



by Matthew McManus, January 2015

There are a number of situations in the bidding and play where I see partnerships consistently “get into trouble”. This trouble takes one of two forms: either a misunderstanding results in a bad score, or – the times I am more likely to hear about it – when the mix-up has an adverse effect on the opponents. If the opponents are damaged because the explanation of the systemic meaning of a bid does not match what the player held, then in certain circumstances the director is able to compensate them by changing the score.

Many pairs would benefit greatly from having a quick discussion about the following so that both players are on the same wavelength. And even if you can't be bothered to look at all the scenarios, at least consider #1, as it is by far the source of most confusion...

### **#1. What happens when the opponents double 1NT?**

West	North	East
1NT	X	?

Do you keep playing the same system as if there were no double – or do you do something different? Many pairs revert to playing natural bids after the double, while others have complex mechanisms for escaping from 1NT: X. In olden times, the double was usually just penalty. But now with the advent of more and more artificial meanings being ascribed to various bids, including double, some advanced (“serious”) pairs may even have the agreement that what they do will depend on the meaning of the double. There is no fundamentally correct answer to the above question – just as there is no wrong answer. The important thing is to have an answer and that you and your partner agree on it.

...and while you're at it....Look at the other side of the coin: what about if it is the opponents who open 1NT? You might use different defences depending on whether the opponents play a weak no-trump or a strong no-trump. For example, you may play natural (with double being for penalties) when the opponents' 1NT is weak and play DONT (or some other convention) when it is strong. But what constitutes a strong no-trump and what will be considered a weak no-trump? 12-14 is typically the weak range, but how will you deal with 13-15 or 14-16? The only right answer is the one that you and your partner agree upon. And the answer may be very simple – for instance, I have an agreement with partners that if the no-trump range can have 16 points, then we will consider it a strong no-trump; otherwise, we will think of it as weak.

## #2. Let's assume that you play Bergen raises – what happens when the opponents interfere?

West North East  
1♥ Pass 3♣

Normally in your system this would be artificial showing 6-9 points with four card heart support.

But if the auction has gone...

West North East  
1♥ 1♠ 3♣

...does 3♣ still show the same hand or is it something different – natural and strong, natural and weak, a splinter, a fit-showing jump? As before, it doesn't matter what the answer is, as long as you and your partner have the same understanding.

...and while you're at it...What about if partner is a passed hand – do Bergen raises still apply? In the auction:

West North East South  
Pass Pass 1♥ Pass  
3♣?

Is 3♣ still 6-9 with four hearts, or is it something else?

## #3. The simplest(?) of auctions, but what does it mean?

West North  
1♣ 2♣

In old style-Goren, the immediate cue bid of the opponents' opening bid showed a very strong hand and was game forcing. However, that method is no longer particularly popular. Nowadays, the two most common treatments are natural and Michaels. What do you play? You may have sat down with your partner and agreed to play Michaels\*, but does it always apply? For example on this hand North is sitting with ♣ AKJ1085 and a scattering of other points. EW are playing standard with a short club so West's opening bid could contain as few as two clubs. You said you'd play Michaels, but you think, "surely it can't apply here when I could have clubs?" The fact that you are having this thought process indicates a "planning problem". When you agreed to play Michaels, you should have also had the conversation as to whether it always applies. It is not unreasonable to play that unless 1♣ promises four clubs (say), then 2♣ will be natural – and the same could apply to the auction: (1♦) - 2♦. But the important thing is to have the discussion and to come to an agreement with partner.

*\* a Michaels cue-bid is an artificial bid of the opponents' opening bid, typically promising 5-5 in two other suits. Depending on the partnership agreement, what those suits are may or may not be known.*

...and while you're at it...If you and your partner have agreed to play Michaels, remember that 2♣ does not need to be alerted. It is a bid of a suit bid by the opponents and is therefore self-alerting – that is, it is considered to have been automatically alerted. Secondly, if your opponents ask what the bid means, do NOT say, "Michaels". There are important reasons for this – one, it could be that your opponents may not be experienced and may not know what Michaels is. Secondly, there are different understandings as to what is meant by "Michaels". In the original auction, (1♣) - 2♣, the majority treatment is that 2♣ shows both majors, but there is a not insignificant number of players who use this "Michaels" to show diamonds and a major. The correct explanation is to spell out your agreement. Some examples: "at least 5-5 in the majors", "usually 5-5 in diamonds and a major, but sometimes only four of the major", "Hearts and Spades, but could be just 4-4", etc. In addition, if you and your partner have some specific agreement about how strong the bid can be, this needs to be included in your explanation.

## #4 In the play of the cards, when you are defending, what signalling methods do you and your partner play?

- high to encourage?
- low to encourage?
- count (either natural or reverse)?
- discard what you don't want?
- McKenney?
- revolving discards?
- odds and evens?
- something even more complex?

Or perhaps a mixture of these?

If you are experienced enough to be part of the Congress scene, even if you haven't specifically discussed it, you will definitely have some idea as to what your partner means when, say, they discard the seven of diamonds. It is important that you discuss what signalling system you will play and you write it on your system card. If I am called to your table and you tell me that you don't play any signals, unless you are very novice players or a very new partnership, I am afraid that, quite frankly, I won't believe you. If you are a new partnership, then I will tell you that at the end of the hand, you have to agree on a signalling method, inform your opponents of this and, in the main, keep to it.

If you don't fall into the categories of novice player or new partnership, then you and your partner will have implicitly developed some way of "guessing" the best way to defend hands. (For instance, you may "know" that when partner discards, it is usually from a weak suit.) All the experts agree that defence is the hardest part of the game. If you don't have some legal communication method with your partner, then it becomes almost impossible. Your opponents will rightly become rather suspicious if you keep finding the correct defence to defeat their contracts, when you supposedly have no signalling system.

...and while you're at it...Even though false carding (which may include playing a card that is not consistent with your system) is permitted and is part of the game, in the main, there is an expectation that the cards you play will, most of the time, match your agreed methods. To give an example, suppose your opponents' agreement is to play high to encourage and one of them discards ♣2. At some later point in the hand, his partner gets on lead and, with a choice of what to do, plays a club and the discarder turn up with a significant high card in clubs. The first time this happens, you might just shrug your shoulders, but if it happened again, then you might start smelling a rat. Don't be those opponents.

