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This Week in Bridge

(331) Counting Points – When the Opponents Bid

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Level: 1

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General

Good hand evaluation involves making use of all of the information available to us at the table. We evaluate our 13 cards before the auction begins. When partner bids, we can make use of that information to help us re-evaluate our hand. We can do the same when the opponents bid - we make use of the information that the opponents give us with their bidding to help visualize their hands and judge how that improves or degrades the likely value of our hand. Let's see how to best make use of this information.

Honors in the Opponents' Suit

When we have honors in the opponents' suit, it generally decreases the playing strength (offensive ability) of our hand. This is the case because when we have honors in the opponents' suit, it leaves fewer honors for us to have in our long suits or partner's suit. Additionally, the fact that we have points in the opponents' suit increases the chances that an opponent has points in our suit or partner's suit – making it more difficult for us to set up our tricks. Simply put, we prefer to have fitting cards with partner, not the opponents!

Positional Values

Another important factor to consider when we are evaluating our hand is how our honors sit relative to the opponents' honors. The value of our tenaces (non-touching honors, like AQ or KJ) goes up or down based on the location of the other honors in this suit. The opponents' bidding helps us understand the likely location of these honors. For example, if our RHO overcalls and we have the AQ of their suit, then the King is likely on our right (where we want it to be for the finesse to work) and we should upgrade our AQ to more like an AK. By contrast, if we have the AQ of a suit and our LHO overcalls, then the King is likely behind us (meaning our finesse will fail) so we want to downgrade our AQ holding. We do similar upgrades and downgrades with holdings like KJx and others when our opponents come into the bidding.



Another issue to consider is the expected suit quality of the opponent who bid. There is a subtle difference between an opening bid and an overcall. An opening bid is dictated by a set of rules from our system (and can be a suit of any quality) while an overcall is a choice that the opponents made to show their long suit and decent values. An overcall (especially when the opponents are vulnerable) will often be a better suit than an opening bid and we can be more confident about our re-evaluation for positional values.

Fits

Using the position of our values is an important part of re-evaluation when the opponents bid, but we want to make use of more than just the location of the opponents' honors. We also want to make use of information about the opponents' length in a suit, as well as their general distribution. If the opponents bid one of our side suits (where we have 4-5 cards), then we can imagine partner as likely short in that suit. This information helps us visualize where we may have a fit with partner. In addition to helping us find a fit with partner, visualizing the opponents' hands helps us count the number of losers we might have in the opponents' suit. Holdings like three small (xxx) are horrible, often leading to losing the first three tricks in this suit. Other holdings like Qxx or Kxx (poorly positioned) can lead to many losers as well. By contrast, if we have four small cards (xxxx) in a suit that the opponents have bid and raised, then we expect partner to have a singleton or void in that suit. That is good for us if we play in a suit contract, because then we can ruff our losers in partner's hand. The opponents' bidding can often help us estimate the length that partner has in their suit and can be a valuable piece of information to help us practice better hand evaluation.

Conclusion

There are many hand evaluation factors to take into consideration when the opponents bid. It is important for us to learn to make use of the information provided to us by the opponents. We want to *use their bids against them*. We use the information they provide to help us visualize the way the four hands fit together around the table. Expert hand evaluation involves collecting the information about the opponents' hands and using it to "predict the future" of the way the play will go. Being able to understand what is likely to happen in the play leads to bidding far better contracts.