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This Week in Bridge

(146) What is a Stopper?

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Level: 2

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General

When the opponents show a suit, we need to be able to prevent the opponents from taking too many tricks in that suit if we want to play in Notrump – we need to be able to “stop their suit”. A *Stopper* is a holding in the opponents’ suit that allows us to win a trick when they attack that suit on opening lead (usually against a Notrump contact.) We are usually looking for a stopper in the opponents’ suit to bid Notrump and attempt to play there.

A stopper is most important when the opponents have shown a long 5+card suit. When the opponents have preempted, overcalled, or made an opening bid showing this long suit, we look for a stopper to play in Notrump. If the opponents bid a suit that could be short, we will sometimes bid Notrump even without a stopper in their suit. For example, if an opponent’s opening 1♣ could be on three small ♣, then we do not always need to have a ♣ stopper to bid Notrump.

Stoppers

There are too many possible card combinations for us to consider them all, but here are some holdings in the opponents’ suit that are usually considered stoppers:

Single Stoppers

- Ax+
- KQ
- QJT+
- JT9x+
- JTxx+ This is not a perfect stopper, but very likely to be one.

Note: The ‘+’ sign means this holding or longer.

Not all stoppers are as perfect as the above examples. We will consider some holdings in the opponents’ suit to be a stopper even if they are not guaranteed to win a trick. We will usually treat a holding as a stopper if it is likely to win a trick when the opponents lead that suit into us when we are the declarer.

Positional Stoppers and Siding

Some holdings in the opponents' suit are stoppers (or double stoppers) only when they are located on the proper side of opponents' suit. Our honors are much more likely to stop the opponents' suit when they are located behind (or after) the opponent with the long suit. These types of stoppers are called *Positional Values* or *Positional Stoppers*.

Positional stoppers are particularly affected by having the opening lead come into them - being in the declarer's hand. When it is important which player becomes the declarer, we refer to this as *Siding the Contract* properly. Siding, or which player becomes the declarer, is an important part of Notrump bidding.

These next **single stoppers** are more valuable when located behind the opponents' suit and when led into on opening lead - so they get to play to trick one last.

- Kx+
- QTx+
- Qxxx
- Qxx This is not a perfect stopper, but one that we usually bid Notrump on when the opponent with the long suit is on our right and the lead is coming into us.
- Jxxx *Same comment as previous example.*

Other Stoppers -- Double Stoppers and Partial Stopper

- AK+
- AQ+ This is likely to be a double stopper if the lead is coming into it.
- KQx+ The longer the holder the more likely this is to be a double stopper. This holding is also more likely to be a double stopper if it is located behind the opponents' suit.

Combined Stoppers

Stoppers can be made by combining two hands - partner's and ours. If we have a *partial stopper* (sometimes called a half-stopper) and partner has a similar holding, then the hands combine to have a stopper in the opponents' suit.

Some examples of partial stoppers:

- Qx
- Jxx
- K

These partial stoppers can be combined with honors in partner's hand to produce a full stopper:

- Qx Jxx
- Jxx Qx+
- K Qx

Partial stoppers can also combine with partner's holding to make double stoppers:

- Qx Axx
- Jxx ATx
- Jxx Kxx
- K Ax+
- K Qxx+

A Special Stopper: Qx

A stopper that players commonly bid Notrump with is Kx. This is a holding that players know needs to be led into, so that it can play last to the opening trick. If Kx is put down on the dummy, to be led through at trick one, it is far less valuable and uncertain to be a stopper in the opponents' suit.

But there is another similar holding that most players are not as aware of - Qx!

With Qx in the opponents' suit in declarer's hand, there are many holdings that partner can have where your side will have an extra stopper in the opponent's suit.

Example

1♣ 1♠ 2♥ P

___?

♠ Q7

♥ 64

♦ AK92

♣ KT654

With no fit for partner's ♥ suit, the best rebid with this hand is 2NT.

Note: If you had opened 1♦ you might have avoided this rebid problem and given yourself another rebid option of 3♣.

Here are some things to consider:

- If partner has ♠Jxx, you will have a stopper.

- If partner has ♠10xxx, you will have a stopper.
- If partner has ♠Ax or ♠Axx, you will have two stoppers when you declare the hand.
- If partner has ♠Kxx+, you will have two stoppers when you declare the hand.
- If partner has no honors, you can still have a stopper if opener leads away from ♠AKxxx on opening lead.

Conclusion

Stoppers are an important part of playing Notrump. When the opponents show a long suit, you can show partner a stopper in that suit by bidding Notrump. When you have positional stoppers in the opponents' suit you should strive to bid Notrump as quickly as possible, even when those stoppers are not perfect. Think about these card combinations and try bidding Notrump more aggressively with these holdings - you will find that your side turns out to have a stopper (or two stoppers) in the opponents' suit more often than you think!