

Winsome & Loathsome

Tales of the Trail



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Oh, man!

Last year at about this time, I wrote a couple of columns about game-tries: Long-suit tries, short-suit tries, help-suit tries, and two-way tries. I suggested that sometimes too much science inadvertently assists the defenders and, particularly playing IMPs, bidding the game directly is often an effective tactic. I call that the long bomb try.

When you write a column, you get mail. Bruce Ohmann, one of an endless panoply of top players who call Florida home, wrote me of still another game-try method that, at least some of the time, doesn't advertise the hand's weakness:

"Hello Zeke, I always enjoy your column. [He's making a great start!] In your article on game tries, you said something I heartily agree with — it's bad to describe your hand to the defenders. For several years I've been playing that the next step (2♠ after 1♥ – Pass – 2♥ – Pass and 2NT after opening 1♠ bid and a single raise) asks in which suit partner would accept a game try. He can bid or reject game or bid the lowest suit in which he would accept. If I want to know about a higher suit, I bid that suit to ask. I believe this is far superior to long/short or help-suit tries."

Bruce disavowed inventing the treatment. (I wanted to call it the B.O. try.) It sounded pretty playable, so I asked for examples. He offered two:

♠AK763 ♥AQJ5 ♦943 ♣6

"The bidding is 1♠ – 2♠, and we make the generic game try of 2NT. If partner bids 3♣, it says he would accept a game try in clubs but not in diamonds and hearts as well. He would have jumped to game if accepting all game tries. We need to know about diamonds so we bid 3♦ over 3♣. This asks about diamonds — the asker keeps asking."

Note that 3♦ reverts to the help-suit formula and thus begins to reveal information about opener's hand. This particular example might be served best by long-suit methods (bidding 3♥). Should partner happen to hold four hearts, e.g.,

♠Q54 ♥K1087 ♦A52 ♣872,

and the suits behave, at least one extra trick (maybe two) would be available playing in hearts.

Bruce continues: "It's a little more confusing when 1♥ is raised to 2♥ because 2♠ asks, and a 2NT response is the surrogate for spades.

♠832 ♥AQJ76 ♦AQ107 ♣6

This is a six-loser hand justifying a game try. Bidding goes 1♥ – Pass – 2♥ – Pass. 2♠ asks. If partner bids 2NT, it says he would accept a game try in spades, so we would bid the game. If he responds 3♣ or 3♦, he says he would not accept in spades, so we would sign off at 3♥." Sounds playable to me.

The Ezekiel 4♣

When the Kantars and Sharon and I took our annual bridge retreat to beautiful Bermuda, David Ezekiel, one of Bermuda's top bridge players

and surely the Western Hemisphere's most entertaining speaker, welcomed us. Speaking at the opening banquet David revealed the secret of his success: The dreaded Ezekiel 4♣ convention!

In the early days of Bermuda bridge, life was simple. Practically everyone played Power Precision. By and large, everyone was on the same page. Then, from the mainland and from Europe, came twin tsunamis of corrupting systems. Island bridge was awash with names like Roth-Stone, Kaplan-Sheinwold, lebensohl, 2/1, Acol, the Polish Club, etc. Soon system mixed with system and nobody understood anybody.

Desperate measures were in order, and David's fertile mind gave birth to the Ezekiel 4♣. It works like this: Whenever the early bidding becomes befuddled and out of control, a jump to 4♣ says, "Partner, we are wallowing in a sea of confusion. No matter what you think you know about my hand; no matter what you think I think I know about your hand I believe both of us to be totally bewildered and the next bid you make will be the final contract!"

Quite commonly, partner's glazed eyes would betray the fact that he was preparing to make the same bid mandating preemptive speed to beat him to it.

Now you may question how such an admission of confusion would be helpful. Well, I'll tell you. Faced with the constant threat of a burst to

4♣, David's partners soon learned to make all of their bids crystal clear. In short, they have learned the most basic lesson of good bidding: Send the message you want partner to hear and make it clear.

That may be the most important lesson we brought out of Bermuda