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Continuing on the theme from a couple of articles ago, here are a few more situations in which you and your partner need to make sure you are on the same wavelength. Otherwise, you may find yourself playing some rather strange contracts or maybe having the director called to the table by some unhappy opponents.

1. What's trumps?

Do you play splinters? If so, what does this sequence mean: 1S – (P) – 4H? Is it really a splinter – or is it a weak hand with hearts? Make sure you know. It's probably easiest to remember if you decide it's a splinter: then you have the simple rule, "all double jumps are splinters". But as long as you agree, then you will hopefully avoid finding yourself playing 4H in a three card fit!

There are other situations where it is also important to understand which suit is agreed as trumps, particularly when you are about to start a cue bidding sequence or when you are about to launch off into Blackwood. Not knowing what is trumps can be disastrous. It can even happen to the best players in the land. At the recent playoffs to decide the team to represent Australia at this year's World Championships, the following hand came up:

Dealer: East
Vul: All

♠ 9	♠ AKJ1065
♥ AQ8	♥ KJ43
♦ AQJ108	♦ 962
♣ A862	♣ ---

The problem seems to have arisen after 3D. West thought that diamonds were now agreed as trumps and so his subsequent bids were cue-bids. On the other hand East thought that 3H and 3S were still looking for the best denomination in which to play the hand. That meant that when West bid 4C, that was the first cue-bid with the last suit – spades – agreed as trumps.

West	East
	1S
2D*	2H
2NT	3D
3H	3S
4C	4H
4NT	5H
7D	Pass

The consequence of this was that there was confusion in response to 4NT Keycard Blackwood. Because East thought spades were trumps, 5H was intended to show 2 keycards (ace and king of spades) without the queen of spades. On the other side of the table, from West's perspective, the two keycards had to be SA and DK, without the queen of diamonds. It all made perfect sense to both players.

* 2/1 game force

You'll see that this is not a good contract. For a start the king of trumps needs to be onside. And even if it is, if the trumps break 4-1, a lot of other good things have to happen. On the actual hand, justice was out to lunch. South had the doubleton king of diamonds and the grand slam rolled in. Good results are sometimes tempered by an element of embarrassment.

2. Have you got a stopper?

Look at this sequence:

West	North	East	South
1D	1S	2C	2S
3C	P	3S	

What does East's bid of 3S mean? Here are some possibilities:

- do you have a spade stopper? If so, please bid 3NT
- I have a spade stopper, but I think 3NT will be best played from your side, please bid it
- I have a very good hand with a spade shortage, we might have slam on
- I have more than a maximum 2C bid; if you've got better than a absolute minimum, we might have game on, but I am not sure where – maybe 3NT, maybe 5C, perhaps even 5D.

And there could be more. Either of the first two options is probably the most useful, since 3NT is the most common and easiest game to make when you have minors. The important thing is to have an agreement with your partner. If not, you could get into trouble. For instance, say you bid this way as East and you think that you are asking for a spade stopper. Assume the opponents ask what 3S is and your partner says it shows a stopper and asks him to bid 3NT. When he does bid 3NT, it must be tempting to run away to a safer place in a minor. After all, you do not have the spade stopper which he thinks you have. However, to bid on would be unethical. When you bid 3S, you were hoping that partner had a stopper so you could play 3NT. If there had been no questions, you would have been content when he showed one. You have to take your medicine in 3NT, no matter how badly this might turn out. And before the opponents lead, you also have to tell them that you believe that your partner has misexplained your agreement.

...and while you're at it...What about if the opponents have bid two different suits? Do you have the same agreements? Even if you normally have an agreement that a bid of the opponents' suit asks for a stopper, many pairs have the understanding that when two suits have been bid against you, then bidding one of the suits shows a stopper and asks partner to consider 3NT if they can stop the other one. As with all these cases, there is no absolute wrong or right answer. The correct answer is the one that you and your partner agree on.