

Sometimes I feel a little like Col. Walter Buller, the English champion of natural bidding whose heyday was in the 1930s. Buller's life mission was to rail against the approach forcing methods, espoused by Culbertson, and which have become fundamental to bidding today. Buller believed, simply, that it was wrong, nay sinful, to make a low-level bid on a good hand. Bid all of your values immediately was his credo. To respond at the one-level, forcing, as one does today to an opening bid with, say, a 20 count was an anathema to the colonel.

While I am not with the colonel there, I do see a very distressing trend, away from natural bidding today. It began with Stayman. Read most beginner text books and you will see that bidding opposite a 1NT opener appears to be such a simple matter, pass, transfer to a suit and pass. Or with game-plus values, locate an eight-card major fit, if any, and bid game or slam in it, according to your combined point count. With no major fit, play at the level that your combined point count decrees, in NT.

Experience shows that while this approach is fine on most hands, bidders\* will out-score you in situations such as these.

- The hands are balanced but with a fatal flaw, such as doubleton opposite doubleton and the only game available is in the 4-3 major fit.
- There are plenty of tricks in three suits, the hand will make eleven or twelve tricks in a minor, with trumps to control the fourth suit, but no game in NT.
- Slams and grand slams where that vital twelfth or thirteenth trick is available, only in the minor suit fit.
- The hands are balanced, but simply do not fit well, and no game is available anywhere despite a combined 25-27 points.

Modern methods address none of those matters. Get methods, and you have a big swing in your favour, when the field heads, lemming like, to 3NT.

\*Some may call these methods "bidding," I am loath to use that word.

The simplicity of the popular methods, in reply to 1NT, and 2NT, opening bids has led to them becoming "the way" after other opening bids as well. Look for your eight-card major fit, and let the minors look after themselves.

Minor suit bidding just gets worse and worse, each new innovation puts it further into the background. Any student of bidding will know that it is already woeful in strong club systems. That is because that most vital of all bids, 1C has been usurped as entirely artificial. Any system that requires you to open 1D, ostensibly natural, on a singleton must be suspect. Better minor players fare little better. Simple, natural, use of all low-level bids is the foundation of good bidding.

The well-known conventions, new minor forcing and 2C check-back are manifestations of the modern style. Players are quite content to ignore the possibility that the only plus score available to

their side is in a minor suit part-score. Despite the match point obsession for NT contracts, +130 still garners more match points than -50 or even +120.

Yet another horror is 1NT reply to one-of-a-major, played as forcing. Holding say, 2-4 in opener's major and minor respectively, responder must give false preference to opener's major. So the hand is played, potentially, in a 5-2 major fit and not a 5-4 minor fit. Over a period, the minor suit contract will outscore the major suit contract significantly. The 4-4 heart fit will be found, but the good minor suit part-score can go hang. The 4522 minimum, gives opener an impossible rebid problem. How much easier it is to re-evaluate your hand when opener voluntarily rebids in two -of -a-minor. Sometimes you can actually raise it! You do need to accept that auctions following a 1NT reply are in effect a system within a system, in fact four different systems. You must apply yourself to dealing with each of these situations differently, but accurately. The emphasis must lie on getting the 1NT bidder to better describe his hand. 2NT asking responder to look for a spare jack or two is not bidding. It should be played, far more constructively, as some sort of enquiry.

And why is it played? Just so the 1NT bidder can follow up with an invitational raise. If you play the "never invite" style it is of no value at all. Save your science for slams, not to look for marginal games.

A new horror has more recently been added, transfer replies to 1C! To its exponents it is the salvation. But at what cost! One of the most valuable of all beginnings, in standard auctions, 1C-1D; 1H or 1S is simply gone. And that means, of course, all the simple, natural and accurate auctions that follow on. Alter your basics and you alter your whole system.

Consider this hand.

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Partner opens 1C. If he is short and strong this could be an absolute disaster, both opponents will be too long in clubs to come to your rescue. You must rescue yourself, so you bid 1D, and happily pass 1H or 1S and are even more delighted if partner raises. These options have been removed from you. Even 2NT is likely to play better than 1C, but it is useful to have methods, such as the Wolff sign-off, to get out into 3D after a 2NT rebid.

What about the diamond suit? Players of this "style" will tell you that 1S, now replaces 1D as showing diamonds, although to some, the 1S response to 1C, like the 2D response to Stayman, merely denies a major. Many players routinely bypass a four-card or even longer diamond suit just to show a four-card major. This is actually built in, playing transfer responses. It is simply wrong! Once you have bypassed a suit, you cannot show it without giving a distorted picture of your hand. Treat all the suits with respect and they will reward you.... at all levels, from a making part-score to the right grand slam. Simply knowing that if partner responds 1H or 1S to 1C, that is his longest suit outside, possibly, clubs is constructive in itself.

If you are one of those who open 1D with 4-5+ in the minors, there is no hope for you. None at all!

Like any system involving transfers, a new area of uncertainty arises, what do responder's bids mean in the face of even very low-level intervention, such as double or 1D? And what do you do if they bid your actual suit before you do, over your transfer bid? See below.

What is the justification for all this complexity? It is so the partnership can determine that they have an eight-card major fit at a low level. As admirable an aim as that may be, it is rarely a problem. The right game contract can always be determined, and often the 4-3 major-suit part-score is the best one, and will be found when opener raises with three, and the right sort of hand. The simple fact that partner has declined to raise your major suit response mitigates in favor of playing in NT ahead of even an eight-card fit in that suit. Transfer replies have removed opener's discretion, to raise, or not to raise, holding three. He is obliged to show three. His opportunity to exercise judgment has been taken away as it is whenever a conventional "asking bid" is been invoked.

It behoves any serious minded partnership to attach a meaning to a bid in the transfer suit. Not only is it a nuisance, it is free. A simple suggestion, which is quite safe and can be used over transfer responses to 1NT as well, it shows four cards in the other major and a long minor. 2NT is the forcing reply, others correctable. It is nearly always better to bid now, rather than later, double should be reserved, not as lead direction, but as take-out of their actual suit. If you want the lead of their transfer suit, double the final contract. If you reasonably can, bid that suit before the opponents get together.

I re-state here the basics, upon which I rely, which make auctions like these, so simple and natural. They are widely played, but not universally.

The opening bid of 1C is used for hands of opening one –bid strength but outside the range of the partnership 1NT bid. That means all 4333 and 4432 shapes. Immediately you have made the opening bid of 1D real.

For opener to rebid 1H or 1S over a 1D response, promises shape, usually 5+4 but possibly 4414. It is unlimited and while nominally forcing, responder who has merely rescued, may pass 1H or 1S.

With four-cards in a major, a five-card or longer minor which can be shown at the one-level bid the minor. If the minor must be bid at the two-level, it is better to respond 1NT without the values to bid two-over-one. At least you give yourself a chance of showing your actual shape.

Treasure all those low-level natural bids. You cannot afford to sacrifice any one of them. You can be assured of getting to a good part-score always, often to the only making one. Use 2NT as always forcing, not only will this ensure that you always play in the optimum game, or slam, contract, it does not usurp a natural bid. It takes a little effort but it is so rewarding, simply to include the minors in your bidding exchanges.

For the more serious minded, 2NT as a second-round shape enquiry after a Stayman reply, can get such precise shape information, that finding those elusive 4-3 major contracts and minor suit games and slams becomes a snap.

In a nut-shell, good bidding means far more than locating your eight-card major fit.