

BEATING THE EXPERTS

Contributed by Mr. Marvin French

Experts bid better, defend better, and play the dummy better than you. They also have better partnerships, so how can you possibly beat them? The usual answer is to copy their methods (surely the best) and to try for swings with unsound bids and plays. Wrong! That might work for a short Swiss match, maybe one time in ten, but not for a longer match.

No, your best chance is to play a solid game that differs from theirs. You don't want the same contract, played from the same side, with the same opening lead and line of dummy play, at both tables. If your alternatives get better results, you win! If they don't, so what, you were going to lose anyway. Here's the plan:

-- Don't play their system. If they play five-card majors, you play four-card majors. Use different notrump ranges, if only to play 16-18 HCP one notrump openings vs their 15-17, and 21-22 HCP two notrump openings vs their unsound 20-21. It is amazing how often good bidding of the same deal in different systems will result in a different contract or different declarer.

-- Use alternative conventions and treatments. They use Michaels cue bids? You use top-and-bottom. Forget weak jump overcalls, yours are strong or intermediate. No negative doubles unless the vulnerability is unfavorable--you double for business (but read up on the techniques). Play two-way Stayman (two diamonds game-forcing, two clubs game-invitational), discarding Jacoby transfer bids. You don't want to play hands from the same side they do. Throw in some good but uncommon gimmicks, like transfer responses to overcalls.

-- No ultra-light openings, doubles, overcalls, or responses. The experts are better at stealing hands than you are, so don't mimic their macho style. That does not mean bidding timidly. If you have a reasonably good bid or double, make it.

-- Don't open notrump with a weak doubleton or off-shape hand. Eschewing these questionable practices, popular with experts, can get some great results.

-- Avoid bidding weak suits with marginal hands. Partner will have more confidence in raising or leading your suit, and you'll have fewer disasters.

-- Prefer a sound minor suit bid to a questionable one in a weak major or in notrump. A good minor suit contract, disdained by the experts, often yields a nice swing.

-- Prefer a notrump response or rebid when the alternative is to bid a weak four-card suit. Don't use Stayman with a weak major and a balanced hand. You might gain if their suit contract gets a bad break, or your unrevealing bidding elicits a favorable lead. Sometimes hands with a 4-4 major suit fit will have four losers in either notrump or the major. Even with a five-card major in a 5-3-3-2 hand, raise 1NT to 3NT with a game-going hand. One recent computer simulation found that this was actually superior to finding a 5-3 fit.

-- Try to stay out of the low-percentage games that experts are fond of (their chief weakness). Sometimes they will succeed in a bad contract, and your lesser bid will result in a loss. The loss would be greater, however, if your inferior play or their superior defense would have defeated you in the same contract. Often the bad contract won't succeed, and you will have a gain instead of a push.

-- Don't get too scientific; their science will be better. If you are pretty sure of game or slam, just bid it. Hiding your assets may get you a favorable lead. Use only those conventions and treatments that your partnership knows thoroughly. It is hard enough to beat experts without giving them gifts arising from misunderstandings.

-- With a close opening lead decision, try to guess what the expert will do and choose the alternative. Maybe you'll get a swing. Don't make strange leads, however, like king from king-small. To do so is to play into the experts' hands (literally).

-- Take alternative lines of dummy play. With nine trumps, finessing for the queen can produce a swing. The edge in favor of the drop is very small (52 to 48), so why not take a chance?

-- Against suit contracts, lead low from weak doubletons and high from weak tripletons. This is a better method than MUD (middle-up-down) for distinguishing between doubletons and tripletons, and often works better than standard leads.

-- Don't use "odd-even" or other coded discards. In fact, signal only when absolutely necessary. Experts love defenders who reveal the location of high cards and are honest about suit length.

-- Don't let a bad result demoralize you. Experts have bad results, too. Say absolutely nothing critical or apologetic. Just smile, and don't let them see you sweat! For that matter, silence in general is wise. Don't initiate, or participate in, hand discussions with partner or with opponents. In trying to look smart, you'll probably end up looking foolish. Experts are very good at deducing skill level from opponents' smallest comments. If you keep quiet, they may think you're an expert too!

-- Before leading against any contract, routinely say, "Please explain your auction." They must explain not only any conventional bids or non-standard treatments, but also any standard bid about which they have a special understanding. You might learn something helpful.

-- Experts excel at reading "breaks in tempo" (hesitations or unwonted speed) during the bidding or play, so try to make every call and play at the same (slow) speed. Consider your opening leads, no matter how obvious, for five seconds or so. Why tell them you don't have a lead problem?

-- Call the director if there is any irregularity whatsoever. The experts will do so whenever your side has a break in tempo, and you must return the favor. Directors are notoriously loath to rule against experts, so use your right of appeal if a decision seems unfair. Whatever happens, keep your cool. Be pleasant. Experts thrive on disgruntled opponents.

-- Don't tolerate misbehavior by the experts' kibitzers, who must be seated and silent. Kibitzers may look at only one hand, and must give the same attention to a bust hand as to a blockbuster. You have the right to banish any one kibitzer without giving a reason, but don't do so arbitrarily.

While the foregoing is aimed mainly at team-of-four games, most of the tactics apply to pair games in which you are outclassed. Also note that many of the recommendations are worthwhile against any opponents, not just experts.

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