

Trumps Easter Teams 2023

System design and slam bidding

by RAKESH KUMAR



Rakesh Kumar describes himself as an enthusiast who makes enough errors to have plenty of material for bridge columns.

Reflecting the downturn in attendance at face-to-face congresses since COVID, this year there were once again only 10 teams at the Trumps Easter Teams event, although the field was quite strong. The congress was won by PEAKE (Andrew Peake - Giselle Mundell, Tania Lloyd - Hugh Grosvenor) who finished more than 9 VPs clear of the field after 6 rounds, with FOSTER (Margaret Foster - Helen Milward, Heath Henn - Colin Clifford) in second place.

There were quite a few interesting slam hands during the day, which got me thinking about how system design significantly influences whether a partnership succeeds in getting to slam. Successfully bidding and making slams can swing lots of IMPs!

An important consideration in designing your bidding system is the range that you choose for opening 1NT. It's worth keeping in mind that a 1NT opening is a highly informative bid, especially for partner, as well as frequently being an effective pre-empt of the opponents. The latter is a key reason for opening a weak 1NT, as such hands are much more frequent than those in the range for a strong notrump. However, a weak 1NT is perhaps less useful in terms of constructive bidding for slams.

So what's a good range for a strong 1NT opening? Balanced hands in the usual range of 15-17 hcp make up only 4.8% of possible hands. Remarkably, this figure jumps to 7.5% of hands if one extends the range to 14-17 hcp (although it's worth realising that one-third of 1NT openings will then be made with just 14 hcp). That's perhaps why 14-16 or 14-17 hcp 1NT openings are gaining in popularity. The ability to open 1NT on 14 hcp became a relevant factor on quite a few deals in this event, including a couple of interesting slam deals.

Here's the first of those, from the morning session: after West opens 1NT, East has ample reason to go slam hunting with a sharp 6-loser hand and a good suit. When partner shows 2 keycards, it's worth shooting for 6♥ – after all, partner must be worth a few additional tricks.

Board 23

Dealer S | Vul All

<p>♠ AKQ95 ♥ J65 ♦ 632 ♣ A6</p>		<p>♠ J82 ♥ Q ♦ JT985 ♣ Q982</p> <p>♠ T6 ♥ AK9842 ♦ A4 ♣ K74</p>
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	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	-	-	-	-	-
S	-	-	-	-	-
E	2	2	7	7	7
W	2	2	7	7	7

However, only half the field bid to this slam – we were among those who didn't, to our cost.

Here's the second slam featuring a 14 hcp 1NT opening, from the afternoon session:

Board 22

Dealer E | Vul EW

♠ J
♥ T732
♦ AQJ953
♣ 83

♠ Q98764
♥ AK8
♦
♣ KT74

N		
W	—	E
S		

♠ AKT2
♥ J654
♦ 642
♣ AQ

♠ 53
♥ Q9
♦ KT87
♣ J9652

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	-	2	-	-	-
S	-	2	-	-	-
E	2	-	5	7	1
W	2	-	5	7	1

On this deal, getting to 6♠ depends on your agreements for a super-accept. If you play that a minimum 1NT opener with 4-card support can super-accept with a jump bid (while a maximum hand makes a control bid) then after the 1NT opening, East can rebid 3♠. Now West can cue 4♣ but East, with no control in either diamonds or hearts, signs off in 4♠. That is of course exceptionally good news from West's point of view, because it means there are no wasted values in diamonds. When Roman Keycard Blackwood reveals that East has 3 keycards, West knows exactly what they are and bidding 6♠ is straightforward. Only 2 pairs bid this slam.

Sometimes, being dealt a super-strong balanced hand can be a headache, because it can be quite difficult to show unless your system design caters for it. In a column a couple of issues ago, I mentioned the Kokish convention, where after 2♣ - 2♦, a rebid of 2♥ is either a genuine heart suit or a very strong balanced hand – responder must bid 2♠ and opener now gets to describe her/his hand further, allowing the balanced hand to be shown at the 2-level. Those who don't play that convention and don't have some other sensible agreement to show a 24+ hcp balanced hand, e.g. via a 2NT rebid after a multi-2♦ opening, might have struggled on this deal:

Board 3

Dealer S | Vul EW

♠ AKJ6
♥ A4
♦ A87
♣ AKQ4

♠ 73
♥ 987
♦ T963
♣ T853

N		
W	—	E
S		

♠ QT8542
♥ 532
♦ QJ
♣ J9

♠ 9
♥ KQJT6
♦ K542
♣ 762

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	6	5	7	4	7
S	6	5	7	4	7
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

If North can show her/his strength then South, with a useful source of tricks and an outside entry, has an easy raise to 6NT. In fact 7NT makes, but only 4 were in slam (3 in 6NT and one in 6♥). However, they were all outscored by the North-South pair of Alex Cook – Tony Allen, who were playing a strong club system. Of course this would readily have allowed North to show his extra strength, but when East unwisely chose to interfere over the 1♣ opening at adverse vulnerability, it cost -1700!

Another interesting consideration in system design is the strength and suit holding(s) you regard as suitable for a forcing 2♣ opening. With most partners, my preferred approach is that it includes not only single-suited game-forcing hands, but also all hands with 16+ hcp, 4 or fewer losers and either a good 6+ major suit or at least 5/5 shape including a 5-card major suit; as well as hands with 19+ hcp, 4 or fewer losers and 5/4 shape including a 5-card major suit. Opener's shape and loser count can be clarified after a 2♦ waiting bid by responder, possibly followed by a further 2NT waiting bid if a fit is not immediately found.

So the West hand on this final board, with just 3 losers, was an easy 2♣ opening for me. After my partner responded 2♦ waiting, South overcalled 4♦. Now I bid 4♥, North raised to 5♦ and partner doubled to try to slow things down. Still, I couldn't see my way clear to passing, so came back in with 6♣. As the cards lie, this contract is unbeatable.

Board 16

Dealer W | Vul EW

♠ J852
♥ 973
♦ AQT
♣ A43

♠ AQ4
♥ AQJT4
♦
♣ KQT75

	N	
W	—	E
	S	

♠ K976
♥ 852
♦ J3
♣ J986

♠ T3
♥ K6
♦ K9876542
♣ 2

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	-	3	-	-	-
S	-	3	-	-	-
E	6	-	5	4	-
W	6	-	5	4	-

We were thus the only pair to reach slam – but we didn't play in 6♣ either! Instead we got away with making 6♥ after ruffing ♦ A lead, crossing to ♠ K, taking the heart finesse and then dropping the king. In the course of the day, though, our team made too many errors on other boards so we only just managed to finish in the middle ... 🟩