



Don't Look for Perfect Cards

Have you ever heard of Barry Crane? If you had lived in America in the 1980s, it would have been very hard not to have heard of Barry Crane, famous film producer and the victim of a headline-grabbing murder. Barry was also a remarkably successful duplicate pairs player.

When someone asked him about the secret of his success, he said, 'I don't play the *'if'* game, neither do my partners.' So what does this mean?

At rubber bridge or teams-of-four, it is quite legitimate to stake the odd overtrick to maximise your chances of beating the contract. Suppose you can say, 'If my partner holds the ace of spades, we can beat this contract. If not, there is no hope.' In this case, so long as the bidding and play to date make it possible, you place partner with the ace of spades. Of course, much of the time partner won't have the ace of spades and all you succeed in doing is giving away a cheap overtrick. This hardly matters at teams or rubber bridge, but at duplicate pairs it can be just as damaging as letting through the contract.

The same approach applies in the bidding, but now it is just as relevant to teams-of-four (IMPs) or rubber bridge. Suppose you pick up:

♠ A Q 7 5 4
♥ 8
♦ K J 7 5 4
♣ Q 2

You open 1♠ and partner raises to 2♠. You know all about fitting cards. If partner's 2♠ raise includes the queen of diamonds then it plugs a gap and makes your suit solid except for the ace. If he holds the king of spades, that plugs another hole. The king of clubs would go nicely with your queen.

Your fertile imagination starts to build up a picture of the combined hands:

♠ K 9 6 2
♥ 9 5 3 2
♦ Q 10
♣ K 5 3

N	E
W	S

♠ A Q 7 5 4
♥ 8
♦ K J 7 5 4
♣ Q 2

Partner has only eight points but 4♣ is excellent. Of course, in real life, you make a trial bid of 3♦ only to find partner actually has:

♠ 9 6 3 2
♥ K Q 9
♦ 6 3 2
♣ K J 7

This time he has nine points, most of them useless. You hope he signs off because of his poor diamonds and still need lots of luck to make even 3♠.

Do you see what I mean by the *'if'* game? If partner has the king of spades and if he has the queen of diamonds and if he has the king of clubs – most of the time he doesn't have these cards.

I think that the same applies to many flat eleven-point hands facing a weak 1NT. Partner opens 1NT. You hold:

♠ K Q 4
♥ Q 7 3 2
♦ Q 8 6
♣ Q 4 2

This is a truly awful eleven points: only one four-card suit, no aces, three isolated queens and no useful tens or nines. Yes, it is (just about) possible to construct a hand for partner to make 3NT reasonable. How many times, though, are you prepared to go off in a gruesome game contract to avoid missing one that makes? Pass 1NT, get plenty of tops or plus scores and don't worry about the occasional bottom.

I will finish with possibly the most dispiriting of all the outcomes of playing the *if* game, going one off in a freely bid 5♥ or 5♠. You open 1♠ and partner raises to 4♠. You hold:

♠ A Q 6 5 4 2
♥ K Q 4
♦ A 5 4
♣ 8

4♠ is pre-emptive, but you realise that if partner has hand A below then you can make 6♠. So you use Blackwood, but unfortunately partner has hand B and, when the defenders lead a diamond, even 5♠ fails.

Hand A	Hand B
♠ K 9 8 7 3	♠ K 9 8 7 3
♥ A 5 2	♥ 2
♦ 2	♦ 7 6
♣ 9 7 6 5	♣ K J 7 3 2

You have bid freely to 5♠ and find that ten tricks are the limit. Do you not feel slightly sick? Playing in 5♠ rather than 4♠ can only lose or break even. In the example above, you had no guarantee of success at the five level so you should not have ventured past the safety of 4♠.

The maxim is this: *Don't look for a perfect fit! Don't play the 'if' game.* ■



Don't Make Give Away Doubles

There are many types of give-away doubles – some reveal high cards and some distribution – and some of these I might describe more aptly as gift-away.

A common type of give-away double discloses a bad trump break. Here is an example from rubber bridge:

Dealer South. Love All.

♠ Q 9 ♥ 8 5 4 ♦ J 6 5 4 2 ♣ A Q 2 ♠ 10 8 7 6 3 ♥ Q 6 3 2 ♦ K 10 ♣ 5 4	<table style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 2 ♥ A K 10 9 7 ♦ Q 9 8 3 ♣ 9 7 3 ♠ A K J 5 4 ♥ J ♦ A 7 ♣ K J 10 8 6	
	N											
W		E										
	S											

West	North	East	South
Pass	1♦	1♥	1♣
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♠
Pass	3♣	Pass	4♠
Dbl	End		

West led the two of hearts, taken by the king. East continued with the ace. South paused as he knew that West must have long spades for the double. He elected to ruff and play on clubs. West ruffed the third round and tried to continue the forcing game by leading the queen of hearts. South simply discarded the seven of diamonds and thereby regained trump control because dummy could ruff the fourth round of hearts.

I would like to mention another point. If North-South's spades had not been good enough to withstand the bad break, they could have retreated to 5♣.

This takes us neatly to our next example. While the classic losing result of a give-away double is that it enables declarer to make an otherwise failing contract, other things can happen. This deal is from the 2007 English open teams' trials:

Dealer South. Love All.

♠ Q J 6 2 ♥ 10 ♦ A K 10 5 4 ♣ Q J 3 ♠ 10 9 7 5 4 ♥ 2 ♦ J 9 6 3 ♣ 10 5 2	<table style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 8 3 ♥ 8 6 5 4 ♦ 8 7 2 ♣ A K 9 6 ♠ A K ♥ A K Q J 9 7 3 ♦ Q ♣ 8 7 4	
	N											
W		E										
	S											

West	North	East	South
Pass	2♦	Pass	1♥ ¹
Pass	3NT	Pass	4NT ³
Pass	6NT	Dbl	7♥ ⁴
Pass	Pass	Dbl	End

¹South, lady international Heather Dhondy and her partner, were not playing Acol two-bids or Benjamin.
²This was game forcing after the two-level response.
³Quantitative; this did not ask for aces.
⁴South realised that East must hold two certain tricks, which as good as told her that he held the ace-king of one of the minors. Since East was on lead to 6NT but would not be on lead to 7♥, she went for the chance that 13 tricks would be available on the wrong lead.

West had a three-way guess and led a spade. North-South made 1,770 instead of losing 50 in 6NT undoubled. This was a greedy, give-away double.

Doubling at a low level can carry added risk. You might turn a part-score into game. Here is a prime example.

Dealer East. Love All.

♠ Q 2 ♥ Q 9 7 6 3 ♦ Q J 10 ♣ J 5 2 ♠ A J 8 6 ♥ 8 5 4 2 ♦ A 7 ♣ A 6 3	<table style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 7 ♥ K J 10 ♦ 8 6 5 4 ♣ K 10 9 8 4 ♠ K 10 9 5 4 3 ♥ A ♦ K 9 3 2 ♣ Q 7	
	N											
W		E										
	S											

West	North	East	South
Pass	1NT	Pass	1♠
Dbl	End	Pass	2♠

Without the double, declarer would surely win the heart lead and play a spade to the queen. On the second round of spades, East discards the ten of clubs as West wins the ten with the jack. Reading the ten of clubs as encouraging but seeing no rush to cash club winners, West can shift to ace and a low diamond. West can then take the next trump, put East in with a club and score a diamond ruff for down one.

The double, however, was a warning to South, who led the ten of spades at trick two. Whether West won, covered or ducked, he would make two trump tricks. Unfortunately, as one of those tricks was now a slow one, he could not score a productive ruff as well. The contract thus made. West had conceded 470 due to careless talk. The lesson here is like a World War II slogan: 'Careless doubles cost contracts.'