

The Revision Club System

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Foreword: Bidding Is 80% Of The Game

This Foreword is really an essay on bidding theory. It will not refer to specific features of the Revision Club system; the rest of the book is for that. Instead, I intend to explain something about the general approach to bridge that I think is best. I will also explain why the vast majority of players out there today, including many of the ones thought to be at or near the top, are not doing what they need to be doing to play their best. This will require some hard words to be said about other players and theoreticians, but there is no way around that.

Most people think that their bidding “system” is whatever they write on their convention card. To them, if they play 2/1 Game Force, 15-17 notrumps, and other popular conventions and treatments, they are playing a system. If they play weak notrumps, that is a different system. Precision, or some other big club method, would be yet another system. They are wrong. What most people call a “system” is nothing more than a framework or outline for a real bidding system. The stuff that goes on the convention card is only the barest of essentials. If you are accustomed to playing 15-17 notrumps, with a 1NT rebid showing 12-14, and then you exchange the meanings of the two bids, you have not really changed your system. You have changed two of the treatments you play. All the rest is the same (although if you are wise, you will add some extra treatments to deal with occasions when the opponents interfere, so that opener, when deprived of his 1NT rebid, will have some way to show his extra values). Some poor fools go so far as to think that if they put 12-14 on their convention cards, they are now playing K-S (which actually *is* a true system, as elaborated by Edgar Kaplan in the pamphlet *Kaplan-Sheinwold Updated* – although this not to say that very many people actually play it as Edgar wrote it). A convention card is not a system. Nor does writing up a few pages of notes to add a bit more detail than can be fitted into the limited space on a standard convention card give you a system worthy of the name. Yet this is all most players have.

Perhaps surprisingly, the basic framework, or outline, or convention-card-level description of the methods you play is not overwhelmingly important. A competent pair could probably pick up the convention card of another competent pair and, using that as a starting point, devise a true system that is just about as good as whatever would be arrived at by starting with their own personal preferences. How can I say this? How, for example, can it not make a difference what notrump range you play? Or whether or not your strong bid is 1C or 2C or something else? Well, it does make a difference, but

not that big a difference. We know this because of the remarkable variety of basic approaches that have been successful in actual play. Notrump openings of the preemptive variety (10-12 or, where allowable, 9-11 or 9-12) have been used successfully. So have weak and strong notrumps of various ranges, and even super-strong notrumps (17-19, 17-20, even 18-20). “Standard” methods have won national and world championships, and so have big clubs, forcing-but-not-necessarily-strong clubs, and methods even farther out than that. People who don’t even bid their longest suit first (canapé) have won at the highest level. *What is really important is not the basic framework you play on the first round of bidding, but that you know what your bids mean after that.* And this is where most players fall down. For various reasons, they do not put in the work to develop a true system, one that is internally self-consistent and sufficiently detailed to make their framework function optimally.

Bridge expertise, like most things worth having in life, is susceptible to hard work. Why should it be any different? Within the small corner of the universe that comprises the intellectual games, all of the other games require hard work. The top chess grandmasters (and many others who aspire to that status) put in incredible amounts of work studying their game. Anyone who wants to play at the level of Anand, Kramnik, Carlsen, and company must learn – literally memorize – many thousands of opening lines, starting with the possible first moves and extending, in some cases, past the thirtieth move. Standard endgame positions, and the winning or drawing methods appropriate to each, must also be memorized. Past games of potential opponents must be studied, to obtain information about how they are likely to play in the future. For the chess grandmaster, it never ends. Every week, new games are published. You had better study the latest new moves in the Najdorf Sicilian, or you are likely to be blown off the board the next time you play it – and the latest “theoretical novelty,” as chess players call them, may have been introduced as recently as the previous round of the tournament you are now playing in. All of this takes many thousands of hours of work just to get you to the top, and a continued investment of time of many hours each week to stay there. The workload for a chess professional is so severe that it is literally impossible to hold a full-time job on the side, even if one wanted to.

How about other games? Scrabble®? Top Scrabble® players memorize lists of words of various lengths, literally hundreds of thousands of them. All of the short words must be learned by heart. As many as possible of the words of other lengths, up to eight letters (sometimes more), must be learned as well. One must know which words can be pluralized and how, and what other endings they take. There is much more. Again, it is a great deal of work. You don’t do the work, you don’t win. If you live in an English-speaking country, you have probably noticed the explosion of poker books in the games section of your local bookstore. Poker theory is advancing by leaps and

bounds. Someone is buying all these poker books, and it is not hard to see why. Poker players stand to lose money if they don't know what they're doing, and it is hard to think of a better motivation than that.

What about non-intellectual forms of competition? Let's take the physical sports. The Washington Redskins¹ play one game a week during the season. A game lasts about three and a half hours. How much practice and preparation goes into each game? It's a full-time job. Hours of on-field practice each day, and other hours devoted to physical training and conditioning, film study of other teams, memorizing the playbook, and who knows what else. The time spent in actual play is dwarfed by the preparation time. Tennis players and golfers spend many hours beating practice balls for each hour they spend in actual competition.

How about life in general? What about matters of life and death, which it is the job of the professional military to confront? A soldier, sailor, Marine or airman will spend relatively few hours of his life in actual combat. And how many in training? There's a saying: "The more you sweat in training, the less you bleed on the battlefield." Of course, most of us make our livings in ways that do not involve any serious risk of death or injury. But ask a surgeon sometime how many hours of his life he has actually spent in the operating theatre, and how many studying and learning in various ways. As a lawyer, I have spent a great many more hours in law libraries than in the courtroom, and I appear in court a lot more than most lawyers.

The point should be clear by now. Any serious competitive pursuit requires a lot of study and preparation, as compared to the relatively small proportion of time during which the actual work is done. So why should bridge be any different? The answer is, it isn't. If you hope to compete at the top level, it is a good idea to put in the work. But for whatever reason, only a few partnerships actually do it. It is worth inquiring why not.

We have all heard the excuses. Many players attempt to justify their laziness (there is no other word for it) in one way or another. "It's better to play simple methods; you are much less likely to have a misunderstanding." "If you don't have to work too hard in the bidding, trying to remember what your agreements are, you can concentrate on the play of the hand." "KISS – Keep It Simple, Stupid." If that is what *you* think too, then this is not the book for you, and my methods are not for you either. But if you think these glib rationalizations sound bogus (which they are), here are some words you can write down on the back of your hand and look at mornings and evenings until you have learned them by heart: "The more agreements you have with your partner, the

¹ A professional American "gridiron" football team, for those of you who live outside of North America.

better you'll play." (If the ink wears off before you have learned the words, have them tattooed.)

As I have already hinted, many players, including some of those at or near the very top, disagree with my view that more is better. They would say that less is, in fact, more. So how do I know that I am right and they are wrong? Two ways. First, my own experience. There is nothing worse than thinking about making a particular bid and having to stop to wonder whether partner will interpret it the right way. I have no idea how many times I have thought of making a bid that I knew perfectly well could be interpreted more than one way, and said to myself "if only we had an agreement about this," but it is a great many. Even worse than that is when partner makes a bid that you know could mean different things, and having to try to figure out which way he means it. That has happened to me a lot too. The result is often not pretty. The people who say that having lots of agreements leads to "misunderstandings" (through one partner or the other forgetting the system) are ignoring the fact that every time one partner makes a bid that the other misinterprets for *lack* of an agreement, *that* is a "misunderstanding" too, and a much more common one. (There is also the loss that occurs when you decline to make what you know is the best bid, because you do not have an explicit agreement and are afraid that partner will not read it correctly.) True peace of mind during the auction comes when your partner makes a bid and you can say to yourself "OK, I know what that means, because we have an agreement;" *that* is when you are able to put the bidding out of your mind when the auction is over, and concentrate on the card play.

The other way I know I'm right is by looking at actual results. Which two players have constituted America's best pair over the past twenty-five (almost thirty, now) years? You know the answer: Eric Rodwell and Jeff Meckstroth. Why are they the best? The easy answers would be that they have the most talent, or that someone has to be at the top of the pyramid and it might as well be them. These are the wrong answers. R. and M. are not the only talented players out there. As far as I know, there is no such thing as a bridge IQ test that can measure innate talent as differentiated from applied talent, but I don't think many people would say that R-M are obviously and indisputably more talented than everyone else in the game. What we do know about R-M is that they have a more detailed system, and more partnership agreements, than just about anyone else. Is it a coincidence that they are also the best partnership in North America? I don't think so. The best teams in the world at the moment, apart from the Nickell team that usually represents the United States in international competition, appear to be from Italy and various other European countries, including Norway, Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands, and Russia. This is not the place to analyze the various bidding methods used by players from these countries and others; suffice it to

say that almost all of their pairs play complex methods, and it is not hard to imagine that they would be contemptuous of the crude ones most American players use.

You may ask, if I am right about the desirability of working on your methods and developing extensive agreements, how is that there are successful players who disagree? Why doesn't everyone do it my way? I have thought about this a great deal, and I think I have the answer. In bridge, it is possible to cut corners and get away with it – to some extent – more than it is in other games. There are no top chess grandmasters who don't study the game, because people who don't study don't get to the top in the first place. It's impossible. In bridge, natural talent carries you farther. It is possible to get away with playing inferior methods and still win national or even world championships. Both the Spingold and the Vanderbilt have been won by teams that included pickup partnerships. But this does not mean that partnerships who avoid work couldn't be better if they adopted my (and Eric Rodwell's, and Bob Hamman's) approach. Many strong players avoid system work on the grounds that what they already play is "good enough to win" – and it is, some of the time. By taking this view, they never find out how much better they could be. Being highly intelligent and talented does not mean that one is immune to laziness or self-deception.

I think I should say a few words here about why I think the state of bidding theory is what it is, at least where I play. When I offered free distribution of the first edition of this book on the Internet, I was very surprised to find that the vast majority of requests for copies of it came from outside North America, and that most of these were from countries where English is not the national language. It had never occurred to me that most of the interest in my work, which after all is written in English by an American, would come from overseas. It seems that the ACBL's restrictive approach to systems and conventions has created a bridge culture in North America that leads most players, even strong ones, to shy away from methods that are perceived to be outside the North American mainstream. (Although the ACBL's restrictions have no effect on Revision, which has been carefully designed to be legal in all ACBL events, except for a few that are restricted to beginners.) This tendency extends to most of North America's top players, almost all of whom are full-time, or at least part-time, bridge professionals. I happen to know a few bridge pros, and there is great pressure on them to stick to commonly accepted methods. Most pros play with a number of different partners. They cannot easily play a completely different system with each client, and in any case, most clients want to play what they know, which is what everyone else knows. Even when a pro gets to play with another pro in a team event, he needs to be ready to play the accepted system. Pros need to be ready to "partner up" at short notice with another pro, even when the two have never played together before. This often happens when a sponsor is putting together a team, and wants an all-expert pair at the other table. All of

this leads to a state of affairs where almost all of the professional players specialize in playing the same style, the one commonly known as 2/1 Game Force. Few of them get the opportunity to develop their own systems with a regular partner. (This does not apply to pairs like Rodwell-Meckstroth, Greco-Hampson, Stansby-Martel, and the like, but it does apply to almost all lesser pros.)

So nowadays, we see almost all advances in bidding theory coming from outside the United States. In countries where bridge professionalism is uncommon, the top players tend to stay in regular partnerships and develop detailed systems. Good for them – and bad for supporters of the U.S. teams in international competitions, now that the Italians and others, who are not under any pressure to use “ACBL-approved” methods, are pulling away from us. What all of this means for the bridge enthusiast in North America is that it is possible to play methods that put to shame those used by most of the top players here – *if* you put in the work.

How much work are we talking about, anyway? That is a fair question. I have seen various written sources estimate the size of the R-M Precision book as being 300 pages, and 500, and 800, and 1100. (I do not know what significance to attach to the fact that all of these numbers correspond to the size of various doubled penalties.) Everyone agrees that it is pretty big. I suppose it is true that most people are not up to the job of memorizing hundreds of pages of bidding theory. Then again, I’m not most people, and if you are still reading this, neither are you. I would say that a partnership should memorize as much detail as both players can assimilate. Obviously, there will be a limit. But I am confident that that limit will be far beyond what all but a few partnerships undertake in the first place. This book is about 440 pages, single-spaced. If I can do it, so can you.

Time for good news and bad news, bad news first. The bad news is that you will have to put in a considerable amount of work before you can play Revision Club. But that’s all the bad news. There is a lot of good news. First, once you have learned the system, there is not that much more to do to keep your newly-acquired skills. Bridge theory changes slowly compared with, say, chess theory. You do not have to learn something new every week. Revision will change with time, as we discover improvements and additions, but the workload to stay current will be light. In fact, most of the work of preparation will be in adjusting to unusual methods played by opponents, but thanks to the ACBL’s restrictions, there will not be all that much to do in that respect. (The ACBL may be wrongheaded in its approach to regulation of bidding methods, but it does make life easier for those of us who only play in North America. It’s different for those who qualify to represent the U.S. in the World Championships, but that is the kind of problem you would like to have.)

Second, the work you put in *will* pay off. Does working on your bidding methods make a difference? You bet your ass it does. When I was learning the game at the Manhattan Bridge Club in New York, I often heard strong players remark that “bidding is 80% of the game.” Ira Rubin supposedly said 90%. It is almost certainly true that people who play bridge as a hobby cannot match the card play technique of professionals who play every day. But to use chess players’ terms, card play is the “tactics” of bridge. Bidding methods are the “opening theory.” In chess, tactics are king; if you can’t see that a move will lose a pawn six moves later, and your opponent does, you will lose. And the best tacticians are the pros who play or study every day. No amateur can hope to compete with them. In bridge, tactics are much less important. You can’t win the hand in the play if you have already lost it in the bidding, and you can win a hand in the bidding in such a way that the play becomes trivial. This gives ambitious bridge players a good chance at beating the “name” players, by outbidding them. True, this is largely possible only because so many of the well-known players do not use methods that are as good as what they could be using. But what does that matter? You can still beat them.

Third, you don’t have to worry about going out and finding a system that is better than what almost anyone else plays. I have done that for you. There is not that much competition for the honor of “best bidding system.” R-M, Black Club (Hamman’s system before Zia), and a few others. Maybe Cohen-Berkowitz or Greco-Hampson; at least they have enough sense to realize that a big club is the way to go. Most of the rest play some variation of what is called Two Over One, Eastern Scientific, Western Scientific, the Walsh System – the names change, but the methods don’t change very much, and neither are they all that good. The exact reasons Revision is better will have to be found in the rest of this book. For now, just take my word for it that it *is* better.

OK, so you won’t just take my word for it. You want to know why Revision works better. As it happens, there is an overarching reason that can be understood without going into the mechanics of the system itself. It is not so much a case of what Revision does (although it does plenty) as of what other systems (or “systems”) *don’t* do. I have a huge collection of books about bidding systems. Most of them are utterly useless. I visit websites and message boards where players put forth their ideas about bidding theory and debate them. The vast majority of these players are obsessed with disputes over ideas that are at such a generalized level that nothing is accomplished. I have already said that it doesn’t make all that much difference, for example, what notrump range you play. Yet that sort of thing is what most players argue over endlessly. They don’t realize that they are concentrating on the wrong things. You will see what I mean if you read the average treatise (it could be a book, a pamphlet or other written tome, or a web page) putting forth the hopeful author’s conception of the latest,

greatest, shiniest, newest Bidding System. Almost all of these works display a touching faith that by adopting some (usually very simple) concept that is different from the norm, victory can be achieved. Often this escalates into a sort of religious belief in the merits or efficacy of a particular treatment, convention, or what have you.

Do you like to play weak notrumps? 12-14, let's say? Believe me, even if you like weak notrumps, there are people out there who like them a whole lot more than you do. True believers in the weak notrump exist who can only be described as fanatics for the cause. As far as I can tell, this movement started with the advent of the Kaplan-Sheinwold system in the 1950s. To this day, the defenders of the faith proclaim the weak notrump as the cure for whatever ails your bidding, and probably for baldness and sexual impotence as well. I am exaggerating, but not by much. The scorn they have for the unimaginative strong notrumpers who make up the bulk of the bridge population has to be seen to be believed. My own opinion is that neither Edgar Kaplan nor Alfred Sheinwold, if correctly understood, ever claimed that the weak notrump was the cure for cancer. Rather, they happened to prefer the weak notrump to the strong one, and set out to design a system that would minimize the weaknesses the weak notrump has compared to the strong variety, maximize its benefits, and have the rest of the system be consistent with the notrump opening. There was nothing more to it than that. They never said, or believed, that just writing "12-14" on your card would work miracles. But in the decades since, their followers have come to believe that the weak notrump is a magic talisman that needs only to be waved in the faces of the opponents to have its effect. Of course, this is nonsense. I played weak notrumps for years and learned one main lesson about them: sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. What you gain here, you lose there, and in approximately equal amounts. (Today, Chip Martel and Lew Stansby are just about the only important pair in America playing 12-14 notrumps, and I suspect they would have won about as much if they played 15-17 like everyone else. If just playing 12-14 were the key to victory, a lot more people would be doing it.) The same is true of the debate between four-card and five-card majors. Four-card majors are very much out of fashion now in North America, but Bob Hamman (along with a few like-minded players such as Ron Rubin, Ron Sukoneck, and Russ Ekeblad) has shown that four-card majors continue to be playable at the highest level, at least when used in a big club context.

So if such basic features of a system don't make the difference, what does? Well, not what your bids mean on the first round of the auction. Anyone can memorize the appropriate opening bids and responses for a given method, both in and out of competition. It is what happens later on that makes a difference. You absolutely have to have agreements about what opener's and responder's rebids mean, in *all* situations that are at all likely to come up. You also need to have some agreements for later rounds of

the auction. You have to have artificial sequences, which must be memorized, for hand types that can't be shown any other way. You must have an extensive set of agreements for competitive situations (did you know that about 75% of the IMPs that change hands in a typical expert match occur on deals where the auction is competitive at one or both tables?). All of this is a lot of work. God is in the details, and so is the devil. (More accurately, the devil is in the *lack* of details.)

This book tells you what your bids will mean in subsequent rounds of the auction in all of the remotely common situations I could think of. The idea is to reduce to a minimum the occasions when you will encounter undiscussed situations. No one can anticipate every auction that might come up, but I have gone as far as I could, and much farther than just about anyone else has gone. More is better, as long as it is not too much, and I don't think there is too much to handle here. It will be hard work, but bear in mind that when you are working harder than the competition, there is a very good chance that you are accomplishing more. There is no magic to it. There is no secret to winning bridge that will carry you through every hand once you have learned it. Rather, winning bridge consists of knowing hundreds, even thousands, of specialized techniques for different, unrelated situations that will come up at different times. The only way to be ready for anything is to prepare for everything. In this book, I have come as close to that as I was able. Just be glad that you only have to learn the material, rather than invent and compile it as I had to do. (You're welcome; don't mention it.)

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