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This Week in Bridge

(181) Visualizing Responder's Hand as a Defender

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Level: 1

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General

Just as it is important to visualize the Opener's hand when we are defending, it is also important to visualize Responder's hand. The information available to us as a defender about Responder's hand is not as quickly available as the Opener's hand because Responder often takes longer to describe their hand than Opener, if at all. Let's look at some of the information and inferences about Responder's hand available to us as defenders.

Responder's Hand Type and Bucket (Strength)

Responder does not as quickly define either their *Hand Type* or *Bucket* as Opener does.

1. Responder focuses on finding Major suit fits first, showing a 4+card Major if they have one – either naturally or using conventional bids like Stayman or Transfers.
2. When Responder does not have a Major suit then they usually turn their focus to either raising Opener's suit or showing the values of their hand.
 - a. Minimum hands usually make one "constructive", forward-going bid, then sign off at a low level.
 - b. Invitational hands invite game in either a suit or Notrump.
 - c. Game forcing hands either jump to game or continue to make forcing bids in exploration of which game to play.

As a defender, when we are visualizing Responder's hand we want to think about what 4-card (and even 5-card suits) Responder has shown and if these suits will likely set up; Are they breaking well for the opponents or not? We also should think about the suits Responder has implied length in but not explicitly shown, and think about if these are splitting well or not. Additionally, we consider what suits Responder has denied length in and what inferences are available about partner's holdings in these suits. This will aid us in determining what to lead if we have a weak hand and want to try to lead partner's suit instead of our own.

When the opponent's suits are breaking well, then we should attack and make an aggressive lead. When the opponent's suits are not breaking well, then we can afford to be more passive and not lead away from our honors because we know that their suits will not easily set up.

Explicit Information About Responder's Hand

Here are some examples of how we visualize Responder's shape in some explicit auctions and how we make use of this information to help us defend better.

Example

1NT 2♣
2♦ 3NT

In this auction, Responder is known to have at least one 4-card Major and Opener does not have a 4-card Major suit.

- If we are 3-3 in the Major suits, then we should fear that when the declarer goes to "set up" a potential 4-3 Major suit fit, it would be successful. In this case, we generally make an attacking lead.
- If we are 2-2 in the Major suits, then we know that partner has at least 4-cards behind a 4-card Major in Responder's hand. Thus, the suit will not likely set up easily. In this case, we generally make a more passive opening lead, leaving the opponents to develop all of their tricks on their own.

Examples

1♦ 1♠
1NT 2♣*
2♦ 3NT

1♦ 1♠
2♣ 2♥*
2NT 3NT

When Responder uses a conventional bid, like *New Minor Forcing (NMF)* or *4th Suit Game Forcing (GF)*, before jumping to game then there is a strong inference that the Responder has a 5-card Major suit as these tools are usually used to look for 5-3 Major suit fits. This means that we should consider if we think this suit is likely to easily set up. Do we think it is splitting well for the declarer, say 3-3, or is it splitting poorly?

Implied Information About Responder's Hand

Similarly, we can make inferences about Responder's Major suit length by what they do not bid.

Example

1NT 3NT

In this case we can infer that Responder likely does not have a 4-card Major suit (though they may have one if they are 4-3-3-3). This information can be useful if we have a weak hand and we may choose to lead a “short” Major suit, hoping to find partner with length in that suit.

Examples

1♦ 1♠
1NT 3NT

1♦ 1♠
2♣ 3NT

If Responder jumps to game when they could have used NMF or 4th Suit GF then there is an inference that they likely do not have a 5-card Major suit (only a 4-card Major suit). Knowing this information can help us evaluate how dangerous the Responder’s hand may be and help us determine how aggressive to be on opening lead.

Conclusion

As a defender, it is important to visualize both the Opener and Responder’s hands during the auction.

The Responder generally focuses on finding a Major suit fit and thus tells us, either directly or by inference, a lot about their Major suit holdings early in the auction. Responder usually continues to tell us more about their hand’s strength later in the auction, which can be particularly useful if they become the declarer. Think about the Major suits in both Opener and Responder’s hands and try to project how the play will go for the opponents. If you think it will go well for them, then get aggressive and try to go get your tricks before they disappear. If you think the play will go poorly for the opponents, then be more passive and force the opponents to earn every one of their tricks themselves.