

Improve your bridge with me

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I am often asked what is the best way to raise one's bridge game and I can see from the disappointed faces around me, that my reply is not at all what people expect.

In my opinion all it takes to do reasonably well in this game is to bid accurately one's hand and use common sense. You can put away that hefty tome on complex squeeze positions, you don't need 1001 conventions, what you need is to approach the game humbly, not to take one-sided decisions because "you know better", and not to fall asleep during play. Leave the eccentric preempts and the super light openings to those who delight in posing their partners insoluble problems hand after hand, make sure you always have your bids, accept to let partner take over the auction when he wants to, put your blind trust in him and you will soon get the reputation of a player who is both competent and fun to play with.

IMPs All Vul South dealer
You are South and you hold:

♠ AK4
♥ K106
♦ AKJ
♣ J1082

How do you open?

We have 19 HCP and a balanced hand. The correct opening is 1♣. It would be very wrong to open 2NT with this hand, as some players do trying to get quickly to a game contract without revealing too much about their hand, or worse because they think they play the hand better and want to avoid the chance that partner might end up as declarer. It is never a good idea to lie about one's strength especially since in this case the 3334 shape is hardly a plus. Partner replies 1♥ and we rebid 2NT to which he replies 3♣.

What do you do now?

3♣ on this sequence is what is commonly known as "checkback" : partner is simply trying to get more information about our hand in the cheapest possible way. We must reply 3♥ to show 3 cards in the suit. Partner now bids 4♣ over 3♥.

What now?

We are not in control of the auction and looks like partner is pursuing hearts as trumps, our task is to continue showing the features of our hand by cue-bidding our cheapest control: 4♦.

Partner now bids 4NT, which we assume must be RKCB in hearts. We reply 5♣ showing zero/three aces. He continues with 5♦ asking about the ♥Q. We do not have it so we simply reply 5♥. To our surprise he continues with 5NT, asking for Kings: we reply 6♥ showing 2 (the ♥K was included in our first reply as the fifth ace). He now bids 7♣.

The bidding so far:

South	North
1♣	1♥
2NT	3♣
3♥	4♣
4♦	4NT
5♣	5♦
5♥	5NT
6♥	7♣

What do you do now?

Like I wrote earlier we are not in control of the auction and while we may be uncomfortable about playing a grand in a suit where we have J109x, at no time partner seemed interested in checking the quality of our clubs. We must respect his decision and pass.

West leads the ♣4 and this is what you see:

♠ Q7
♥ AJ875
♦ 7
♣ AKQ96

N
W E
S

♠ AK4
♥ K106
♦ AKJ
♣ J1082

It all seems clear now: partner was investigating a higher scoring slam in hearts before settling for the safer spot in 7♣.

How many losers do you have?

It is correct to count losers in the hand with the most trumps, in this case it is North. There we can see just one loser in hearts.

How can we get rid of it?

We can either finesse for the ♥Q or finesse for the ♦Q and pitch three hearts on two diamonds and a spade. Since we are playing a grand slam, the finesse should be the last of our options.

How can we play to give ourselves the best chance?

The best way is to take out trumps and cash the two top hearts, if the ♥Q does not drop doubleton we must go for the diamond finesse.

This line actually gives us better than 75% chance of success, which shows that the grand slam was a fairly good bet.

Here is the complete hand:

♠ 10953	♠ Q7	♠ J86
♥ Q92	♥ AJ875	♥ 43
♦ 10832	♦ 7	♦ Q9654
♣ 43	♣ AKQ96	♣ 75
	N W E S	
	♠ AK4	
	♥ K106	
	♦ AKJ	
	♣ J1082	

