Ask Jerry

Jerry Helms
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Dear Jerry,

The other day in our local club, my partner and I had a big misunderstanding. With none vulnerable, my right-hand opponent bid 1♣. I overcalled 1♠. My partner bid 2♦. I bid 2NT. She bid 3NT. How could we have prevented this bad contract? Our hands:

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

Floris

Dear Floris,

The best way to avoid such a bad contract is to stay low when lacking values and a fit. As always, partnership agreement is the overriding factor. I agree with 2♦, but it appears that you interpreted this bid as forcing. Personally, I prefer that new-suit advances of overcalls be constructive, but non-forcing. The overcaller (you) should speak a second time only with something useful to say. With your hand, having already expressed good spades and some values, I would feel I had done my duty and simply pass. An invitational 2NT rebid would look more like this:

♠A Q 8 6 2 ♥Q 9 8 ♦K 7 ♣Q J 4.

Having said this, your partner should probably pass 2NT with no spade fit and poor diamond spots. In short, methinks both players overbid their values.

If advancer (partner) truly has enough to force the bidding, a number of options exist. As an unpassed hand, a cuebid can be used to imply but not guarantee support for the overcall. This allows a cuebid followed by a new suit to be 100% forcing. As an alternative, if you insist that a cuebid guarantees support, some partnerships play that a jump shift by advancer is natural and forcing.

My experience has been that if advancer holds up to 13 or 14 points with a reasonable suit, he can simply bid it … non-forcing. If the overcaller has trump support, he should "support with support" even with minimum values. If the overcaller does not have support, he should speak again only to show extra values, extra length or extra shape. With none of these, pass is often an attractive option.

Dear Jerry,

Playing with a longtime Life Master, I opened 1NT (15–17). We play Stayman and transfers. My partner transferred me to 2♠ and passed. Dummy tabled this:

♠K 10 6 5 3 ♥7 4 ♦5 2 ♣K 8 6 3.

When the play was completed (and I managed to go down one), the traveler revealed that someone had made 2♠. It also showed that one pair played 1NT and made one, and another played 1NT and made two. Following the play, I said to my partner, "I pass those hands." She replied, "Oh, I always transfer when I have five of a major."

What's best?

M.J. Beavin

Hi M.J.,

Although I prefer to avoid terms like always or never, I agree with your partner on this issue. As a general rule, the weaker your hand is, the more important it is for your long suit to be trump.

If your partner fits your major, the benefits are clear. If the notrump opener holds a low doubleton in your five-card suit, it is possible that your hand will produce zero tricks in notrump, yet some tricks in a suit contract.

As a matter of style, I am far more likely to pass 1NT holding a five-card major with near-invitational values than with a truly woeful hand. An example:

♠9 7 6 5 4 ♥6 ♦10 8 4 3 ♣9 4 2.

If partner opens 1NT, I would transfer to spades and give partner the opportunity to demonstrate his declarer skill in 2♠, but with:

♠Q 9 7 6 5 ♥Q J 6 ♦J 8 ♣Q 9 2,

I would pass in a flash!

I would be sure of what was right after seeing the results, but the key is to consistently do what rates to be right most of the time. ❐