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This Week in Bridge

(208) Figuring Out Declarer's Hand - Asking Questions!

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Level: 3

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General

As a defender, if we can figure out the declarer's hand then defending the hand and knowing which suits to keep and which suits to attack is much easier. On defense we should ask ourselves questions like "How many ♥ does declarer have?" or even "What is declarer's complete shape?" We should make educated guesses at these questions based on the information we have at the time. That information comes from several sources: counting, danger suits, signals, logic, questions, listening, and many others. Counting involves watching the cards that are played in the suit as well as getting count signals from partner. Danger suits involve determining which suit to focus on as the "danger suit" - to figure out where declarer's winner/losers are coming from by collecting as much information as possible about declarer's hand. Signals and logic give us valuable information, as does asking the opponents good questions about the auction - really listening and trying to figure out what the declarer has shown and what they have denied. Here we take a look in detail at some of the situations where asking questions about the opponents' bidding should help us better defend the hand.

Questions to Ask About the Opponents' Bidding

Opener often makes bids that describe their shape, especially with rebids, and what we know about their shape varies based on their agreements. Let's look at some examples of when to ask questions of the opening bidder and what questions to ask.

Questions about Declarer's Opening Bid

Example 1

1NT P 3NT All Pass

We are defending 3NT and before we look at our hand to select a lead and subsequently defend the hand, we want to know all we can about declarer's shape.

Ask:

- Does Opener commonly have a 5-card Major? Do you open 1NT with all 5332 hands with a 5-card Major? Some? None?

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- Does Responder have a Puppet Stayman bid available (like 3♣)? This will help us know if this is extremely common because the opponents have tool to look for it and we should expect it.

We want to know if declarer can have a 5-card Major and how often we should expect it!

Questions about Opener's 1-Level Rebid

Example 2

1♣ P 1♦ P
1NT All Pass

We assume declarer has shown a balanced minimum hand, but there are many questions we need to know from the opponents. Ask:

- What is your range for this 1NT rebid? 12-14? Do you open 1NT with some or many good 14 point hands? Do you open any balanced 11 HCP hands?
- Do you bid your suits up the line, or could Opener have a 4-card Major in this auction?

(Walsh Style – “Frequently Bypass 4-card ♦”)

We want to figure out their point range and if they can have a 4-card Major!

Example 3

1♣ P 1♥ P
1NT All Pass

Declarer has shown a balanced minimum hand, but there are many questions we need to know from the opponents. Ask:

- What is your range for this 1NT rebid? 12-14? Do you open 1NT with some or many good 14 point hands? Do you open any balanced 11 HCP hands?
- Can Opener have a 4-card ♠ suit for rebidding 1NT? (Extended Walsh Style)
- What do you open with 4-4 in the minors – 1♣ or 1♦? Can Opener have a 4-card ♦ suit in this auction?

We want to figure out their point range and if they can have a 4-card ♠ suit or 4-card ♦ suit!

Example 4

1♣ P 1♦/1♥ P
1♠ ...

Declarer has opened one suit and rebid another suit, so we need to what kind of hand to expect. Ask:

- What type of hand should we expect? Is balanced possible, or would Opener rebid 1NT (or 2NT) with all/most balanced hands?
- Is 1♠ forcing? (more common for very old fashioned players)
- What point count range should we expect? 12 to a bad 18?

We want to know what type of hand to expect in terms of shape and points.

Questions about 2/1 GF Auctions

Example 5

1♠ P 2♥ P
2♠ P 2NT P
3NT All Pass

Opener has shown ♠ and the opponents have ended up in 3NT. We want to know how many ♠ Opener showed. Ask:

- Did Opener's 2♠ bid promise a 6th♠? Or was it just "waiting"?

We want to know if Responder/declarer likely has 0-1♠, or if 2-card ♠ is possible.

Example 6

1♠ P 2♥ P
3♣ P 3NT P
4NT All Pass

Opener has shown a good 2-suited hand and made a slam try that Responder has rejected. Ask:

- Did 3♣ show extra values? A new suit at the 3-level in a 2/1 GF auction shows extra values in many partnerships.
- What would 4♣ have been over 3NT? Gerber? Minorwood? Natural Slam Try? This helps us know if dummy is likely to be 5-5 or only 5-4 with more HCP. If so, then Opener showed extra values twice, and we know Responder must have a poor hand, 12-13 points. If 4NT was the first bid to show extra values, then declarer could have more values for rejecting the slam invite (say 12 to a poor 15).

We want to know how strong to expect dummy to be and how strong declarer is likely to be.

Example 7

1♠ P 1NT* P
2♦ ...

We want to know what to expect from Opener's rebid. Ask:

- Was 1NT completely forcing? Can Opener pass with a balanced 12-13 HCP hand?
- Do you open 1NT with a 5-card Major and 15-17 points? Is this balanced, strong NT strength hand one option for opener to hold in this auction?

- What does Opener rebid with 5-3-3-2? Can 2♣ be short and does 2♦ always promises 4-cards? Or can partner rebid 2♦ with this shape? Does partner have a choice?

We want to know what Opener's possible shapes and HCP are for this bidding.

Questions about Responder's Hand

Example 8

1♥ P 1NT* P
2♦ P 2NT P
3NT All Pass

Opener has shown two suits with extra values. Ask:

- Do you play Flannery? Can Responder have a 4-card ♠ suit for this auction?

We want to know what to expect from declarer's hand.

Example 9

1♥ P 2♣ P
2♦ P 2NT P
3NT All Pass

Responder has shown game forcing values and primary ♣. Ask:

- Can Responder have a 4-card ♠ suit for making a 2/1 GF bid? If so, can Responder bid 4-4 in the black suits or does this always show longer ♣?
- Did 2♦ by Opener deny a 4-card ♠ suit?

We want to know as much as possible about declarer's possible shapes for this bidding sequence.

Example 10

1♦ P 2♣ P
2♠ P 2NT P
3NT All Pass

Responder has shown game forcing values and primary ♣. Ask:

- Can Responder have a 4-card ♠ suit for making a 2/1 GF bid? If so, can Responder bid 4-4 in the black suits or does this always show longer ♣?
- Does Opener's 2♠ rebid show a 4-card suit or just a ♠ stopper?
- Does Opener's 2♠ rebid deny a 5+card ♦ suit?

We want to try to visualize all the of hands. Any inferences we can make help.

Hopefully these examples demonstrate the kind of things we should be thinking about during the auction, prior to and when making the opening lead, and during the defense. Asking good questions can help us get valuable information about what the opponents have shown, or often just as important, what they have not shown.

Examining An Auction in Detail

Let's take a look at a common auction and think through what we know about it to see how as a defender we should be trying to visualize the declarer's hand.

Example

What do we know about Opener's hand in the following auction?

1♣ P 1♠ P
1NT ...

- First, we know that Opener has a balanced hand.
- Opener has about 12-14 HCP (possibly as few as 11 HCP, depending on the opponents' opening style) and may not have a good 14 points if the opponents open 1NT with 14+ to 17 points.
- Opener has 2- or 3-cards in the ♠ suit, though a singleton honor may be possible.
- Overall shape options are starting to narrow:
 - 3-3-3-4
 - 3-4-3-3
 - 3-2-3-5
 - 3-3-2-5
 - 2-4-3-4
 - 2-3-3-5
 - 2-3-4-4 (if the opponents open 1♣ with this shape)
 - 3-2-4-4 (if the opponents open 1♣ with this shape)
 - 2-4-2-5 (less likely, semi-balanced)
 - 1-4-3-5 (rare, with a singleton honor in ♠)

Now the auction continues with New Minor Forcing and we find out more about Opener's hand.

1♣ P 1♠ P
1NT P 2♦* P



2♥ P 3NT All Pass

- Now we should ask does 2♥ deny 3-card ♠ support? With 3-4 would Opener show the ♠ support first?
- Did 2♥ show a minimum hand? Would Opener jump to 3♥ with a maximum hand?
- If this is true, we know more and more about declarer's hand:
 - 2-4-3-4 shape most likely, though 2-4-2-5 or 1-4-3-5 are possible
 - 12 to 13 points, since no jump.

When defending the hand, we need to take the time to process all of the information available to us. If we stop and do this, we will be much better prepared to figure out declarer's distribution and values.

Conclusion

Until you can visualize the opponent's hand (if not guess their honor cards, at least try to guess their distribution), you will not be able to determine which suits to attack to get your tricks or which suits to keep to stop declarer from setting them up. During the play, tools for getting this information about declarer's hand are count signals and discards from partner. But before this, you can collect information by thinking about declarer's bidding and understanding what their options were. Ask questions about the opponents' agreements before you make an opening lead. Even something as simple as asking dummy, "What do you expect partner to have?" can help you get information that makes defending the hand much easier. Remember not to be lazy and make an opening lead or continue to defend a hand without thinking about these details!