

BRIDGEWORKS



STRATEGIC THINKING



THREE-FIFTHS OF A LOAF

BY LARRY COHEN

We have discussed how to prepare a duck and scramble an egg. We turn now to bread.

During 30 years of high-level tournament bridge, the biggest key to my success (outside of the obvious: strong partners, and the need to concentrate and to apply logic) was a middle-of-the-road approach. I was a singles hitter who tried for a high batting average.

Stay Out of the Newspapers

Sure, you can make the bridge column by playing for the squeeze, but what if a finesse will do? Say you reach six spades after an uncontested auction:

NORTH
 ♠ K Q 6 4
 ♥ A Q 5
 ♦ A 7 5 4
 ♣ K 6

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

You win the trump lead in hand and play three rounds of clubs, ruffing high in dummy; the suit splits three-three. You draw trumps and find those breaking three-two. There are two ways to try for an overtrick. You can take a mundane heart finesse, or you can run your black-suit winners to reach:

BLUE PENCIL

... on page 44
... would have been

fine
Gents.

NORTH
 ♠ —
 ♥ A Q
 ♦ A 7
 ♣ —

SOUTH
 ♠ —
 ♥ 3
 ♦ K 6 2
 ♣ —

An opponent who started with the king of hearts and a majority of the defensive diamonds will have been squeezed; if the ace of hearts doesn't drop the king, the diamonds will run. Wouldn't that be fun? Of course, you could equally well test the diamonds first. Or could you?

A stagestruck declarer might reach this ending and continue with a diamond to the ace, then a diamond to the king, to check out the situation. But then, if he needs to play a heart, he can't safely fall back on the finesse, because RHO might take the last two tricks. That declarer will need to play dummy's ace to ensure the contract. He will make an overtrick far less often than the stodgy declarer who kept out of the newspapers by taking a 50-50 finesse. (A red-suit squeeze is a lesser chance, because, given the black-suit splits, diamonds will often be three-three; and if they aren't, the king of hearts will more often than not be with the short diamonds.) The only newspaper column you might make is the obituary section.

Unilate


Psychics can usually tops and to my grave with one. They are long partner potential aren't psyching—rely on your active occasional thrill

Poking out a unbid suit for you likely get you an suit, but the odds perate measures. against a suit con It can gain you in often it will prod when partner do tion—thus, the la a layout where it ceed. Worse still, of an ace-underl you've acted nor with the king fro over dummy's qu are practicing ch king from king-t notrump occasion the news, but you a string of disaste partnership dishar late this play.

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WORKING 

OF A LOAF

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Unilateral Actions

Psychics can create excitement (and usually tops and bottoms). I will go to my grave without ever having tried one. They are long-run losers and cause partner potential grief even when you aren't psyching—he will not be able to rely on your actions. It's not worth the occasional thrill of success.

Poking out a doubleton king in an unbid suit for your opening lead will likely get you an "all-or-nothing" result, but the odds don't favor such desperate measures. Underleading an ace against a suit contract is even worse. It can gain you instant fame, but more often it will produce a loss, especially when partner doesn't read the position—thus, the lead may fail even in a layout where it seems slated to succeed. Worse still, partner will be wary of an ace-underlead on deals where you've acted normally. He might rise with the king from, say, king-ten-low, over dummy's queen, fearing that you are practicing chicanery. Leading the king from king-ten-low against three notrump occasionally propels Zia into the news, but you don't want to incur a string of disasters (and risk causing partnership disharmony) trying to emulate this ploy.

Big Blue

Jeff Meckstroth loves to use his blue card. He redoubles more than anyone I know. Perhaps there is psychology involved—he doesn't want people doubling him; fear of big blue could cut down on opponents' penalty doubles. Me? The redouble cards in my box are for rescue, or for showing controls, or for announcing strength when partner's opening bid is doubled. I can't remem-

ber the last time I made a business redouble of a final contract. Let's say that, at matchpoints, I hold:

♠ A 4 ♥ A Q 10 9 6 ♦ 7 ♣ J 10 5 3 2.

With neither side vulnerable, RHO opens one club, I overcall one heart, LHO makes a negative double, partner splinters with four clubs, and my four-heart conversion gets doubled and passed back to me. Sure, I expect to make, but will I get a *bad* result for plus 590? Do I need to turn a 90-percent board into a 100-percent board by redoubling? What if the opponents run to four spades? No thanks; I won't lose the event by scoring 590 instead of 880.

The Myth of 200

Matchpoint competitors sometimes mistakenly think that partscore deals are all about obtaining the magic 200. I'll let you in on a secret: I double at matchpoints less often than my peers. My goal in low-level competitive auctions is to push the opponents from two to three. If I beat them in three, I usually get a good board. If they make three, I live with my average minus (often with the field defending against two making three).

Let's say that at matchpoints, with both sides vulnerable, you hold:

♠ A 2 ♥ K 8 7 6 5 ♦ 4 3 2 ♣ 10 8 7.

You		Partner	
—	—	1 ♦	Pass
1 ♥	Pass	2 ♥	Pass
Pass	2 ♠	Pass	Pass
3 ♥	Pass	Pass	3 ♠
?			

Each side has about half the deck in high cards, and it is tempting to double. If your side can make 140, beating the opponents one trick undoubled, for plus 100, will feel unsatisfying. How-

ever, doubling is necessary only in that exact situation (they can make eight tricks, you can make nine). If they are down two, you will do quite well for plus 200 undoubled. If they are making three spades, double will turn a poorish score into a bottom. Even if they are down one and you were making 140, you are not doomed to a bad score for plus 100. Other tables could sell to two spades, minus 110. Still others could play in four hearts down one. Maybe partner opened light and other tables are ending in two or three spades; perhaps minus 140 is near average. Maybe plus 100 for pushing them to three is a good board if others with your side's cards never entered the bidding. If neither three-level contact can make, you should expect any plus score to be above average. I am content to play a session this way and to achieve a string of 75-percent and 40-percent boards. This adds up to a better score than 100-percent and 0-percent results.

Preempting Style

During the 1980's, I had a partner who preempted with suits like jack-empty-fifth. I even saw four-card preempts. His approach was novel, and for a while it worked well. In today's world, opponents are more seasoned. Unrestrained preempting is no longer a winning strategy. Sure, there are still some successful wild men (the Stewart-Woolsey partnership comes to mind), but in my view it is better to "have" your values, especially vulnerable. Even the superaggressive Meckwell partnership has standards. If you want to preempt on queen-empty-sixth, go ahead and have fun. Experience tells me that you will get at least as many

bottoms as tops. I'd rather aim for 60 percent on every board.

Doubling Partscores at IMPs Don't.

Bidding Grand Slams

It's fun to bid and to make seven. In a top-flight event, if you are quite sure from the auction that seven is sound, go for it. But playing in a 70-percent grand slam, down on poor breaks, can be disastrous. When others with your cards are stopping in *game*, bidding six would have been a much wiser move. Let's say you hold:

♠ A Q J 5 4 ♥ K 7 6 ♦ A 8 4 2 ♣ 4.

You open one spade, and partner splinters with four diamonds. Your four-notrump enquiry shows that all the key cards are present. Should you think about seven? It could be virtually laydown opposite:

♠ K x x x x ♥ A x ♦ x ♣ A x x x x,

though some might say that that hand is too strong for four diamonds. Still, in most fields, for stopping in six you'd likely get at worst a 50-percent board. Some pairs will languish in *four* spades. Certainly at a local duplicate, more pairs would be in four than in seven. Meanwhile, if you reach seven and partner has:

♠ K x x x x ♥ A x x ♦ x ♣ A x x x x,

how well do you think you'll score for down one? Bid seven on some other deal.

It's Dangerous to Bid; It's Dangerous to Pass

Sometimes, a gun is held to your head and you have no way to avoid danger. For example, after RHO deals and opens three hearts, you must overcall three notrump with:

♠ K Q 3 ♥ K J 4 ♦

even if red versus v could go for a number but you can't play so pass (or try to hedge a takeout double). Do situation with one like

♠ A 5 2 ♥ A 8 6 ♦

RHO deals and o I consider it suicidal notrump, especially v collection. There is no your neck out at this live with a compromise all-or-nothing, machine not only dangerous or damaging on other d ner won't be able to if your notrump over shabby.

Hanging P

When partner balances an action based on the values of the partner those in his own hand he has aided the cause

Playing matchpoint side vulnerable, you h

♠ A 6 5 ♥ A 10 8 ♦

RHO opens one diamond; LHO's one heart hearts by opener. You again, and this goes a If you hate minus 110 you will be pleased to balance with two spades with three hearts. And ing to double or to b but experience dicta enough alone. Just p to have pushed the op This might be the dea

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154 ♠K76 ♦A842 ♣4.

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For example, after RHO deals
ns three hearts, you must over-
e notrump with:

♠KQ3 ♥KJ4 ♦A764 ♣AJ8,
even if red versus white. Sure, you
could go for a number—a big number,
but you can't play scared bridge and
pass (or try to hedge with an ill-judged
takeout double). Don't confuse that
situation with one like this: You hold:

♠A52 ♥A86 ♦KJ53 ♣K74.

RHO deals and opens one spade.
I consider it suicidal to overcall one
notrump, especially vulnerable, on this
collection. There is no urgency to stick
your neck out at this point. Here, I can
live with a compromise double. The
all-or-nothing, macho one notrump is
not only dangerous on this deal but also
damaging on other deals, where part-
ner won't be able to judge accurately
if your notrump overcalls can be this
shabby.

Hanging Partner

When partner balances (that is, takes
an action based on the presumed total
values of the partnership rather than
those in his own hand), be happy that
he has aided the cause.

Playing matchpoints, with neither
side vulnerable, you hold:

♠A65 ♥A108 ♦K9652 ♣107.

RHO opens one diamond, which you
pass; LHO's one heart is raised to two
hearts by opener. You reluctantly pass
again, and this goes around to partner.
If you hate minus 110 as much as I do,
you will be pleased to hear said partner
balance with two spades. RHO persists
with three hearts. And you? It is tempt-
ing to double or to bid three spades,
but experience dictates leaving well-
enough alone. Just pass and be happy
to have pushed the opponents to three.
This might be the deal:

NORTH		EAST	
♠32	♥KQ92	♠A65	♥A108
♦AQJ43	♣32	♦K9652	♣107
WEST		SOUTH	
♠KQJ7	♥74	♠10984	♥J653
♦108	♣Q9865	♦7	♣AKJ4

On this typical layout, your side
surely would go minus in three spades.
Don't blame partner for having a
strange hand; would you prefer that
he sold out to two hearts? Meanwhile,
would you have beaten *three* hearts?
Probably, but doubling is not the per-
centage action. If three hearts makes
undoubled, for minus 140, you'll get
about a 30-percent board. But at the
end of the day, having 30-percent-
ers instead of zeroes on your few bad
boards will turn a 55-percent game into
a 60-percent game.

Looking for Magic

At matchpoints, your one-spade
opening is raised to two. You hold:

♠AKJ85 ♥AQ532 ♦A102 ♣—.

Opposite just the right hand:
♠Qxx ♥KJx ♦Kxxx ♣xxx,
six could be cold. Opposite the wrong
hand:

♠xxx ♥xxx ♦Qxx ♣AJxx,
you might struggle to make four. If
you look for magic and try for big
things, you may occasionally reach
a good slam; but in the process, you
will give away valuable information
to the defense. Wouldn't you rather
jump to four spades and sometimes be

treated to a heart lead from the king? Wouldn't that be better than pinpointing your club shortness and receiving a club lead? You won't lose the event for plus 480 opposite the magical hand (maybe scoring 40 percent). In the long run, you will gain much more for extra tricks in the play (or by avoiding reaching five down one) than by looking for magic.

Greed

If you can see that setting a contract one trick will be a great result, don't risk a good board by trying to set it two. Similarly, if making your contract will obviously lead to a fine score, don't make the poor risk-vs.-reward decision to try for an overtrick.

Confusing Your Partner

Imagine that you are in a new or casual partnership. Your RHO open a weak two-heart bid and you hold:

♠ A Q J 6 5 ♥ 8 ♦ A Q 10 7 4 ♣ 3 2.

Would three hearts show spades and a minor? Would four diamonds announce spades and diamonds? Instead of worrying about such nuances, concentrate on avoiding an accident. Behind door number three, there is a safe two spades; choose it.

Another scary situation in an inexperienced partnership is: (one club) — pass — (one spade) — ? up to you. If I could find an alternative to one notrump (which partner might think is for takeout) or two of a black suit (also subject to misinterpretation), I'd take the safe route.

Even with a regular partner, not keeping it simple can be dangerous. Suppose that you hold:

♠ J 10 ♥ 8 7 6 ♦ K J 6 2 ♣ A 8 4 3.

Partner opens one spade, you respond one notrump, LHO overcalls two hearts, and partner jumps to four diamonds. What now? You have slam interest in diamonds. How should you express this? Perhaps five clubs is a "master bid," indicating the club ace and good diamond support. As against that, might not partner think that you have the likes of king-queen-eighth of clubs and out? Why take the risk? The sensible course is to bid either five or six diamonds. In an amusing one-two punch that spanned problems in 1981 and 1993, the Master Solvers' Club maneuvered several panelists into partnering themselves in a four-one club fit. Don't try to be a genius. Avoid such disasters.

Subtle Signals

On defense, don't get cute. If the opponents have obviously overreached (say to three notrump), and you are ready to make a tell-tale discard, make it a clear one. Playing standard, I'd even risk discarding the spade nine from ace-king-queen-nine-deuce, to make sure that partner shifts to the suit when he gets in. If I thereby beat the contract only one, for a 90-percent board, instead of two, for a 98-percent board, so be it. Would you rather discard the diamond four (having no good signal available) and hope that partner's ESP directs him to the killing spade switch?

Complex Methods

Using complex methods, which might enable you to achieve a spectacular result on Board 6, is not a winning strategy idea if the consequent accidents and memory strain result in bottoms on boards 4, 9 and 17.

Summary

In making a decision, try course that will lead to a miracle or one that will preserve

IMPROV

Rubber bridge
East dealer
East-West vulnerable

NORTH (dummy)
♠ 4 3 2
♥ 4
♦ 10 8 4 2
♣ A Q 6 4 2

IMPRO

Problem A

IMPs
South dealer
Both sides vulnerable

NORTH
♠ A K Q 6 4
♥ A J
♦ K 5
♣ 10 6 5 4

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

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
1 ♦	Pass	2 ♠
2 NT	Pass	3 NT
4 ♣	Pass	4 ♦
4 ♥	Pass	4 ♠
6 NT	Pass	Pass

West leads the diamond nine

Plan the play.