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This Week in Bridge

(219) Partnership Discussions – Understanding Partner’s Style

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Level: 1

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General

When we sit down with a new partner and have only 5-10 minutes before gametime to discuss bridge, it is important to make sure we discuss the right things. In a regular partnership, it is also just as important to make sure we and partner are on the same page about the meaning of our bids. Many (if not most) players focus on discussing the wrong things early in the partnership. When we are trying to determine “how” partner likes to play bridge, discussing conventions like *1430 Keycard* or *New Minor Forcing* should not be at the top of our discussion list. Instead, understanding partner’s style in a variety of different situations is far more important. Here we look at what things we should first discuss with a new partner (and be sure to discuss with our regular partners as well).

Questions to Ask Partner

Here is a quick list of things to discuss with partner. These are many of the things we should know about ourselves as well as our partners. We shall see that much of the focus of these questions is on partner’s style of playing bridge. Below each question are some of the answers and follow up discussions that we and partner may have.

Opening Bids

How light do you open with Balanced Hands?

- Sound 12 HCP?
- Most 12 HCP?
- All 12 HCP?
- Some 11 HCP hands?
- Most 11 HCP?

How light do you open Unbalanced Hands?

- Some shapely 10-11 HCP hands?
- Most shapely 11 HCP (most 11 HCP hands with a 5-card suit)?
- Some 8-9 HCP highly shapely hands?
- Most 8-9 HCP highly shapely hands?



What is your NT opening bid style?

- Upgrade many 14 HCP hands?
- Upgrade many 19 HCP hands?

Do you promise any defense when opening the bidding? (Do you expect any when we do?)

- None?
- 1 quick trick?
- 2 or more quick tricks? (We may pass some 12 HCP hands that do not have enough defense)

General

How focused are you on Vulnerability in general?

- How much does it affect your openings?
- How much does it affect your overcalls?
- How much does it affect your preempts?
- How much does it affect your other bidding situations?

Competitive Bidding

What is your preempting style?

- General expectations?
- Suit quality?
- Do you vary much based on seat?
- Do you vary much based on vulnerability?
- Do you like to be aggressive with shape?

What is your 1-level overcall style?

- How aggressive are you?
- Is a good suit required with minimum values?
- Does Vulnerability matter?
- 4-card suits common?

What is your 2-level overcall style?

- Good 10 HCP enough?
- At least an opening hand normal?
- Always a good 5+card suit?

How aggressive are you with shapely bids?

- Michaels?
- Unusual 2NT?
- 6/4 or 7/4 type hands?
- Bidding over their 1NT opening bids?



Strong Hands

How strong are your reverses?

- Almost Game Forcing?
- Many 17 HCP hands?
- Many 16 HCP hands?
- Shapely 15 HCP hands?

What is your “Double and Bid” style?

- Do you usually have a 6-card suit when you double and bid a new suit?
- Do you tend to overcall heavy or stretch to double and bid with borderline hands?

Other Topics

How aggressively do you make low-level takeout doubles in competition?

- Do you stretch in the direct seat to make a takeout double when short in the opponent’s suit?
- Do you expect partner to balance aggressively?

What is your slam bidding style?

- Conservative?
- Aggressive slam tries below game?
- Aggressive slam tries in general?
- Bid lots of slams?

What is your opening lead style?

- Active opening leads - tend to lead away from honors?
- Passive opening leads – tend not to lead away from honors?
- Always lead partner’s suit if they bid?



Why We Ask These Questions and How to Make Use of the Answers

The value of having these kinds of discussions with partner, instead of spending time on specific agreements about conventions, is that with a few quick answers we should have a good idea of how partner likes to get into the bidding and generally play bridge. This should give us an idea of what to expect from partner in many different situations that we explicitly discuss and help us infer what to expect in situations we do not get to discuss. Knowing what to expect from partner allows us “to be on the same page” as partner, and this is a vital part of a good partnership! Many of the poor results that first-time partnerships (and even long-time ones) have come from having different expectations about what each bid shows or promises. If we have a good idea of what partner has for their bid then we will make better decisions than if we are just left guessing.

Additionally, these discussions put “what they promised” in the front of partner’s mind and often help partner be more careful in considering their actions. In first-time (or relatively young) partnerships this can cause partner to be a bit more disciplined, something that is helpful for building partner’s confidence.

Conclusion

Knowing what conventions you and partner have agreed to play is a large part of making partnership agreements. But understanding partner’s style and their level of aggression in a variety of different situations is just as important (if not more important) if you only have time for a few brief questions. Another important part of having these conversations with a new partner is introspection – to know or learn your own bidding style and to be able to communicate that to partner. Take some time to discuss these important questions with both your new and established partners. You should find that you better understand “what is going on at the table” and become a better bidder and better partner!