



## Issue 8: 2006 BridgeHands Newsletter

Orchestrating Notrump Contracts

October-November 2006

Dear BridgeHand Friends,

Welcome to *Bridgehands* eMag Newsletter, Issue 8. Do you look forward to bidding and playing a Notrump contract or do you fear Notrump enough to influence your bidding? Sure, we've all had an occasion of playing in a poor Notrump contract. Suits can split poorly, stoppers don't always hold up, and declarer play can be challenging. Yet avoiding a makeable Notrump contract faces its own consequence.

In this issue, we will take a look at the basics of Notrump contracts: the hand shape, hand evaluation, opener rebidding considerations, and play fundamentals. Do you worry about a worthless doubleton? Are all honors created equal? Should you upgrade your hand with a five card minor suit?

The **Rule of 5** provides a handy rule of thumb to consider in competitive auctions. The saying goes, "the five level belongs to the opponents." Let's consider the rationale behind this axiom and when your common judgment might prevail.

Note: Viewing the hands below requires your EMAIL reader to use "fixed fonts" (not proportional). If you have problems reading this document, please view our [online web-based copy](#) or [Adobe Acrobat PDF file](#) suitable for printing.

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## Orchestrating Notrump Contracts - How's your shape?

Given Notrump contracts assume balanced partnership assets without an 8 card major suit fit, what constitutes a balanced hand? The general guideline is one of the following hand shapes:

4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, 5-3-3-2

Fair enough, but how about the point distribution within the suits? May the 2 card suit contain a worthless doubleton or should the suit possess a useful honor? Aside from a slam contract, should we be concerned about a worthless doubleton when playing a game or partscore Notrump contract? No – in balance, when you aren't holding an honor in the doubleton suit, your partner is more likely to hold the missing stopper. Sure, there is a possibility that both you and partner will not hold a stopper. Yet in Bridge the name of the game is to optimize your aggregate score, not "play it safe" on all hands with only a moderate risk. Actually, when you think about it, a long suit headed with 2 of the 3 top honors has more trick-taking potential than a short suit with top honors.

1. S A K  
H A K 2  
D 6 5 4 3 2  
C J 3 2

2. S 3 2  
H J 3 2  
D A K 4 3 2  
C A K 2

While the first hand certainly has double stoppers in the short suit, this holding will be hard to generate more than 4 tricks. However, on the second hand if partner holds as little as the Diamond Queen, the hand may generate 7 tricks (5 Diamonds and 2 Clubs)

And what about "semi-balanced" hands, with 5-4-2-2 or 6-3-3-2 shape? If you play the cards beautifully as a Bridge professional, you probably open certain hands in certain situations. Yet as mortals, let's avoid pushing our luck since these hands do not meet the balanced criteria. Recall in previous *BridgeHands* eMag Newsletters, we've mentioned "[environmental factors](#)." Accordingly, if we are holding a long 6 card suit, that suit is more likely to hold honors – that's good news provided it's not where all the honors are concentrated. More importantly, if we hold a long suit, the opponents are also more likely to hold a long suit. Thus, the risk goes up that an opponent will eventually run a long suit. Let's say you hold 1 stopper in opponents' long card suit and lose a finesse in your long suit. Playing a 3 Notrump contract, you can still make game when the opponent holds a 4 card suit, losing 4 tricks. When opponents hold a 5 card suit, it's not so easy. We will need one of the following: 2 stoppers, an onside finesse, or a way to disrupt transportation to opponent with the long suit.

## Notrump Hand Evaluation – Not All Hands are Created Equal

Take another look at the above hands, would you evaluate both as 15 points? Perhaps not – we've acknowledged the later hand may take several more tricks. Here's a few general helpful guidelines:

1. Add 1 point for a 5 card suit with extra trick- taking potential - the second hand with "working honors" in a long suit.
2. Subtract 1 point for a two honor doubleton suit (**A-K, K-Q, Q-J**)
3. With close decisions as when partner invites game, upgrade your hand with "working honors" collocated in the same suit:

S 3 2 (working)  
H A Q 2  
D A Q J 3 2  
C K 3 2

S A J (not working)  
H A 3 2  
D K 5 4 3 2  
C A 3 2

**Opener Rebidding Considerations** What High Card Point opening range do you play? For the last 20 years, duplicate players have enjoyed 15-17 HCP while many rubber Bridge players continue with the tried-and-true 16-18 HCP range. While the lower range has the advantage of a higher frequency of use, conservative players might argue that 16-18 HCP is a sounder opening bid. For our discussion here we will use the popular 15-17 range. As we learned last month in our captaincy lesson, either partners Notrump bid at the cheapest level is a signoff bid with no interest in game. Further, opener's 1 Notrump rebid implies:

1. No suit fit with responder
2. 12-14 HCP (assuming 15-17 1 Notrump opener)
3. A balanced shape (4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, 5-3-3-2)

This begs the question, "But what about when opener has a singleton in partner's bid suit or began with a 5-4-2-2 shape?" Okay, let's tackle these questions one at a time. Let's say the bidding begins:

1C - 1S; And you hold:

S 2  
H A 4 3 2  
D A 3 2  
C A Q 4 3 2

We normally prefer a 6 card suit to rebid a minor, yet for this holding rebidding the Club suit is a reasonable proposition. When good judgment dictates a long suit is not likely to "set up" for additional tricks (promotion), we should consider other options. For instance, if you instead held a singleton Spade Ace or King and a

lonely honor in your Club suit, rebidding 1 Notrump would be a thoughtful call.

Now let's turn our attention to the hand with a 5-4-2-2 shape. To add to the complexity, we'll assume we have 2-2 in the major suits. Would you open 1 Notrump holding 15-17 HCP or perhaps rebid 1 Notrump when partner raises to 1 of a major suit? Hmm, neither of these are great propositions. Sometimes Bridge bidding involves telling the smallest lie – certainly that's the case here. Perhaps some additional information might help in our decision making:

S A Q  
H K 2  
D A 4 3 2  
C K 5 4 3 2

Many better players would open this 16 HCP hand as 1 Notrump, simply to avoid the rebid problem! (you are not quite strong enough for a 2D [reverse](#)) Certainly the honors are balanced and three useful stoppers in the doubleton suits help provide a barrier. What about this hand?

S Q 2  
H K 2  
D A 4 3 2  
C A K 4 3 2

Opening 1 Notrump with this holding is asking for "major" trouble; perhaps opening and rebidding Clubs is a better proposition. By the way, did you consider opening 1 Diamond, planning to rebid 2 Clubs? True, we prefer to open with our longer suit. But desperate times (hands) calls for desperate measures - this can work well with hands that beg a rebid by responder. No, if responder bids a major suit, opener's 2 Club rebid is not purely forcing simply because we have bid a new suit. While responder's new suit bids are forcing (assuming responder is not a passed hand), opener must make a reverse or strong jump shift in order to force responder to rebid – see links for details.

Let's finish by exploring opener's jump rebids. So far we've mentioned:

1 Notrump opener = 15-17 HCP  
1 Notrump rebid = 12-14 HCP

Most who play 15-17 HCP 1 Notrump openers, play:  
2 Notrump opener = 20-21 HCP

Thus, when opener jumps a bidding level and rebids 2 Notrump, opener is committing to a point range between 1 and 2 Notrump, or:

2 Notrump rebid = 18-19 HCP, and  
3 Notrump rebid = 20-22 points (20-21 not balanced)

Opener is showing a balanced hand or as we saw earlier, at least telling the smallest possible lie! Oops, we do have one exception to the balanced hand rule: opener's 3 Notrump rebid promised game forcing values, not necessarily a balanced hand. Of course if opener held a balanced 20-21 HCP hand, opener would have initially opened 2 Notrump; remember, "real Bridge players" don't worry about opening a worthless doubleton!

## Play Fundamentals

***BridgeHands*** is happy to announce Marty Bergen just released his latest book, "[More Declarer Play the Bergen Way](#)." We thank Marty for allowing us to share excerpts from each chapter at our website. Further, Chapter 4 "Life in Notrump" is reprinted here (copyrighted).

Too many players become nervous when considering playing a notrump contract. They remember the devastating feeling of going down in 3NT when the opponents gleefully cashed the first five tricks.

As unpleasant as those memories may be, try not to overreact. Marty Sez: "Notrump contracts are usually easier to play than suit contracts.

A notrump contract is essentially a race. Each side hopes to finish first by establishing its suit and cashing enough tricks to "win" the hand.

Playing a suit contract involves more considerations. In addition to deciding whether you should work on a short suit or a long suit, you always have to resolve the usually crucial but often subtle question: Should you or should you not draw trumps first?

When playing a notrump contract:

- Count your guaranteed, immediate winners.
- Figure out how many more tricks you need.
- Select a suit that will provide those tricks.
- Make sure you have the necessary entries.
- Decide how to cope with the suit led.

On your mark, get set, go.

**Sometimes, the Eight is Enough**

**Contract: 3NT, Lead: SQ**

**North**

S K 5  
H 9 7 5 4 2  
D A J 2  
C J 5 4

**South**

S 8 6 4  
H A 10  
D K 8 4 3  
C A K Q 9

West	North	East	South
--	--	--	1NT
Pass	2D*	Pass	2H
Pass	2NT	Pass	3NT

All Pass

2D \* = transfer to hearts

North responded with a Jacoby Transfer and then invited game by bidding 2NT. You're concerned about spades, but like your two honors in partner's heart suit and your very strong club suit. You also like the fact that your 16 HCP include no jacks!

**Because jacks are the most over-rated honors, you should look favorably at worthwhile hands that contain no jacks.** Based on a lot more pluses than minuses, I agree with your 3NT bid.

Unfortunately, when West leads the **SQ** and dummy hits the table, you don't like your chances. With no confidence, you try the **SK**, but East wins his ace and returns the **2S**. Hopefully, this card represents some good news. It suggests that East started with four spades, which means that you're not down yet.

On the third round, you discard dummy's **H2**. On the fourth round of spades, you discard dummy's **4** and your own **H10**. East wins the fourth spade and leads a heart to your now-singleton ace.

Five tricks have been played, and having lost the first four, you need every one of the remaining eight tricks. Unfortunately, you have only six sure winners – two diamonds and four clubs. Your only hope to make the contract is to win two additional diamond tricks

You lead the **D3** and West plays the **D9**. You finesse the **DJ** and hold your breath. It wins, so you cash the **DA** and West plays the **DQ**. Very interesting. That leaves the following position:

D 2

D K 8

When you lead the **2** from dummy, East follows with the **7**. You finesse the **8**, and, as expected, West shows out. Yessss! You now claim your **DK** and four club winners and score up your game.

Contract: 3NT, Lead: SQ

North

S K 5  
H 9 7 5 4 2  
D A J 2  
C J 5 4

West

S Q J 10 3  
H K J 8  
D Q 9  
C 8 7 6 3

East

S A 9 7 2  
H Q 9 3  
D 10 7 6 5  
C 10 2

South

S 8 6 4  
H A 10  
D K 8 4 3  
C A K Q 9

West	North	East	South
--	--	--	1NT
Pass	2D*	Pass	2H
Pass	2NT	Pass	3NT

All Pass

2D \* = transfer to hearts

**Very important defensive note:** You successfully finessed dummy's **DJ** and then cashed the ace. Suppose West had been dealt the **D Q 10 9**. At that point, any West worth his salt would drop the queen – the card that he was *known* to hold.

That *mandatory* falsecard would create the opportunity for a deep finesse – and results in you (or I) going down several tricks.

### Entries – the Name of the Game

Contract: 3NT, Lead: S7

North

S K J 5  
H J 10 8 7 3  
D 6 4 3  
C 8 3

South

S A 9 6  
H Q 9  
D A K J 5  
C A K 4 2

West	North	East	South
--	--	--	2NT
Pass	3D*	Pass	3H
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

3D \* = transfer to hearts

Question 1: After West's fourth-best spade lead, how many spade tricks do you have?

Question 2: What suit (or suits) do you plan to work on to make your contract?

Question 3: What card will you use to win the opening lead?

Answer: Time to apply the Rule of 11. Subtracting 7 from 11 equals 4. This tells you that there are a total of four cards above the **7** between yourself, dummy, and East. You have two cards: the **ace and 9**. Dummy has two higher cards, the **king and jack**. Therefore, East has no spades above the **7**. Winning three spade tricks will be easy.

Question 2: What suit (or suits) do you plan to work on to make your contract?

Answer: Hearts is the only suit you need to work on. Counting 3 spade tricks, you have 7 winners off the top. You need only 2 additional tricks. Fortunately, you have all the heart intermediates, so you should be able to win 3 heart tricks while losing only 2.

Question 3: What card will you use to win the opening lead?

Answer: To ensure two spade entries to North's hand for later, you must *now* take your **SA**. When you lead the **HQ**, East should duck, but you'll continue hearts and drive out a heart honor. East will win and lead the **CJ**, but you'll win and take the marked spade finesse. Then it's easy to knock out East's last heart honor. Once you do, dummy will have 2 heart winners and a guaranteed entry in the **SK**, and you'll win 10 tricks.

If you had won the first trick with the **S9**, you'd still have the **SA**, so you'd have only one spade entry to the board. If East is smart enough to duck when you lead the **HQ**, he will cut you off from dummy's hearts and limit you to one heart trick.

If you had won the first trick with the **S9**, you'd still have the **SA**, so you'd have only one spade entry to the board. If East is smart enough to duck when you lead the **HQ**, he will cut you off from dummy's hearts and limit you to one heart trick.



Contract: 3NT, Lead: S7

North

S K J 5  
H J 10 8 7 3  
D 6 4 3  
C 8 3

West

S Q 10 8 7  
H 5 4  
D Q 9 8 7  
C Q 7 5

East

S 4 3 2  
H A K 6 2  
D 10 2  
C J 10 9 6

South

S A 9 6  
H Q 9  
D A K J 5  
C A K 4 2

Marty Sez: Sometimes, it is *not correct* to win a trick as cheaply as possible.

### Waste Not, Want Not

Declarer should lead an honor for a finesse only when he will be well-placed if it is covered.

Contract: 3NT, Lead: SQ

North

S A  
H J 3 2  
D 7 3 2  
C 9 7 6 4 3 2

West

S Q 10 8 7  
H 8 7 6 5  
D J 6  
C Q J 5

East

S K J 9 4  
H Q 9  
D 10 9 8 5 4  
C K 10

South

S 6 5 3 2  
H A K 10 4  
D A K Q  
C A 8

Declarer has seven tricks in top cards, and his only hope is to win *two* additional heart tricks. But if he leads the **HJ** at trick two, and East covers with the **queen**, South can win only the **ace, king, and 10**.

Because he is missing the **H9**, South must not waste the **HJ**. Instead, he should lead dummy's **H2** and finesse the **10**. After that wins, he can cash the **HA**. When the **HQ** falls, he can lead the **H4** to the **HJ**, and get back to his hand to cash the **HK**.

## Rule of 5 – The Five Level Belongs to the Opponents

Counting up the "Rules of," it's time for the Rule of 5. Back in the mid-1980's, Grant Baze offered an axiom that in most situations it's not profitable to make a 5 level bid over the opponents 4 Spade or above bid. Does that mean a pair should never overcall above opponents 4 Spade call? No, not at all – in fact, the other side might actually belong in slam. Of course, doubling opponents indiscriminate high level bid is another possibility. While we won't be able to get in depth here, let's cover some of the basics associated with these super-competitive high level bids.

First off, it's unlikely both sides have an even 20 HCP distribution. Typically the weaker partnership is pushing the limits of their combined suit length, usually with favorable vulnerability and shortness the opponents' suit. The stronger side usually holds game-going or stronger values. Another assumption is that the weaker side does not possess significant defensive tricks to set their opponents – this type of an unwarranted overbid destined to go down is known as a "phantom sacrifice."

And what is the difference between offensive and defensive tricks? Well, holding all your honors in your sides extra-long suits would be considered offensive tricks, likely to result in a quick ruff by the opponents when your side is not the declarer. As defenders, we would prefer to hold primary honors, Aces and Kings, in our shorter suit. And what about when both sides have a double fit in two suits? Ah, here's a situation where the bidding can get really exciting. Particularly when your side holds the "master suit" – Spades and primary honors in the long suits, complementary hands like these result in a makeable five-level or perhaps a six-level contract for each side.

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[Issue 2 - Notrump Leads](#)

[Issue 3 - Leads Against Suit Contract](#)

[Issue 4 - Trump Power](#)

[Issue 5 - Trumps are wild - Part 1](#)

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Best wishes,

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