised many conventions.

Another reason is that in rubber bridge people rotated partners and frequently played with people they didn't know very well; so they kept their bidding very simple. In duplicate, partnerships evolve and become more and more detailed in their bidding.

With a few conventions (e.g., Stayman, Jacoby Major suit transfers, etc.) there is a strong consensus about the usefulness of a convention so those "convention" are really pretty much "standard." For many others there is not agreement among experts and authors.

I'm not going to recommend either for or against any specific conventions. I will point out some situations for which you should strongly consider having some conventional approach. I do not subscribe to the idea that the best way to improve your game is by seeing how many conventions you can add. (I found an old 3x5" convention card from about 1960) I'm not suggesting that bidding hasn't improved by the addition of more sophisticated conventions; however, I think there's a limit to how many the average club player needs. Adding a convention seems easy; someone tells you what to check on the card, you read a description, which may or may not be the same as the one partner read. You have a great feeling of accomplishment that lasts until the first misuse. You may see an opportunity to use a particular new convention once a week (or month, or year) depending on the convention. You will see an opportunity to work on your defense an average of 13 hands per session, so don't invest all of your time hunting for conventions.

To understand why certain conventions exist, it can be helpful to consider some ways of categorizing conventions. One instructive way is whether you'd use them in uncontested auctions, or in competitive auctions, which are often more difficult. Some conventions (like Blackwood) are used in both.

Another way to categorize conventions is whether they are used for constructive auctions or primarily to impede the opponents. Some can be used in both ways simultaneously such as various jump raises like splinters or invitational jump shifts.

2. MASTER YOUR CURRENT CONVENTIONS FIRST

Before considering any new conventions, I'd strongly suggest that you and each partner make sure that you understand the conventions that you already play. The list probably is something like this: Stayman, Blackwood, Weak 2's and 3's, 2C opening, Jacoby transfers, Negative doubles, limit raises, takeout doubles, and 5-card majors.

Some of the things that you should be sure to agree on are the ways in which the auction can proceed after the first conventional bid:

What bids are forcing, weak, invitational?

Is the convention on or off with various forms of interference by the opponents?

Does it matter if you're a passed hand?

What are the considerations of vulnerability?

Does it affect the meaning of doubles that you later make in competitive auctions?

Are there "standard" defenses against the convention?

Does the convention change for different suits?

Doing this with your existing conventions will do more to improve your game than quickly seeking new conventions would. It will also provide a methodology for investigating new conventions.

You probably won't be able to think of all the possible situations that may arise. You will always want to add new agreements after someone throws a different curve ball at you.

3. WORKING WITH EXISTING AND NEW PARTNERSHIPS

The decision to play a new convention should follow some study and conversations with partner. If possible, start the process with only one frequent partner.

Don't decide right before a game to add a new convention. I'm not very good about following this guideline, and it costs me far more match points than it gains. When I do this, my partner and I agree that we're doing this for experience, and that there may be disasters from which we'll learn.

When playing with a new, or fairly new, partner, keep your convention card as simple as possible, and try to discuss it a few days before the game.

When misunderstandings arise, don't start the blame game. Defer your discussion until after the game, and then work toward a common interpretation.

If you (and partner) decide to play a new convention, expect some problems. Problems are good; that's how we learn. Don't abandon the convention until you think you've given it a fair try.

3. RATIONALE FOR SEEKING A NEW CONVENTION

Decide why you think a certain convention will improve your game. What bidding problem does it solve or simplify? Don't embrace a solution and then go in search of the problem it addresses. Does it contribute to your constructive auctions or to your ability to obstruct the opponents? If the latter, does it hurt your constructive bidding? See *Karen Walker, "Bidding Matters" ACBL Bulletin July 2005, p.57.*

Don't add a convention unless you have a clear and cogent reason to do so. Let's look at some of the factors that fairly strongly motivate the adoption of a convention by way of an example. Start with partner opening 1NT. I think most systems have an opening NT bid because in one bid it gives a fairly narrow range for both HCP and distribution, and – together with both NT rebids and higher NT openings – covers the entire HCP spectrum for opening bids. What you give up to do this is the one level to start exploring for a fit, but you also deprive the opponents of the one level.

I think you'll all agree that with NT raises and a few conventions (mainly Stayman Jacoby and Texas transfers, and a few simple agreements on asking for aces or key cards), you can arrive at a good contract more than 90% of the time that the auction starts with 1NT. (Some of us clutter up our convention cards with myriad conventions that may come up once in an election cycle --- in North Korea.)

That 90% is if the opponents don't interfere, but they know about this 90% too. So if they have some playing strength, they will often interfere. To interfere has its hazards when the other side knows its strength. So when the opponents open 1NT, and you want to interfere, you usually want to do so at the 2 level if at all possible. You also want to interfere with a good suit or with a good fit. A good suit implies a one-suited hand, and a fit implies exploring with a 2-suited hand, but there's a problem. There are 4 one-suited

hands, (C, D, H, and S) plus 6 two-suited hands, (C+D, C+H, C+S, D+H, D+S, and H+S), but there aren't that many bids at the 2 level. That's why there are probably dozens of conventions for interference. Most of them give more than one possible meaning to some of the 2-level bids, and many of them give up the penalty X to cover other situations. The options range from fairly simple ones; the simplest being natural. Another simple one is that 2C shows the Majors; 2D, 2H, and 2S are natural, and X shows an equivalent NT opener, and is a penalty X, subject to partner's discretion. At the other extreme are rather complex conventions, for example: 2C shows C + M (C + a Major); 2D shows D + M; H = H; S = S; X shows a long minor, both Majors, OR a very good S suit; and 2NT shows both minors.

So there is a good motivation to find a convention so you can interfere with the opponents NT auctions, but there is no consensus about which convention is best. You and partner should pick one that is comfortable for you. ~~Some~~

Once more players started interfering with NT auctions, a variety of new conventions were devised for the opening pair to continue their auction in the presence of interference. In competitive auctions like these, it is essential to know what conventions your opponents are playing. Say an opponent overcalls partner's 1NT with 2C. Usually most players play that when there's a 2C overcall, systems are on. That means that if you double 2C, it is Stayman. All other bids have the same meaning as if the X or 2C overcall had not been made. But if the overcaller is playing 2C to show the majors, you don't want to bid Stayman. So knowledge of the opponents' conventions is essential. You are free to ask whenever it's your turn to bid, whether they alert or not. If you think that they don't provide an adequate answer, call your friendly Director.

5. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF NEW CONVENTIONS

There are some drawbacks to adopting many conventions. Some conventional bids (weak 2 bids, takeout doubles, Stayman, and Blackwood) involve giving up the "natural" meaning of the bids. Even though Stayman is virtually universally used, it does deprive you of the natural meaning to play 2C. The same is true of 2D as a transfer. What do you lose by giving up the natural meaning of a bid that would be replaced with this new conventional

meaning? Are the advantageous situations more frequent than those in which you would want to have the natural bid?

Some conventional bids used in competitive auctions do not have a “natural” meaning because they don’t exist in uncontested auctions, such as doubles (take out, negative, lead directing, support, etc.) many cue bids (Michaels, Western cue, etc.) and some passes (forcing passes, DOPI, conversion of a takeout double to penalty, etc.). The absence of a lead directing X has meaning.

Another drawback of some conventions is that you give information to the opponents, which may help them evaluate their own values for bidding; may give them the opportunity to make (or forego) a lead-directing X of an artificial bid (Stayman 2C or a Jacoby transfer); or may give them information to help with the defense by revealing distribution (various help-suit game tries, Michaels, and UNT). Consider the auction 1NT P 2H (transfer) X (lead directing). Without the double, the opening bidder would bid 2S, or occasionally 3S (super accept). Now in addition to these 2 options, she can Pass, which means, “I have a doubleton S” (Bidding 2S says “I have at least 3- card S, or XX, which means “I’m willing to play 2HXX. The partnership should agree on what each member needs to make the decision to play 2SXX.

In fact, every time you make a bid (not Pass) in a competitive auction, you give the next bidder more choices of bids. He may be able to Pass in a situation where he was otherwise forced to bid; he may be able to X, or XX if his RHO doubled; he may be able to cue bid. Believe me various experts have invented bids for all of these options.

Another potential drawback is forgetting the convention. We all do it, but the more conventions you have or add at the same time, or the more complex the subsequent bids are, the more chance for error.

Whenever you consider adopting a convention you must evaluate these drawbacks vs. the benefits of the convention. WARNING: Most authors that tout a particular convention, especially if it is named after them, will show you a disproportionate number of hands in which the convention helps, and it’s absence is quite serious. To make your own decision, study the convention and then ask an odd number of people whom you respect whether they think it’s beneficial.

Be sure that you don't have 2 conventions that are mutually exclusive. For example Bergen raises and weak jump shifts (to the 3 level) not in competition.

When you play with several partners it's hard to keep uniformity of which conventions you play and which version of them you play. Welcome to the beauty of Bridge. Agree on a published, or at least written, description of the system to work from. The choice is not nearly as important as that you use the same description. If you can get all or most of your partners to agree to the same version, that is very helpful – and astonishing.

convention

Two good sources of information about conventions are Seagram and Smith (*25 Bridge Conventions you Should Know*) coupled with Seagram and Bird (*25 More...*) and Root and Pavlicek (*Modern Bridge Conventions*). There are many others on line.

In the Appendix there's a section on Support Doubles, which I won't go into here. It's an example of the importance of having a detailed agreement with partner.

Suppose that you decide to try the some convention. That's not an irrevocable decision, and one valid reason for studying it may be to better understand opponents bidding when they use/don't use it. When you see how interference by the opponents gives you trouble with the convention, that may help you figure out how to cause problems for users of the convention.

Talk to some Directors and experienced players about how to mark your convention card, what bids are alertable, and what explanations should you give when the opponents ask about your bids? Don't be shocked when different people give you different answers.

Find a book or more likely an online source of practice hands to address various types of bidding situations Bridge Base Online has such a capability..

6. APPENDIX

Consider the case of support doubles:

Which of the following doubles by opener are support doubles.

1C P 1H 1S

X

1C P 1D 1S

X

1C 1D 1H 1S

X

1C 1D 1H 2D

X

1C 1D 1H 3D

X

1C 1S 2H 2S

X

1C X 1S 1NT

X

1D X 1S X

XX

1D X 1s 2H

X

1C 1D 1S 1NT

X

1S 1NT 2H X

XX

I think that I have witnessed partnership postmortems of all of these auctions. I've been one of the coroners in many. On some of these auctions there is broad consensus that they are Support X's. For every one of these auctions you can find some who say that it's a Support X.

It doesn't much matter which ones you accept as support X's. It matters a great deal that you and your partner agree. Rather than go through a list (that is longer than this, it is possible to make a few defining statements.

If opener's RHO bids (or doubles), and opener could raise partner's suit (or M suit if you prefer) to the 2 level, then opener's X (or XX) shows 3-card support, regardless of what opener's LHO did