

Is your Magazine Full and Your Powder Dry?

I have already talked to you about the fact, that when you learn bridge, you are taught a non-competitive system such as ACOL, but that the mysterious competitive system which I have called Universal Competitive is only hinted at. Yet, all of you by now will have experienced that unopposed auctions are a rarity and hotly contested auctions are the norm. I read recently that in the Second World War, some Italian troops were issued with cardboard boots. Is your equipment up to date? Will you be going over the top in cardboard boots?

The basic Universal Competitive System of doubles and overcalls is fine against standard opening bids, but what do you do when the enemy changes the rules and introduces a new weapon? Do you have a gas-mask for when the mustard gas shell comes flying? Do you have an asbestos shield against the flame-thrower? Or to put it in bridge terms, do you have a counter-measure to their Multi 2D, their Precision 1C, or their gambling 3NT? Here is a check-list of bids that your standard takeout doubles and overcalls will not adequately deal with.

- 1C Precision No reference to clubs, 16+ HCP).
- 1D Some forms of Precision. No reference to diamonds, generally balanced.
- 1D Transfer openings. 5+ hearts.
- 1H Transfer openings. 5+ spades.
- 1NT Weak or intermediate. 11-15 HCP.
- 1NT Strong. 16-18 HCP.
- 2C Artificial Strong.
- 2C Precision. 5+ clubs, 11-15 HCP.
- 2D Multi 2.
- 2H, 2S Natural weak twos.

- 2H, 2S Showing 5 of the major and 4+ lower suit.
- 2NT Strong balanced 21-22HCP.
- 2NT Unusual for the minors.
- 3C, 3D, 3H, 3S Natural weak 7 card suits.
- 3C, 3D, 3H, 3S Weak transfers to the next suit.
- 3NT Gambling with long solid minor.
- 4C, 4D, 4H, 4S Natural pre-empts.
- 4C, 4D Tied minor-major bids indicating hearts or spades.
- 4NT Immediate Ace Ask.

Armageddon is upon us my friends and the four horsemen of the apocalypse have been seen abroad accompanied by a squadron of ring wraiths. In this article, all I have time for is to prepare you to counter the secret arts of the Enemy as expressed in only the first four of those bids. Ask yourself what your double of each of those four opening bids means according to your present understanding with your partner. Ask yourself as well what it means if you overcall 2 of the same suit that they have just opened. I hope you and your partner are in total agreement and that your agreements are sensible. Just in case you need a little help, here are my non obligatory recommendations.

When they open a Precision 1C, they are not saying anything about the club suit, simply that they have 16+ HCP. Two facts should be immediately apparent to you. Firstly any available contract is much more likely to be for their side rather than your side because they have already claimed 16+ of the available 40 HCP. So, based on that wisdom, does it make more sense for any overcall by you to be natural and tied to a reasonable point count or to be entirely artificial and not tied to any point count at all? In other words, should your bid be to help your partner or to hinder the opposition?

The second fact that is blindingly, bleedingly obvious is that so far the partner of the 1C opener has no idea whatsoever about the suits that he could be holding. He is flying blind.

Taking these two facts into consideration, it obviously makes more sense to make a bid which tells opener very little about the actual shape or strength of your hand, but which muddies the water when he starts to try and communicate with his partner. So 9 times out of 10 any meaningless obstructive bid will be better than any natural bid and as you can never have your bid being both obstructive and natural, that means that 10/10 a meaningless obstructive bid is better.

Out there in the international black market for nefarious weapons, there are several systems you could adopt, but I am going to recommend one that is fairly well-known in New Zealand. This goes by the squelchy name of SUCTION. It works as follows.

Rule one: If you are actually blessed with a good hand, don't use Suction. Instead, pass and wait for them, to get into trouble or possible come into the auction later.

Rule two: There is no lower limit to the strength of your suction bid. It can range from a fairly meaty bouillon or gazpacho all the way to that weasel water low fat milk they insist on buying for the bridge club or unadulterated bilge water.

Rule three: you must have a suitable hand, which means any hand with a 5 card suit or any hand with two 4+ suits (or in other words, just about any hand).

Rule four: You never bid a suit you actually hold. Instead you bid the suit BELOW a suit you hold 5 cards in OR could hold 5 cards in!!!

It works like this. They open 1C and you bid 1H. You are saying that you have nothing much in hearts, but you may possibly have 5 spades. If you don't have 5 spades, then you will have 4+ diamonds and 4+ clubs. The opposition don't know what you actually have and neither, bless his little cotton socks, does your partner. If the bidding gets round to him, then he simply bids 1S (the suit you might have 5 spades in) and if you don't and that bid comes all the way round to you again

(a very unlikely occurrence, you can bid 1NT or even redouble to show an interest in the minors. Here is the full set of suction bids.

- X: 5 diamonds OR 4 in both majors.
- 1D: 5 hearts OR 4 in both black suits.
- 1H: 5 spades OR 4+ in both minors.
- 1S: 5 clubs OR 4 in both red suits.

You have now put up a smoke screen and hopefully jammed their communications. Now is the time for you to down periscope and sink quietly below the waves. As soon as either of the opposition bid, that's it. You are out of it. If your partner has to, he will accept your imaginary transfer suit, and if you really have to, you will rescue to your choice of 4 card suits. Basically get that Dive! Dive! Dive! Klaxon going and get the hell out of it before you are depth charged. There is actually small risk of that happening because big 1C hands are so proud of their hands that they can't wait to try and announce their shape.

Well if you enjoyed using Suction against a Precision 1C, just imagine how more satisfying it will be to use it against an ACOL Strong 2C! You'll feel like a submariner in a one man mini-sub attaching a limpet mine to the hull of the Bismarck.

But now that nasty Precision player opens 1D against you and you are informed that it means he has 11-15 HCP and a balanced hand and that the 1D bid has nothing at all to do with a diamond suit. He could have 1 diamond. He could have 6. What do you do?

Well, it's no good making up system on the hoof. You have to have already discussed your defence with your partner. Say, that if it is not diamonds you want to bid a natural 2D, but if it is diamonds you intend to pass. One thing you must never do, is to ask the opposition what the bid means and then pass. That is a big no-no. You are giving unauthorized information to your partner about your diamond holding.

I recommend the following. Whatever the 1D bid might or might not mean, treat it for the time being as a natural diamond bid for the purposes of defining your action. So, if you are treating it as natural then a 2D bid by you must be artificial, hence it is a Michaels' cue-bid showing 5:5 in the majors. If instead you yourself have diamonds, for the time being you must pass, hoping that your partner opens with a double, which you could then pass for penalty.

If you learn that the opposition are playing transfer openings, then I recommend a different approach. The bids you are likely to come across are their 1C bid which is generally a big artificial club and you can use suction over that and the bids of 1D, 1H, 1S and 2C which generally show opening hands transferring to the next suit, but if you have the intention of competing, you must always ask, as different partnerships have different variations. If you don't intend to bid, then you don't ask of course. Keep your asking until their bidding is completed.

These bids are actually marvellous for the opposition, because, believe it or not, they provide an extra bid that is not available over natural openings, and on the whole your bidding is kept lower. Let's say that they have an opening hand with hearts. If they had opened a natural 1H, you would have had available these 8 options: Pass, Double, 1S, 1NT, 2C, 2D, 2H and 2NT. If however they open 1D which is alerted and explained as meaning an opening hand with hearts, you now have 10 options: Pass, Double, 1H, 1S, 1NT, 2C, 2D, 2H and 2NT. This by the way is the only situation where a double by you at the one level is NOT for takeout. It all works like this. They have opened 1D.

- PASS : Either a weak hand or a hand with long hearts.
- DBL: An opening hand with a good 5+ Diamond suit.
- 1H: An opening hand with short hearts (their suit!) and takeout for the other three suits (our equivalent of a takeout double).
- 1S: Natural overcall, a good spade suit, 8+ HCP.

- 1NT: 15-18 balanced with a good heart hold, but not a stack in hearts.
- 2C: Natural overcall, a good club suit, 10+ HCP.
- 2D: Cue-bid of the suit they bid. 2-suited in spades and clubs. If you only had diamonds, you would have doubled!
- 2H: Cue-bid of the suit they actually hold. 2-suited in spades and diamonds.
- 2NT: Unusual. 2 suited in both lower ranked unbid suits (clubs and diamonds).

Now let's see this defence in action when they open 1H showing spades.

- PASS : Either a weak hand or a hand with long spades.
- DBL: An opening hand with a good 5+ Heart suit.
- 1S: An opening hand with short spades (their suit!) and takeout for the other three suits (our equivalent of a takeout double).
- 1NT: 15-18 balanced with a good spade hold, but not a stack in spades.
- 2C: Natural overcall, a good club suit, 10+ HCP.
- 2D: Natural overcall, a good diamond suit, 10+ HCP.
- 2H: Cue-bid of the suit they bid. 2-suited in hearts and clubs. If you only had hearts, you would have doubled!
- 2S: Cue-bid of the suit they actually hold. 2-suited in hearts and diamonds.
- 2NT: Unusual. 2 suited in both lower ranked unbid suits (clubs and diamonds).

The three two-suited bids are all based on the assumption that you are only battling for a part-score. If you have an enormous two-suiter, you have to announce that by a 3 level cue-bid of their suit! If partner has a fit for your 5 card major, he is honour bound to make a LAW response. This means, that, if he is aware of a 9 card fit, he must raise to the 3 level, and if he knows you have a 10 card fit, he must bid game.

All this naval warfare imagery runs in my blood. My father was a Royal Marine during the war, often on Arctic convoys. He told me that there was almost more danger of suicide than there was of being torpedoed. You were without sunshine for weeks; you were freezing cold; and you were in constant danger of attack from German submarines. He knew what lockdown really meant. He told me that on every single convoy he went on, there was at least one death from suicide. I remember my father this ANZAC day. Believe it or not, before the war, he was actually stationed in New Zealand. He wasn't on the Veronica in Napier on the day of the 1931 Earthquake, but was in Devonport on HMS Diomedé which steamed down to Napier the next day.

In my next article I shall attempt to build up your arsenal to cope with all those pre-emptive openings. In the meantime hunker in your bunker and stay safe. In the words of Vera Lyn, "We'll meet again. Don't know where. Don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day."