

The Revision Club System

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Introduction

Revision (short for “revised Precision”) is a big club system that is similar to, and based on, Precision. Of existing published methods, it most closely resembles the Precision style presented by Barry Rigal in his book *Precision for the 90s*. Bits and pieces lifted from other theorists are included as well (for example, the responding scheme to a 1NT opening is derived from Al Roth, and the responses to a 2NT opening come from George Rosenkranz). However, there is enough that is original in it to warrant calling it by a different name than just Precision.

The characteristic, recurring treatment in Revision is the existence of low-level shape-showing bids in situations where, in other methods, you must either keep quiet or make a forcing bid. Our animating principle is that Shape Is King. At relatively low levels (usually meaning through the two level), if you have decent shape to show, you are almost always allowed to show it, without much regard to high-card strength. Revisionists believe that *the worst crime in bridge bidding is to have a suit worth bidding, at a level at which it would be safe to bid, but to be forced to pass because your hand is “not strong enough.”* More disasters are caused by having a good fit, and not finding it, than by any other general problem. Most systems, including ours, are relatively good at clarifying the combined high-card strength of the partnership, and thereafter making a decent guess at whether the hand “belongs” to our side, or to the opponents, or is up for grabs with the strength relatively evenly divided. Where Standard and traditional Precision fall down is in lacking enough ways to find out, at a low level, whether there is a fit or not.

After we open the bidding, we have a variety of ways for responder to show hands with suits that are worth bidding, without getting too high. In competitive auctions, where RHO has overcalled or doubled after partner opened, we play negative free bids (or weak jump shifts) at the two level (or transfers to one or two of a suit, after a double). This is not that uncommon, but the limited nature of our openings allows these bids to be made without promising any high-card strength at all – there is no requirement to have six points to respond in such situations. We also respond light at the one level, a proven IMP winner (at least in a big club context). After an opening bid of one of a major and a forcing notrump response, a new suit by responder is nonforcing, but again, need not promise six high-card points. The most important innovation is the existence of immediate nonforcing suit responses to a strong club opening, with most positive responses starting with 1D, which is defined as a waiting

bid (this is also the main reason the system cannot be called “Precision;” in all varieties of Precision, a 1D response is a true negative).

The basic structure of the system is kept relatively simple by modern “mad scientist” standards (the follow-ups on the second round of the auction and later are where the real action is). It has specifically been designed so that everything in it is legal to play under the ACBL General Convention Chart. Few relay sequences are used. We do not use any of the traditional Precision asking bids. In many situations, the first two or three bids are different from what 2/1 or classic Precision players would do, but after that we revert to generally accepted principles.

Modern high-level bridge is more like a knife fight in a dark alley than a precise exercise in scientific technique. The elegant uninterrupted auctions that you see in bidding books and Challenge the Champs are just not that important, at least not compared to where the real points are won and lost, which is in competitive auctions. Fairly light opening bids, most players have realized by now, are essential. What they have not realized is that light responses and free bids are equally essential. We have elegant constructive auctions too, but we are also ready for the rough and tumble.

One thing the system is *not* is a “relay” system. It seems that the fashionable approach these days for players who want to use sophisticated methods is to adopt some variant of the “symmetric relay.” I have seen many such players boasting about how wonderfully well such a system works. I have rejected the approach. I observe that in none of the world championship books I read, or in tournament reports in magazines, does it seem that people who bid this way are winning much of anything. I think I know why. The relay approach is really a philosophy of waiting however long it takes for the perfect hand to come along. When you finally get that big club opener, and partner has a strong hand too, and the opponents don’t interfere because they are vulnerable, then you can have your relays that show one hand all the way down to the jacks. It just doesn’t happen very often. In contrast, our approach is geared toward transmitting information that will be useful in every hand that we will ever play – distributional information, at low levels and as early in the auction as possible, in the form of (usually) responder’s longest suit, by means (usually) of nonforcing, natural bids. We do, in fact, use a few relays, such as in auctions where someone has first made an artificial bid showing an unidentified splinter, or when length in two suits is known and it is desirable to show the residue. But these bids only happen later in the auction, when the opponents have presumably decided to pass throughout. We do not attempt to use relays on the early rounds of the auction. I note that Rodwell and Meckstroth also do not use many immediate relays, and rely on sophisticated methods of showing distribution later on in the auction (code bids where one suit really shows another are common in their

auctions). We are adopting a similar general approach to theirs, although the specifics are very different.

The methods described in this book are not purported to be perfect. Undoubtedly, in actual play, they will prove to be far from that. Improvements will be discovered and implemented. The thing to bear in mind is that bridge is a game of mistakes. There is no one who even comes close to getting everything right. You can win just by making fewer mistakes. These methods are intended to give you bids to use that will avoid some of the more common mistakes, and put pressure on the opponents to make more mistakes of their own.

This would seem to be the appropriate place to explain why one aspect of the system is the way it is, namely, the decision to employ a strong club. The main reason is purely pragmatic – strong clubbers win. They have been winning since the days of Howard Schenken and his Big Club system, and the Italians of the Blue Team (I know that some of the Squadra Azzura used a forcing club that was not necessarily strong, but strong club was their predominant approach). The original Precision Team won plenty, and with players who were not well known at the time. Rodwell and Meckstroth, long recognized as the strongest pair in North America, have never expressed the slightest interest in playing anything else. I have a personal reason for choosing it. In 1993, when I first set out to devise my own system, I started with a “standard” approach, including natural, nonforcing opening bids at the one level. I tried to solve the problems that inevitably result from the virtually unlimited one-bid by using various treatments and conventions on later rounds of the bidding, including something similar to what is now known as the Cole 2C convention, along with various artificial reverses and jump shifts that did not necessarily show the suit bid. It was immensely complicated. After writing close to a hundred pages on the 1C opening alone, it was clear that the system book would end up being much longer than anything I, let alone potential partners, would want to try to memorize. Then I read the Rigal book. After thinking about it a while, I realized that a big club approach would make most of the problems go away. There were other problems that needed to be solved, but I eventually figured out ways to solve them all. I am satisfied that this is the best way to go, within the usual ACBL system restrictions.

That’s the real reason a strong club works better: it lets you get to the level of detail you need to create a sophisticated system, with less work. Once you assimilate the basic differences between strong club and standard, a lot of things fall into place that are problematic in standard. You do not have to program in nearly as many patches to your code, or “kludges” as computer programmers call them, to deal with hands that are

unexpectedly strong in context. Far from making life more complicated, the strong club actually makes things simpler in the long run.

Please note that I do not say that it wouldn't perhaps be possible to do even better with a forcing pass system, or with a "one-under" system where you bid the suit below your real suit, hence transferring at the one level on the first round of bidding. I have read system books describing such methods. I do not know how good they are, nor do I care. I like to play bridge. To me, it is a waste of time to develop methods that can never be played in the vast majority of games in ACBLand. In fact, it borders on the cowardly (when done by people who live and play in ACBL territory, that is; this does not apply to players who live in other parts of the world). The people who devise such methods know that they will never be called upon to prove them, so they get to spend the rest of their lives complaining about how the ACBL will not let them play the killer system that would win everything. Nuts to that. In the real world, every game has rules, and here, the ACBL makes the rules whether you like it or not. My system is ready to roll in any ACBL-sanctioned event that allows the GCC or higher.

Some might wonder why there are not, at the very least, optional treatments for use in Midchart and Superchart events. The answer is that they are not worth the trouble. The trouble is having to pre-Alert, to give the opponents suggested defenses, to explain to clueless tournament directors why your treatment is actually chart-legal, and so on. There are really only one or two things I would like to play that even need the Midchart to be legal, and the practical effect of not having them is very slight. Better to make everything conform to the GCC, which is not that hard to do, and never have to worry about what version of the system we're playing today.

Those of you who do not live in ACBLand may be wondering whether, despite all the detail Revision contains, it is not nevertheless an "inferior" approach (because it is designed to work under ACBL rules, and does not contain methods that would be legal in, say, Australia, or in many of the European countries). I can only say that while I can't prove it, I don't believe this is true. The basic structure of my system is not all that different from Meckwell's (although of course the details are very different). Meckwell are still the equals of any partnership in the world. They do well enough against the Italians, despite having to carry a sponsor who plays half the boards. As far as I can tell, there is no reason to think that any of the avant-garde approaches to bidding that have come up over the years are fundamentally any better than the big-club approach. Perhaps one of these days, it will be proven that something else *is* better, but I don't think it will happen any time soon.¹ In any event, this is it for me. After

¹ Actually, there is a system out there that could, just possibly, be better than anything else including Revision. This is the system played by Fulvio Fantoni and Claudio Nunes of the former world champion Italian team. I won't attempt to describe it here (you can learn something about it on the Internet), but it is quite different from

spending parts of fifteen years of my life developing Revision, I don't think I am going to have the energy to try to do better. I will continue, for some indefinite period, to update the existing Revision system files as improvements are invented (or, more likely, as I continue to notice stupid mistakes on my part). But I don't expect to make any basic changes in the system, and I certainly won't invent a completely different one. Someone younger than I am will have to do that.

Regardless of what system you are using, the real money is made by being ready for competitive auctions. Of course we need to have ways to bid in uninterrupted auctions, and we do, often quite complicated ones. The best stuff here, in my opinion, is the extensive array of weapons for use when the opponents interfere over a strong club (a traditional problem for Precisioneers), and the defensive bidding structure, which is quite different from standard. This stuff works. My customary way of evaluating a possible new idea is to look through old world championship books, picking out actual deals where the idea could have been used, and comparing my new idea to what was actually done at the table using standard methods. I don't put anything drastically different from standard in the system without checking it this way. It is laborious, but it is better than running simulations, which can be misleading in various ways. My way, I am always checking against real deals played by real players. What would have worked in a world championship is certainly good enough to work in lesser events. I hope you'll give it a try and help me prove it.

As you read through the book, it is likely that you will end up asking yourself a few questions. Such as: "Why is this so complicated? Why is the book so long? Isn't there an easier way?" No, there is not an easier way. A lot of people think that superior bidding can be achieved through some relatively simple concept or convention or what have you that only needs to be adopted to have its effect. This is pure fantasy. There is no one thing you can learn that will make all of your auctions better. Good bidding methods are dependent on having specific defined meanings for specific bids in specific situations. There are, I have no doubt, many hundreds (or thousands) of such situations that must be dealt with. There is no way around it. Many of the specific definitions in this book will come up rarely. It is undoubtedly true that even if you and your partner memorized the system tomorrow and used it for the rest of your lives, many of them would never come up at all. Would you have wasted your time by learning the ones that did not come up? No, because you didn't know in advance which ones would come up and which ones wouldn't. As far as is possible, you need to be ready for anything that is

existing "natural" methods. I have very little idea why it works as well as it does, but you can't argue with the results. "Fantunes" have gone from being very much the third pair on the team, after Bocchi-Duboin and Lauria-Versace, to arguably being both the leading pair on that team and the best pair in the world. I don't know whether this is because they have the best bidding system, but it could be. So far, I have been unable to find out sufficient details about their methods to be able to form an opinion about how good the system really is.

at all likely to happen at the table. With Revision, you will be ready. There is no guarantee that any particular number of superior “system auctions” will come up in any particular session, but my (very rough) estimate is that you can expect to get something like four of them per session, with perhaps one or two of them resulting in IMPs won, compared to what would have happened had you been playing ordinary methods. That may not sound like much, but given that the average swing on boards that are not flat or quasi-flat (gains or losses of 1 IMP due to overtrick differences) is something like 6-7 IMPs, the expected gain is perhaps 10 IMPs per session. In a four-session match, that is 40 IMPs generated by you and your partner. That is something worth having. Now it is up to you to go out and get it.