

# Of X's and Omigods

Frank Stewart and Larry Cohen argue the merits of aggressive balancing actions.

## Call me stodgy

By Frank Stewart

I find some deals intriguing, some mystifying, some imbued with elegance and beauty. I never viewed one as downright frightening until a deal from the 2007 Fall NABC scared the heck out of me. My fellow Bridge Bulletin contributor and friend Larry Cohen wrote it up for the Daily Bulletin. It unnerved me because:

1. Larry made a call that wouldn't have occurred to me.
2. It worked (and he won the event).
3. He published the deal, implicitly advocating his action for players of diverse skill levels.

This was the deal. Cohen was playing with David Berkowitz:

Dlr: East	♠ A K 5 3		
Vul: None	♥ 6 3		
	♦ 8 3		
	♣ A Q J 6 5		
♠ 9 7 6 4 2		♠ Q	
♥ K		♥ A J 10 8 5 4	
♦ A K 10 5		♦ Q 9 6 4	
♣ K 4 3		♣ 10 8	
	♠ J 10 8		
	♥ Q 9 7 2		
	♦ J 7 2		
	♣ 9 7 2		

West	North	East	South
Berkowitz		Cohen	
Pass	Dbl	2♥	Pass
Pass	Pass	Pass	2♠
3♥	3♠	Dbl (!)	Pass
Dbl	All Pass	Pass	Pass

When North-South came to rest at 2♠, Larry reopened with a double! West ran to 3♥, but when North risked 3♠, West got out the hammer and led a trump. South played low from dummy and must have been shaken when East produced the queen. South ended with five tricks and minus 800.

Now, I'm not dumb enough to question the at-the-table judgment of a player with Larry Cohen's track record. Experts win by backing their judgment and taking stylish actions at the right moment, and Larry's judgment is exceptional, as his many wins attest. Moreover, the event was board-a-match teams, where risk-taking is common.

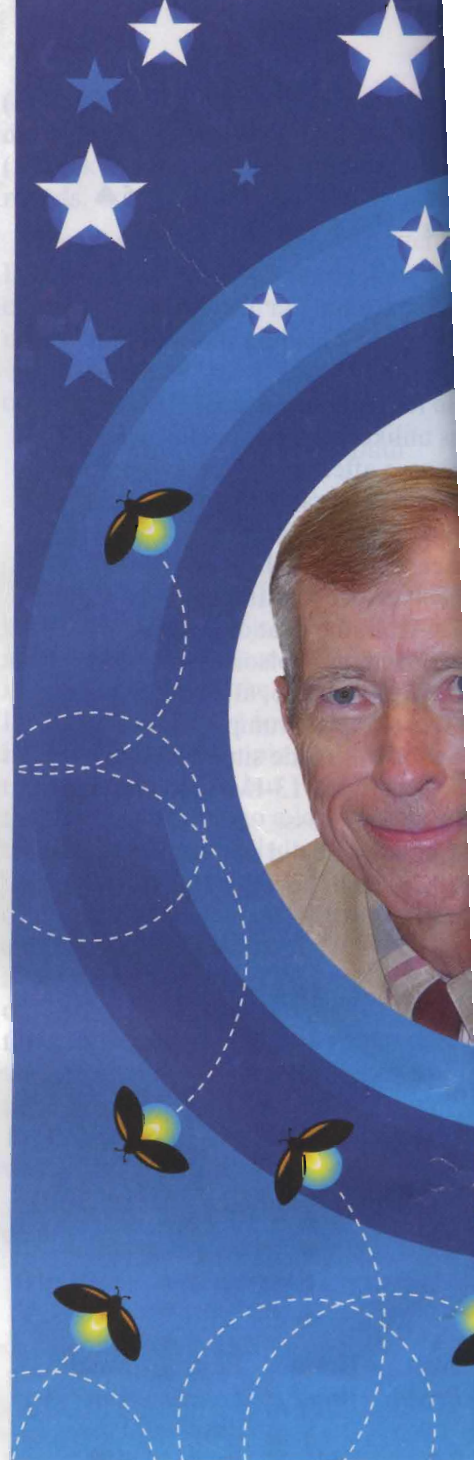
What I am willing to question is the theoretical basis for actions such as Larry's. I can't help but think that if this is the direction competitive bidding is headed, we're in trouble. A recent trend has been away from soundness and discipline and toward adventuresome actions that discount the partnership nature of the game. Now I see one of the world's great players make a limited, descriptive bid, then act again even though he has a trustworthy partner.

Maybe experts can survive and thrive by relying on their table feel. Aspiring players, in my opinion, had better try to win by cultivating sound habits.

Suppose the deal was this:

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

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it's likely to fail (best defense always beats it), giving East-West a plus. Score one for discipline.

Which layout is more likely? I don't know. Neither can East. Only West, who is looking at his hand and has heard East's 2♥, has a chance to judge his side's prospects intelligently.

Larry and I corresponded about this deal and found that our philosophies are night-and-day different. His experience tells him that my stodginess will lose in today's world of bridge. I fail to see how describing your hand, then deferring to partner, can be a losing long-run approach.

When I wrote to Larry, I got the gracious and articulate reply I expected from a player of his stature. Readers will be interested in his thoughts. As for me, you can call me stodgy.

**Call me competitive**

*By Larry Cohen*

Before I get into specifics, let me say several general things. First, I enjoy Frank's writing (particularly his over-my-shoulder columns), and I consider him a friend and great writer. Second, I welcome his open-minded approach in inviting me into this debate. Also, I don't recall my original reply to Frank, but I'm glad I was gracious.

If I were teaching beginners, I'd preach: "Once you preempt, don't act again unless partner asks for your cooperation (as with a 2NT ask)." However, if I were teaching more experienced players, I wouldn't be so absolute with this rule. I've seen hands where you open a weak two-bid with 6-5 and later show the second suit (unsolicited).

More important (and common), though, is a hand such as the one

from the board-a-match teams.

Honestly, I consider it "routine winning bridge" to balance in that example.

Selling out to 2♠ when the opponents rate to have an eight-card fit (admittedly they didn't here) is losing bridge.

Typically, if they have eight trumps, so will our side. On Frank's constructed deal (the second one), you can see the only distribution where we have no eight-card fit is when they have eight (we have to have exactly seven hearts, seven diamonds and seven clubs amongst our 21 non-spade cards to have no eight-card fit).

Even in that unusual case, it is often right to compete. On Frank's constructed deal, 2♠ is likely to make. (Double-dummy software owners will note that after the normal lead of the ♥K, there is only one card in West's hand that will beat 2♠ — and it isn't one that would be found at the table — the ♠2!)

So, in this specific situation, where I've preempted and they've come to rest in a two-level partial, I find it is winning strategy to *not* sit there and take your medicine (minus 110 or plus 50).

More broadly, I'd say the game has changed from Frank's "stodgy" days. You can't just follow conservative guidelines and consequently sell out on partscore deals. On low levels, you have to compete, compete, compete — especially when the opponents rate to have a fit. The hand with shortness strives to make a takeout double and the other player tries hard to take it out (without burying partner).

Selling out on the two-level is *not* a growth industry. This applies to matchpoints, board-a-match, and yes, even IMPs. I don't enjoy minus 110 at any form of scoring.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		2♥	Pass
Pass	Dbl	Pass	2♠
Pass	Pass	?	

If East reopens with a double, West may try 3♣. Then if East looks for a better spot with 3♦, West may convert to 3♥. No matter. East-West can't make anything at the three level, and North, with a normal reopening double, won't push to 3♠.

Meanwhile, if East sells out to 2♠,