

The Foundation System

Introduction

In search of a new lifestyle after shedding her third husband, my daughter Kathryn moved to Hawaii in December 1996, and plunged into the world of tournament bridge. Despite virtually no previous experience, her game progressed so rapidly that eleven months later she won a Flight A Imp Pairs game at the St. Louis NAC with an 80 percent game. Two months later, to prove this was no fluke, she won two two-session 0-300 mp games at the Hawaii Regional.

How could she have learned so quickly without being exposed to the teaching methods designed by Audrey Grant and promoted so heavily by the ACBL? To answer that question, I enrolled in the TAP training course at St. Louis and became an accredited teacher. I came away with profound respect for Ms. Grant's methods of teaching the mechanics of the game, elementary declarer play, and defense. In the area of bidding, however, I found a serious mismatch between the system she teaches and the methods employed by modern American tournament players. How could the ACBL, which promotes the Club Series as the primary means of recruiting new members, have designed a curriculum based on a system (1950's style Goren) which has been obsolete for at least a generation of tournament players? Was it nostalgia for an earlier era when there were no alerts and everyone played essentially the same system, an era which I described in an earlier book as the Golden Age of American Bridge?

Despite its apparent complexity and variety, the bidding systems of the vast majority of modern American tournament players share a common foundation: 5-Card Majors with Limit Raises, New Suits Forcing by Responder, 15-17 HCP 1NT Opening with Non-Forcing Stayman and Jacoby Transfers, Strong Artificial 2C Openings, Weak Two Bids, and the Negative Double. I call this the Foundation System. Except at the highest level of competition, the bidding systems of modern American tournament players are built upon this foundation. They may add lots of bells and whistles, but anyone who understands the Foundation System will be able to interpret their opponents' bidding, with the assistance of the alerts and explanations required by ACBL regulations.

Kathryn was exposed to the Foundation System from the beginning, but that was not the main deviation between Ms. Grant's teaching approach and mine. Hand evaluation in Ms. Grant's courses is based on the familiar Goren 4321 point count. She adds points for long suits, and for the potential ruffing value of short suits when a fit has been found. Writers have been teaching versions of this approach for years, despite the fact that expert hand evaluation for unbalanced hands is not based upon distributional point count, but upon winners, losers, and the favorable or unfavorable location of high cards. The simplest hand evaluation method which approximates the expert method is the Losing Trick Count. Kathryn's use of the Losing Trick Count from the beginning has been most responsible for her rapid progress.

This book aims to describe the Foundation System in terms which should be understandable to any bright beginner who has successfully completed Audrey Grant's Club Series course. All descriptions and explanations will be in terms of high-card points for balanced hands, and Losing Trick Count (LTC) combined with high-card points for unbalanced hands. Any mention of "points" without the qualifying adjective will still always refer to high-card points (HCP). There are always exactly 40 points in my decks.

The main thread of the text will emphasize the more or less universally-accepted interpretations of the System. Areas where options are available or where there are commonly accepted deviations requiring prior partnership discussion and agreement will be relegated to sidebars to keep from interrupting the main flow of the text.

How to Use This Book

Part I provides a fairly concise explanation of the Foundation System. **Do not try to memorize this information!** The student will want to read through this Part carefully to become familiar with the general structure. The astute student will note that both Opener's and Responder's hands tend to be subdivided into three strength classes: weak or minimum, intermediate or invitational, and strong or forcing. Regardless of which opening bid applies, similar patterns of responses and rebids tend to be associated with hands of the same strength class. Be alert for such patterns; they will make learning the system much easier. Part I is designed so that the student can print out each chapter, save it in some sort of notebook or binder, and use it for reference later when questions arise while using the system. While Part I must be read to understand the system, the real learning experience will begin in Part II, which provides abundant examples of the system in practice, using a question and answer format. Unlike most student texts, the example hands are not always clear-cut illustrations of a particular bid, but may lie in the gray area where two or more possibilities are reasonable; the answers will try to show the reasoning for choosing one action over another.

A Note on Political Correctness

Sir Walter Raleigh and his cloak were a little before my time, but I grew up during a chivalrous era in which gentlemen opened doors for ladies. In the English language I learned, the male pronouns served double duty, referring both to males and to unspecified persons of either sex. We gallantly allowed women to reserve the use of the female pronouns for reference exclusively to females. Such chivalry perseveres in this Web Book. Male pronouns are used exclusively to refer to all players, despite the preponderance of women in the ACBL membership. This will allow me to avoid the particularly odious, but increasingly common, use of the plural *they* and *their* to refer to a single person of indeterminate sex.