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Bidding Basics

Conventions

This is the 60th and final edition of this five-year series. All these articles are published on my website, *larryco.com*. An enhanced version is available in book form (“Bidding Basics,” Volumes 1, 2 and 3).

I am not a convention fan. In my experience, most players (of all levels) don’t use them properly. They don’t study all the “what-ifs” (is it on by a passed hand, what if there is interference, etc.). They don’t discuss with their partner which version they are playing. They forget to use the convention or forget to Alert when their partner uses it. They haven’t discussed the follow-ups. The director ends up at the table. The opponents are damaged. The user of the convention is damaged because they misused it or one of the partners forgot they were using it.

That said, some conventions are essential. In this series we had extensive coverage of what, in my opinion, are the four most important conventions: Blackwood, Jacoby transfers, negative doubles and Stayman.

Also explained in the series, though not quite as important, were Dru-

ry, feature-ask, fourth-suit forcing, Jacoby 2NT, lead-directing doubles, Michaels cuebids, new minor forcing, responsive and support doubles and unusual notrump.

A few other conventions were touched on as “more advanced,” but not fully spelled out. Those would be DOPJ, inverted minors, Lebensohl and splinter bids. Experienced players will want to use some convention (Cappelletti, DONT and Meckwell are some of the more popular ones) when the opponents open 1NT.

Other than those, I would say that 99% of bridge players should look no further. If it isn’t mentioned above, don’t waste time and memory on it. Unfortunately, many books and bridge seminars are devoted to conventions. Most players (especially given the typical age of ACBL members) don’t have the memory or concentration to study and absorb. Even when we were in college, we might have been able to memorize some text and spit it out on the test that week, but we wouldn’t remember it a week later. Even if bridge students think they understand a convention, that isn’t the same as properly executing

it when it comes up two months from now. It is hard to play good bridge when your head is full of (and living in fear of) conventions.

Much more important than learning new conventions is to make sure you understand the basic ones. Know the ins and outs of the “top four.” And even more important than conventions is to know your partner’s style. Is she aggressive or conservative? Is she opening all 12-counts? Is he a good declarer (so that you should push towards that aggressive game contract that he is playing)?

And more important than any convention is what is in the previous 59 articles! It makes no sense to learn conventions (beyond the top few) until you know inside and out what the first four bids of the auction mean. Way too many people are trying to learn inverted spiral-relays but they don’t know the difference between opener’s reverse or jumpshift. Giving bridge students complex conventions is like giving beer to babies.

You can study (and likely forget) conventions until you are blue in the face, but a much better use of your time is to study “Bidding Basics.” 🍷

Larry Cohen’s Bidding Basics will continue in 2022 with a series on doubles, including takeout, negative and other doubles and how to respond to them.