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This Week in Bridge

(262) Making Use of the 3-Level

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Level: 2

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General

In constructive bidding, the 3-level is a somewhat neglected topic for most partnerships. Most players spend their time discussing what 2-level bids show in a variety of situations (usually searching for a fit) and most partnerships have good agreements about how they use the 4-level in different auctions (Splinters, Gerber, Cuebids, etc), but the meanings of bids at the 3-level is a topic that is frequently not discussed in enough detail. Let's take some time to look at some specific 3-level situations.

Using the 3-Level After a Major Suit Fit -- Help Suit Game Tries

After we have found a Major suit fit at the 2-level, we can bid a new suit to ask partner if they can help with our losers (either with honors or shortness) in this suit.

Example 1

1♠ 2♠
3♦

This is a traditional *Help Suit Game Try*, a new suit after we have found a Major suit fit. Partner bids game with a good or helpful ♦ holding and stops in 3♠ without one.

Example 2

1♣ 1♠
2♠ 3♦

This is another *Help Suit Game Try*, bidding a new suit after we discover a ♠ fit. This is commonly a valuable use of the 3-level after we have found a Major suit fit.

Help Suit Game Tries in Competition

Sometimes the opponents compete in the bidding, taking away our bidding space for making a game try after we have found a Major suit fit.

Example 3

1♠ P 2♠ 3♦
__?

In this case we may have to make a bid that is less specific about in which suit we need help. Here a bid of 3♥ would be a generic game try and may not be focused on needing help in the ♥ suit, similar to bidding “3.5♠” and letting partner guess whether to stop at the 3-level or go on to game. A 3♠ bid in this situation is purely competitive and would not invite partner to bid game.

Using the 3-Level After a Minor Suit Fit

If we have found a minor suit fit, we may use the 3-level differently. When we have found a minor suit fit we are striving to get to 3NT and discover if we have stoppers in the important suits.

Example 4

1♦ 3♦
3♥ __

Here 3♥ is trying for game in NT. It shows a stopper in the ♥ suit and implies a problem in the ♠ suit, because with stoppers in both Major suits, we would just bid 3NT.

Other 3-Level Uses After a Simple Raise

Jumps to the 3-level (or higher) after finding a fit are often splinter bids, showing shortness in that suit and at least game forcing values (often interested in slam).

Example 5

1♥ 2♥
3♠

This jump to 3♠ shows a singleton or void in ♠ and a hand that is interested in slam if responder has a maximum for their raise to 2♥ and no wasted values in ♠.

Example 6

1♦ 2♦
3♥

Whether 2♦ is a simple raise or a stronger raise (inverted minors), a jump to 3♥ shows enough values to force to game and shortness in ♥. This bid does not promise as much interest in slam as some other actions. Though slam may be

possible, the bid is more focused on letting partner know which suit, the ♥ suit here, is our primary concern for 3NT. Splinters are another valuable tool available at the 3-level.

Constructive Auctions at the 3-Level - Patterning Out

Another use of the 3-level is to show further shape in a constructive auction. This is true whether we have found a fit or not.

Example 7

1♠ 2♣
2♥ 2♠
3♣

This auction shows that opener has 5-4-1-3 (or possibly a ♦ void with an extra Major suit card). This is not a control showing cuebid. The 3-level in these auctions is used to further describe Opener's distribution and "pattern out."

Example 8

1♠ 2♣
2♥ 2NT
3♣

Again, this auction shows 5-4-1-3 distribution (or possibly 5-4-0-4). This bid does not promise any extra values. In this auction we have not yet found a fit, so it is important to let Responder know we have at least 3-card ♣ support and imply our ♦ shortness. This allows partner to reevaluate their hand for playing 3NT or a possible 5♣ or 6♣ contract.

Using 3-Major as a Slam Try

In 2/1 Game Forcing auctions, the 3-level can be used to express slam interest. This can be done by jumping to the 3-level or by failing to use fast arrival. Let's look at some examples.

Example 9

1♠ 2♦
3♠

This jump to 3♠ shows a solid suit (at most one loser opposite a void) and asks Responder to start making control showing cuebids in an effort to explore slam.

Example 10

1♠ 2♣
2♥ 2♠
3♠

In this auction a jump to 4♠ after finding a ♠ fit would show a minimum hand by Opener (applying the principle of fast arrival). 3♠ in this auction does not show a

strong ♠ suit (as it did in the previous example where opener jumped to 3♠). Here, Opener shows some slam interest (extra values, usually about 14+ points) and asks Responder if they are interested in exploring slam.

Example 11

1♠ 2♦
3♥*

This 3♥ bid is a splinter in support of ♦. It shows at least 4-card ♦ support and a singleton or void in ♥. Responder can now reevaluate their hand for the best game or possibly bidding a slam.

The 3-Level in Jacoby 2NT Auctions

When we open 1-Major and partner responds using Jacoby 2NT (showing 4+card support and game-forcing values) we initially use the 3-level to show shortness or rebidding our suit to show an excellent hand without shortness. After we show shortness at the 3-level, Responder reevaluates their hand.

Example 12

1♠ 2NT
3♦* —

At this point in the auction a 4♠ bid by Responder says they have significant “wasted” values in the ♦ suit and they have less than an opening hand’s worth of “working” values. A 3♣ bid here by Responder shows that they still like their hand and have slam interest (all bids other than 4♠ show slam interest). Bids of new suits at the 4-level are control showing cuebids. But many expert players play that a bid of 3♥ at this point in the auction shows a “concentration of values” – usually a 4+card suit with at least two honors.

Here are some holdings that would qualify for a “concentration of values.”

AQJx
KQTx
QJT9x
AKJx

This concentration-showing bid is valuable because it lets partner know that any fitting honor they hold in this suit will be extremely useful, and we have found yet another use for a 3-level bid.

Conclusion

When we discuss bidding agreements with our partner we frequently have good agreements about the first round of the bidding and we spend our time discussing

the meaning of low-level bids. But frequently the 3-level is one of the areas of bidding we do not get around to discussing. There are many more 3-level uses than those discussed here (3/1 Invitational, Bergen Raises, Western Cuebids, 4th Suit Forcing, 3-Level Freebids, etc). If you want to take your partner to the next level, spend some time looking for how you might use the 3-level in a variety of different auctions and make sure that partner sees these bids in the same way that you do!