

A Spot 4 the Advancing Player
by Jay Apfelbaum

This is a continuing series of articles written for the advancing player. I welcome any questions or suggestions about future articles. Please send them to the publisher. Who knows? You may be mentioned in a future article! Since beginning this series, I have been asked about several conventions. Keep asking! Your questions give me direction about what the next article should be about.

I get questions almost every time I play about what an auction might mean. My answer always begins with a question about what the partnership has agreed to play. It occurs to me that many pairs do not have an agreement about a specific auction - they just play something they call "standard." That is an agreement almost certain to lead to a misunderstanding.

There is a court decision from the 18th century that I studied in law school. It illustrates this problem. A contract called for a shipment of tea. The contract stated that name of the ship that was to carry the tea. It turned out there were two ships with the same name. One party thought it meant ship one, the other party thought it meant ship two. The court decided there was no contract because there was "no meeting of the minds."

When deciding what to play, it is a good idea to discuss ahead of time what "standard" means. There are hundreds of possible auctions. Having an agreement about a specific auction will help to understand what "standard" means to your partnership.

Most of the people I play with do not have the time or patience to prepare system notes that can extend into dozens of pages. If you are one of those people, I present an alternative approach. Try establishing specific policies that cover whole classes of auctions.

No single idea is better than another. My suggestions are just what I play in most of my partnerships. To begin, there are three basic types of hands that merit a raise other than a simple raise. There is the pre-emptive raise, the distributional raise and the power raise. My policy to cover this class of auctions is to jump raise with the pre-emptive raise, cue bid with the power raise, and jump shift with the distributional raise.

The pre-emptive raise to the three-level promises four-card support (or more),

and no more than roughly six support points. The pre-emptive raise to the four-level promises five-card support (or more), no more than roughly eight support points and a ruffing value (singleton or void).

The power raise does not promise any distribution. It promises three-card support and at least eleven support points, almost all of which are in high-card points.

The distributional raise promises at least five cards in the bid suit plus at least four-card support. It is unlimited in strength, but the minimum strength for the bid is eight support points to force to the three-level. Add three support points for each level higher.

The advantage of this approach is that my partner will have a pretty good idea if I jump raise his bid. We are just competing against their contract where they have the balance of power. If I cue bid, he will know they are competing where we have the balance of power. Finally, if I jump shift, he will know whether we have a double fit. If so, both sides could easily make their contract. If not, he will have a better idea of the limits to the hand.

Here are some instances where this approach will help. Suppose we open the bidding with 1 Spade and the next hand overcalls with 2 Hearts. Our partner bids either 3 Hearts or 4 Spades. A 3 Heart bid is a power raise and a 4 Spade bid is a pre-emptive raise. Either way, the next hand bids 5 Hearts.

If our partner pre-empted, we would pass with any modest hand. We would double with enough strength to defeat their contract. Or we would bid 5 Spades if we thought we could make it or if we thought it would be a profitable sacrifice.

If our partner cue bid, we would pass on any hand where we were unsure what we should do. Our partner would be required to double or bid, depending on his opinion of our chances of making a 5 Spade contract. We would double on any hand where we doubted our ability to make a 5 Spade contract. We would bid 5 Spades if we were confident of making that contract.

Notice that our bids mean very different things depending on what our partner bid over the 2 Heart overcall. If we could not be certain of our partner's hand, there is no way we could correctly decide what to do over the 5 Heart bid.

This same concept applies to contracts at lower levels. At matchpoints, a pair is

often required to double a low-level contract to protect the plus score it could get in its own part score contract. These kinds of basic principles will pay big dividends without the need for dozens of printed system notes.