

KIT WOOLSEY

THE BRIDGE WORLD INTERVIEW

Very few individuals achieve the highest echelon as both theorist and at-the-table participant. Kit Woolsey, *The Bridge World's* Technical Editor, not only has held such ranks for several decades but also has succeeded in transmitting his interests and results to advanced players through numerous publications. His "research and development" has ranged very widely, covering many aspects of the game and practical considerations; in particular, he has won major championships using different system approaches and styles. This interview was conducted during the Fall of 2009.

Disputing the Common Wisdom

T.B.W.: You have a lot of theories about strategy that go against the standard view. What are the most important of these, and how do you defend your positions (or persuade a partner to adopt them)?

Woolsey: Throughout the years, there has been much dogma passed from generation to generation. This is taken as gospel by new players, and it remains entrenched even when applying a little bit of common sense will demonstrate that it is fallacious. I am always on the lookout for such misconceptions. Here are a few examples:

Doubling the opponents into game. A popular notion is that there is no bigger crime at IMPs than unsuccessfully doubling a making partscore that produces a game bonus. Most players

won't make such a double unless they have a lock. By failing to do so, they miss many opportunities for a juicy plus score at the risk of an occasional disaster.

Suppose that your vulnerable opponents have bid to three spades, and your expectation is that they will go down one trick. Nobody would double—it might make. But let's look at some numbers. Presumably, down one will be the most common result, sometimes the contract will make, sometimes it will go down two. Let's assume 50 percent for down one, 25 percent for a make, and 25 percent for down two, and that the contract at the other table is three spades undoubled taking the same number of tricks. Then, if you double, you will win 3 imps (200 vs. 100) 50 percent of the time, lose 11 imps (minus 730 vs. minus 140) 25 percent of the time, and win 7 imps (500 vs. 200) 25 percent of the time. This produces an average gain of 0.5 imps per deal, so doubling is a winner on balance.

Leading against three notrump. The principle of attacking with fourth highest from your longest and strongest suit (unless that is obviously wrong—e.g., it is an opponent's suit, or partner has bid a different suit) is misguided. Unless such a lead happens to hit partner's five-card suit, leading from a broken four-card suit will usually lose or break even, seldom gain.

The defenders' goal is to take five tricks. Suppose you lead from, say,

king-ten-fourth, and are lucky enough to find three low in dummy in dummy, ace-jack-low with partner, queen-third with declarer. The lead has worked out fine, but that gives the defenders only four tricks. A fifth trick is needed, and if it is available there will be time to run the suit of your king-ten-fourth when the defense gets in. Thus, unless there is a cashout situation where declarer has nine tricks if the defense doesn't take the first five, leading from a four-card suit to set up the long card in the suit will never by itself defeat three notrump unless the contract is beatable some other way.

Five-card majors with forcing one-notrump responses. These methods were introduced when people experimented with the Kaplan-Sheinwold and Roth-Stone systems, and some parts of those systems remained popular. Five-card majors is a sensible agreement; forcing one-notrump responses is not. If you hold, say:

♠ A Q x ♥ J x x x x ♦ Q x x ♣ K J,

and partner responds one notrump to your one-heart opening, all your experience tells you to pass. A two-diamond rebid may lead to a weak

seven-card trump fit in two hearts or two diamonds, or to a risky level in two notrump or three hearts when partner has invitational strength. Time and again, I have seen players rebid two diamonds on a hand like this, reach an inferior contract, and then say: "I just knew I should have violated the system and passed one notrump." They are right. Over the past couple of decades, players have been switching to "semi-forcing" notrump, so that opener can pass one notrump with a junky 5-3-3-2.

A follow-up king-ask by key-card-asker promises partnership possession of all the key cards. This idea goes all the way back to the invention of Blackwood. Sometimes, asker will be missing a key card and hope to reach six notrump opposite a particular king, either for safety or (at matchpoints) for extra points. This capability is negated if teller is allowed to bid a grand slam over the king-ask. A simple solution that touches all bases is that a king-inquiring asker is temporarily assumed to have announced partnership possession of all the key cards, but if teller wants to bid a grand slam, he bids six notrump, protecting the alternative

IMPROVE YOUR DEFENSE

Matchpoints; East dealer; both sides vul.

NORTH (dummy)

♠ Q 9 7 6 5 4

♥ K 9 4

♦ 4

♣ J 3 2

WEST (you)

♠ A 10 8

♥ Q 7 5 3

♦ A 7 5 3 2

♣ 7

SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST

5 ♣ — — 2 ♦

Pass Pass Pass

Diamond ace, four, king, six.

Plan your defense.

(Solution on page 37.)

possibility. Although this is a no-lose treatment, I have not yet met anyone else who uses it.

I try to defend these and other heretical positions through cold, hard logic. I'm hopeful that if my explanations are sufficiently forceful, my partners will then see things in the same light.

T.B.W.: You recommend (and take) very aggressive preemptive actions. To what extent do you temper this style based on vulnerability?

Woolsey: Vulnerability is a meaningful factor in many bidding decisions. I have often said "vulnerability is for children," and it may sometimes appear that I bid that way, but this is more a reflection of my beliefs that aggressive bidding early in the auction is winning bridge, more so than most players realize.

However, I do keep an eye on the vulnerability when contemplating a marginal competitive action. IMP scoring is structured to make the rewards for winning decisions in game- and slam-bidding greater when vulnerable than when nonvulnerable, and the penalties for being wrong are greater. This has a big effect on many of my initial actions. For example, in first seat at favorable vulnerability, I would open three clubs on:

♠ x x ♥ x x ♦ x x x x ♣ Q J 10 x x.

Most players think I'm nuts to do this, but in practice it is a big winner. Of course, once in a while I'll go for a number, but that doesn't happen very often—when I'm potentially in really big trouble, typically each opponent is too long in clubs to make a take-out double. Some players understand this philosophy but wonder how my

partner can handle such a wide range of preempts, since I'll also open three clubs under those conditions on a hand such as:

♠ x ♥ x x ♦ Q x x ♣ A Q 10 9 x x x.

a "normal" three-club preempt. The answer is that we don't worry about it. Partner assumes that I have something in between the two extremes and acts accordingly. If he gets it wrong, and perhaps bids a bad game or misses a good one, the cost is only 5 or 6 imps. In contrast, if the opponents make a wrong decision (missing a good game, getting to the wrong game, making a bad slam decision one way or the other, or coming in at the wrong time and going for a number), their cost is in double figures of imps (because of the vulnerability). Since I have two opponents and only one partner, and since I'm getting two-to-one odds on the cost of the possible missteps, the wide-range-preempt style is a big winner. At any other vulnerability, the odds wouldn't be nearly so good, and I would not preempt on the 2=2=4=5 hand, so vulnerability does play an active role.

T.B.W.: Your studies showing which decision-types have the most impact at IMPs surprised many experts. What were the results, and how do you account for them?

Woolsey: Let's simplify the discussion by looking only at constructive auctions, not being concerned about the opponents' competition or about giving away information. Let's also lump small slams and grand slams into "slam bidding." Then we can classify decisions that a partnership must make when determining the final contract as: (a) partscore or game? (b) game or

slam? (c) which partscore? (d) which game? (e) which slam?

An exercise that might be relevant to constructing one's bidding system is: Rank these five decision areas in order of importance, taking into account both frequency and expected imp swings. When I polled experts, most placed (a) highest. My view is that they are completely wrong. Yes, these are high-frequency decisions, but the number of imps at stake is relatively small. The main reason is that bidding game or not, though it may swing a lot on any given deal, rarely changes expectation (the average result) by much. When there is any question about whether or not to bid game, it is seldom the case that the game is either laydown or has no play; usually, it's success will depend on some combination of finesses, splits, defense, or other factors that give the contract some moderate

percentage chance of making. Thus, the difference in average imp result between bidding and not bidding game is generally small.

For example, suppose you fail to bid a vulnerable game that depends on a finesse. *Within category (a)*, this is a fairly serious error, but how much does it cost on average? Half the time, game makes, and you lose 10 imps; half the time it fails and you gain 6 imps. Thus, if such a deal were played twice, on average the error will cost only 2 imps per board.

This argument does not extend to slam-related decisions. These are not as frequent [Edgar Kaplan, who strongly emphasized slam bidding in his system construction, estimated that roughly one deal in 10 offers some form of slam decision.—*Ed.*], but the swings can be greater. In a possible slam, there will be, on average, far fewer finesses

IMPROVE YOUR PLAY

Problem A

Rubber bridge; South dealer; E-W vul.

NORTH
♠ A 4 3 2
♥ 4 3 2
♦ 3 2
♣ A 4 3 2
SOUTH
♠ 9
♥ A K 8 7 6 5
♦ A K Q
♣ 7 6 5

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 ♥	Pass	2 ♥	Pass
4 ♥	Pass	Pass	Pass

Diamond jack, deuce, five, ace.

Heart ace, spade five, deuce, queen.

Plan the play.

Problem B

IMPs; South dealer; N-S vulnerable

NORTH
♠ A Q 10 8
♥ 7 6 5
♦ J 4 2
♣ K 9 3
SOUTH
♠ J 9 7
♥ K J
♦ A Q 10 9
♣ A Q J 10

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1 ♦	Pass	1 ♠	Pass
2 NT	Pass	3 NT	(All Pass)

Heart four, five, ten, ?

Plan the play.

(Solutions on page 37.)

or breaks or special considerations relevant to the contract's success than in the lower zones. In fact, low frequency notwithstanding, I give category (e) top priority. If you go down in a vulnerable six notrump instead of making six of a minor in a four-four fit, your error costs 16 imps if your counterparts make a slam; if the players with your cards stopped in game, let's say scoring 660, the error costs 25 imps. It takes a lot of expected 2-imp losses from missing a vulnerable game on a finesse to make up for just one such slam swing.

Decision area (b) is close on the heels of (e). This will always be a potential 11- or 13-imp swing (depending on the vulnerability), and if the higher-level contract is laydown or hopeless (much more often the case in slam situations than in game contracts), the full swing, rather than merely a percentage of the swing, is at stake. Category (d) is fairly important. Reaching three notrump when the opponents can run a long suit costs 10 or 12 imps when some other game is cold and bid in the other room, and it can cost even more if the other table reaches a partscore. The same applies to wrongly failing to bid three notrump or choosing the wrong suit.

These considerations affect not only one's best strategy in devising a system but also the most appropriate tactics on a given deal. If you face a choice of evils in the bidding, it is almost always right to lie about strength rather than to lie about shape. There is usually more to lose by reaching the wrong strain than the wrong level.

Category (c) doesn't involve double-figure swings, but it is a quite-frequent decision, because when one cannot

safely bid too high there is often too little room to explore for the best strain. Making a partscore instead of going down in another can swing 4-8 imps (depending in part on how much the wrong partscore goes down).

This puts category (a) last on my list. Yet, many partnerships put forth a lot of effort trying to construct accurate invitational sequences at the cost of finding the right strain or not laying a foundation for accurate slam bidding; these pairs are making a big mistake. Of course, accurate invitational sequences can be valuable, but they should take second chair to choice of strain or slam investigation. Even if you simply bid game every time you think you might have one, you will not be too far off the mark.

Matters of Partnership

T.B.W.: How do you determine when someone may be a suitable partner? Do you do anything to test the possibility before conducting serious system discussion? When starting a new partnership, what are your first steps? Is there an overall plan, or does progress depend on circumstances?

Woolsey: For starters, successful bridge partners must like each other, because you want always to be rooting for your partner to do the right thing. It is extremely difficult to form a successful partnership with someone you don't like. Bridgewise, you should have similar philosophies about broad concepts; otherwise, there is likely to be too much friction. For example, if one of you is a believer in light pre-empts while the other is uncomfortable with them, there will be too much over-compensation trying to make partner

happy and guessing what he has. [One of the first highly-successful expert partnerships in contract bridge was Ely Culbertson and Theodore Lightner. Like even the most sympathetic partners, they occasionally disagreed on which theory to follow in some system areas; Culbertson had the controlling vote. Once, in an important match, the pair suffered a disaster by following a Culbertson theory of which Lightner disapproved. Of this, a contemporary report said: "Lightner was not entirely displeased by this result."—*Ed.*]

The simplest way to test the possibility of starting a serious partnership is to play a few sessions. Also, if you enjoy it (not everyone does), you might try bidding some practice hands; on-line sites are excellent for this sort of activity.

Although it is possible to start a system from scratch, it is much easier if one partner prepares a set of notes that the partnership uses at the outset (barring obvious flaws and things that the other partner finds unacceptable). As experience increases, the notes can be modified accordingly, taking both players' preferences into account. Word processors and e-mail are great advances in working on partnership agreements, making it easy to keep an up-to-date set of notes, to make changes, to review only recent changes prior to playing, etc.

T.B.W.: You are associated with the tactic of violating system (e.g., passing a forcing bid) when it seems right. How does this work in practice? Does it have an impact on other deals? Does success require particular characteristics in partner? Are some bothered by it

more than others?

Woolsey: Bridge is a game of percentages. There are rarely guarantees, particularly in the bidding. When you open one notrump on a balanced 16-count with a worthless doubleton in spades, you are taking a chance. Partner may raise to three notrump when he also has a worthless doubleton, and the opponents may run the first five spade tricks. The reason you open one notrump hand is that your judgment and experience teach that it is the percentage action, the one that will work well more often than any other. You don't pretend that it will *always* work.

The same holds true of an intentional system violation. One takes such an action because circumstances and judgment indicate that it is the percentage action, and in that regard it is no different from any other action. Suppose that, at favorable vulnerability, you open one diamond with:

♠ K x ♥ K x x x ♦ A x x x x ♣ Q x;

LHO overcalls two clubs; partner bids two spades; RHO passes. Your table feel sensed that RHO was suffering some discomfort—he isn't broke and was itching to act. What should you do?

On the above information, you know deep in your bones that the percentage action is to pass. Your opening was minimal, and the overcall demoted the value of your queen of clubs. The vulnerable overcall combined with your sense about RHO indicate that partner probably has only a 10- or 11-count. Even if partner has a full opening bid, game could be pretty bad; picture him with, say:

♠ A Q x x x ♥ A Q x ♦ Q x x ♣ x x.

On top of all that, any bid you make will be a misdescription, so even if your side has a sound game contract, you might not find it.

Yet two spades is forcing, so passing is a violation. It might be wrong. Partner could be very distributional, or you might have misread the table action (RHO was flirting with preempting on a very weak hand and a club fit, and partner has an 18-count). So be it! If I think a call is percentage, I will make it regardless.

How will partner take it? It shouldn't affect him one iota. All of us occasionally take nonmainstream positions, whether they are system violations or not. Sometimes, we will be wrong. Passing a forcing bid is no different from taking any other such position. It shouldn't affect future deals. Partner knows that I know that two spades is forcing. If, in the future, he picks up a 16-count with five spades, he will not be afraid to make the normal two-spade bid (and I would not continue playing with a partner who felt otherwise). We all make lots of table decisions, and some of these will turn out wrongly. Someone who gets upset at every wrong decision will not be a good partner.

T.B.W.: Leaving personal preferences aside, do you find significant technical differences among the popular system approaches? Would it increase effectiveness to use different approaches at different vulnerabilities?

Woolsey: There are plenty of significant differences. A system that is highly scientific may make very accurate slam decisions, while a more go-as-

you-please approach may achieve good results by providing the opponents with less information. Light opening bids can win by striking the first blow; sound opening bids will produce more accurate bidding after opening. Systems with the same base offer many options, which may turn out better or worse on any given deal.

Vulnerability considerations are intrinsic, even when not formally stated. Independent of general guidelines, conservative or wild, anyone will preempt more liberally at favorable vulnerability than at unfavorable vulnerability. Explicit adjustments merely adjust the degrees of these differences. My partner and I use 10-12-HCP one-notrump openings nonvulnerable in first or second seat, but use a 14-16-HCP range when vulnerable. Among the methods (a) always 10-12, (b) always 14-16, and (c) some variable method, it is an open question which will work best. However, *surely* our approach is better than 14-16 nonvulnerable and 10-12 vulnerable.

Some pairs use entirely different methods depending on vulnerability. The most common of these split-personality systems use a strong club nonvulnerable and a more standard-American style vulnerable. The theory is that a forcing club can be hurt by preemption, which won't do as much damage when the opening side is nonvulnerable. Whether or not this is valid, I have no idea. In theory, it would probably be best to use four different systems, one for each vulnerability (or, if complexity were no object, eight systems, varying with both vulnerability and whether or not the opening side includes the dealer).

As a practical matter, the gain (if any) from such a set of agreements would be more than lost by the extra mental strain needed to learn and to recall several similar methods with some small differences.

T.B.W.: In determining which system to use, or what treatments to use within a given approach, is it more important to suit personal style or to stress technical superiority?

Woolsey: Unquestionably one should stress personal preference, which can completely dominate technical superiority. It is impossible to produce one's best game when uncomfortable at the table. Many pairs err in trying for technical perfection in their system. It just doesn't pay to memorize a bunch of low-frequency sequence meanings that don't fit into a logical pattern (as is sometimes done merely to ensure that every possible call has a well-defined meaning). If something remains undefined, so what? You just don't make that call. It is far more important to maintain consistent, simple patterns in order to cut down on memory difficulties.

Here is a practical example: My partner and I use a very straightforward defense against transfer preempts; it is perhaps suboptimal, but we know well how to handle it. So, when preparing our defense against Flannery, instead of coming up with a bunch of new meanings, we agreed to treat a two-diamond opening showing four=five in the majors as if it were a transfer preempt to two hearts. Is that the best approach? Surely not. But by making this agreement we will always know exactly what our actions mean with-

out needing to commit anything additional to memory. Since Flannery isn't employed by many pairs, and the bid comes up rarely even when the opponents have it available, and our methods will work pretty well most of the time anyway, we are giving up very little by keeping things simple.

Learning Bridge and Other Games

T.B.W.: How would you advise someone who is learning bridge now?

Woolsey: The usual: Play as much as you can, read everything, talk to experts and try to understand what they are saying. The more exposure of any kind, the better.

One often-overlooked vital factor that is underdiscussed is: To improve your status, you must learn to think for yourself. Merely trying to follow a bunch of rules won't help past the elementary levels. When you are at the table and must make a critical decision, there won't be anyone whispering in your ear what you should be considering, what inferences to draw from the bidding and play, what you know about the deal based on its history, and what negative inferences to draw. You must work these things out for yourself, unguided by rules.

This is the main reason why attempts to write computer programs to play top-level bridge have failed. Generally, computers can only follow pre-set rules, and arranging for a computer to learn from experience is a much more difficult challenge. The human mind is not limited to rule-following; it can produce the originality of thought vital for advanced or expert bridge. Thinking independently is the most important talent for a new player to develop.

T.B.W.: You excel, both as player and theorist, at both bridge and backgammon. Other top bridge stars have similar records in both games, but hardly anyone reaches the top in both bridge and chess. Does this relate to similarities and differences among games, or with the need to spend so much time to become proficient in bridge and chess?

Woolsey: I know good bridge players who are or were competent chess players (including some *Bridge World* staffers, one of whom is myself: I was a good player as a youngster, but I gave up serious play at an early age). However, no top bridge player would rank in, say, in the top 100 chess players in the world. The reason there isn't more overlap seems to be the nature of chess, which requires an enormous amount of study to be a world-class player. Anyone who does that won't have the time and energy necessary to become a top bridge player, even with a lot of natural

talent for the game.

In contrast, while a fair amount of time and effort are needed to become a top bridge player, the amounts are not nearly as great as in chess, so such players will have time to delve into other things. Several very strong bridge players are also successful in business. I would be surprised if a chess superstar had sufficient time for anything else. Some other games can be mastered with less effort. Many top backgammon players took up poker in the recent poker craze, and some of them have become world-class poker players as well; this does not apply to chess players. So a talented bridge player could also become a top backgammon or poker player with relatively little study. A generally strong games player might well have the ability to be a chess star as well as a standout elsewhere but probably could not find the time to do both.

CLASSIC REWIND

SOME RECENT DEALS

BY THEODORE A. LIGHTNER

Here are some of the more interesting deals that I have noted in recent months. The reader may either read through them or pause at the indicated stage and try to work out the correct approach. Some of these problems were bungled by top-notch players.

1. In the last deal of the semifinal round of a rubber-bridge tournament, you, South, needing to score a slam,

have arrived at what would otherwise be the unsound contract of six diamonds.

NORTH
 ♠ K 5
 ♥ A Q 2
 ♦ 9 5 4 2
 ♣ A 7 4 3
 SOUTH
 ♠ A Q 10 7 4
 ♥ 3
 ♦ A K 6 3
 ♣ J 10 5

The opening lead is the deuce of clubs. *How do you play?*

As a diamond must be lost, the only chance is to avoid any club loser. No heart play will help, but there is a chance of getting rid of three clubs from dummy on the spades. In order to accomplish this before an opponent trumps in, the East-West spades must be four-two (a three-three break defeats the slam automatically [unless the three-trump defender has a singleton club—*Ed.*]), and the jack must be captured. Therefore, after taking the ace of clubs, play two rounds of diamonds, then the king and another spade, planning to finesse the ten—if East has four spades, it is twice as likely that he has the jack as that West holds it.

2.
 NORTH
 ♠ 8 5
 ♥ A J 8 2
 ♦ A 6 3
 ♣ Q J 10 4
 SOUTH
 ♠ A 9 7 2
 ♥ K
 ♦ K 8 7 5 4
 ♣ 9 6 2

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
Pass	Pass	1 ♥	Pass
2 NT	Pass	3 NT	(All Pass)

The bidding was optimistic and unsound. West led the five of hearts: deuce, ten, king. South led a low club: East won with the king and shifted to the four of spades. West won with

the spade ten and returned the queen; East played the three, and South won with the ace. South now led a club to West's ace. When West returned a club, East discarded the six of spades. On dummy's winning club, East and South threw diamonds, leaving:

NORTH
 ♠ —
 ♥ A J 8
 ♦ A 6 3
 ♣ —
 SOUTH
 ♠ 9 7
 ♥ —
 ♦ K 8 7 5
 ♣ —

How should South exploit the situation?

Declarer decided that East would not have abandoned a sure or possible stopper in diamonds; consequently, he must have started with four diamonds and now had queen-jack-low along with the king-jack of spades and a heart. South therefore cashed dummy's ace of diamonds (to strip West of his remaining diamond) and then led the jack of hearts to endplay West. Dummy gets two heart tricks, the second of which will squeeze East between spades and diamonds. [If West ducks the jack of hearts, declarer can continue with the eight.—*Ed.*] Of course, a more fortunate earlier defense could have beaten the contract.

CORRECTIONS PUBLISHED

Errors are corrected both in *The Bridge World* and on its web site. From www.bridgeworld.com link to the Editorial Department page, then to Corrections. You can check there to obtain missing information or to see if an item has already been submitted.