

NSBC Autumn Online Swiss Pairs

System, judgement and aggression

by RAKESH KUMAR



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

A field of 60 pairs competed for the generous prize money in this RealBridge event held on 23 April 2023. In the Open section (44 pairs) the eventual winners were David Weston - Kim Morrison, followed by Wei Zhang - Wayne Zhu and Alicia Mercer - Prue Siemsglue. The Restricted section (16 pairs) was won by Mary Carter - Diane Hood.

The competition was in the now customary format of 6 x 9-board matches. Unlike the Australia Day Swiss Pairs about which I wrote a few months ago, this time there weren't too many "deals of doom" where the declaring side was inevitably heading over the cliff for disaster. So there were plenty of rewards available for aggressive bidding, careful play and tight defence – but the card gods continued to provide challenges in all of those areas. I'm going to show you some of the bidding conundrums.

Here's one. With both sides vulnerable, partner as dealer opens 1NT and you hold:

♠ KQ963
♥ K8652
♦ 865
♣

Before you get a chance to show your useful major suit holdings, your RHO bids 2♣ showing at least 5/4 in the majors! What are you going to do?

Here's another challenge. Vulnerable against opponents who are not vulnerable, as dealer you open 1♦ with this hand:

♠ AQ9
♥ QJ43
♦ QT86
♣ T4

LHO overcalls 1NT, showing 15-18 hcp and a stopper. Partner bids 2♠, constructive but not forcing, and RHO doubles. You pass, LHO bids 3♥ and after partner passes, RHO raises to 4♥. What, if anything, are you going to do?

For the third one, with both sides vulnerable LHO deals and opens 2D, natural and weak. Partner overcalls 2H and RHO raises to 3D. What will you do with this hand?

♠ AK6
♥ Q95
♦ 8
♣ AKQJ83

And finally, as dealer with both sides vulnerable, how would you bid this hand?

♠ K87
♥ 8
♦ AKQT6
♣ AT93

Partner's first response to your opening bid is 1♥. What then?

This was the deal associated with the first problem. As North, you don't have quite enough strength to force to game and in any case, which game? Partner almost certainly has good clubs and probably good diamonds too, but can 3NT come home? Is it better to simply pass and collect whatever penalty might be available?

Board 7

Dealer S | Vul All

<p>♠ AT72 ♥ QJT74 ♦ ♣ 8642</p>		<p>♠ KQ963 ♥ K8652 ♦ 865 ♣</p> <p>♠ J5 ♥ ♦ AQT9732 ♣ K975</p>
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	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	-	-	2	1	4
S	-	-	2	1	4
E	1	-	-	-	-
W	2	1	-	-	-

I'm not sure that there is a clear answer, but the Swiss-Pairs-aggressive approach is to bid to 3NT, presumably via Lebensohl, and hope to make it. This time, that works. However, the range of scores on the board was very wide, from +800 NS when East ended in 3♦x, to a variety of minus scores up to -400, when West chose not to bid at all.

On the second deal of interest, the natural reaction is to look at your excellent defensive prospects and pass. In any case, with a minimum hand opposite a notionally 7-9 hcp hand, you wouldn't think of bidding 4♠ at adverse vulnerability, would you?

Board 16

Dealer W | Vul EW

<p>♠ AQ9 ♥ QJ43 ♦ QT86 ♣ T4</p>		<p>♠ 76 ♥ AKT2 ♦ K4 ♣ AQ987</p> <p>♠ JT85432 ♥ ♦ 53 ♣ KJ52</p>
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	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	2	2	4	-	-
S	1	1	4	-	-
E	-	-	-	4	-
W	-	-	-	4	2

Well, at Swiss Pairs, perhaps you should. After all, if the opponents have some 24+ hcp as suggested by the bidding *and* they have a good fit, what has partner got? Probably not much by way of high cards, so perhaps 5-7 hcp and seriously good shape. You have the perfect holding in spades for him, so all he might need to make game is something useful in either of the minor suits. In fact 4♠ is unbeatable – six tables played in spades, 3 of them in 4♠ of which 2 were doubled. Again, the scores varied widely because at the other end of the spectrum, 4 were allowed to get away with making 4♥.

There are many who hold a natural weak 2♦ opening in contempt. However, it can be quite an effective small-calibre weapon, because it means that if the opponents have the balance of strength, they are forced into a competitive rather than a constructive auction. That was certainly the case on this next deal:

Board 20

Dealer W | Vul All

♠ J2 ♥ K63 ♦ QJT643 ♣ 64	♠ T754 ♥ AJT874 ♦ A9 ♣ 7	♠ Q983 ♥ 2 ♦ K752 ♣ T952
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♠ AK6 ♥ Q95 ♦ 8 ♣ AKQJ83		♠ AK6 ♥ Q95 ♦ 8 ♣ AKQJ83
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	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	7	-	7	5	7
S	7	-	7	5	7
E	-	1	-	-	-
W	-	1	-	-	-

After 2♦ - 2♥ - 3♦ South has a problem. Of course 4♥ must be cold, but with so much playing strength, does 6♥ have chances? Will investigation lead to stopping in 5♥ going down, for a large and unnecessary loss? Again, the Swiss-Pairs-aggressive approach is to try for slam. Half the field did get there, but only 2 pairs managed to bid it after a weak 2♦ opening, whereas 4 pairs who had that bid against them (and one who had to deal with a crazy brave 3♦ opening!) stopped in game.

And finally, a deal where the issue is not about being brave but about stopping in time. This also raises issues about system and strategy. In the "good old days" it was normal for opener's jump shift rebid to show 16-19 hcp and at least 5/4 shape, so if you still bid that way (I do) then on this deal North would start with 1♦ and rebid 3♣:

Board 45

Dealer N | Vul All

♠ 642 ♥ AQJT ♦ 8732 ♣ J7	♠ K87 ♥ 8 ♦ AKQT6 ♣ AT93	♠ AJT5 ♥ 9654 ♦ 954 ♣ K8
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♠ Q93 ♥ K732 ♦ J ♣ Q6542		♠ Q93 ♥ K732 ♦ J ♣ Q6542
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	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	4	3	-	1	1
S	4	3	1	1	1
E	-	-	-	-	-
W	-	-	-	-	-

Any such rebid would almost inevitably lead to 5 ♣, which fails. These days, many play that a jump shift rebid promises 18+ hcp (the almost-universal North American approach) and is therefore effectively game-forcing. However, a non-jump rebid (of 2 ♣ in this case) is forcing unless responder has a bare minimum hand. With 8+ hcp, South is required to take some action but if she does raise to 3 ♣, this will again lead to 5 ♣ (or a hopeless 3NT).

So how did 4 pairs manage to stop below game? Well, in 3 auctions either North or South chose to downgrade their hand and pass. And then there was the outlier approach of Jake Andrew - Alan Stoneham. Jake opened 1 ♣ as North, so as to be able to reverse rather than worry about relative minor suit lengths ... the auction proceeded 1 ♣ - 1 ♥ - 2 ♦ - 2 ♠ (blackout = cheapest of fourth suit or 2NT to deny game interest)-2NT (forced)-3 ♣. That certainly worked! 🟩