

Don't Cry Before You Are Hurt

by Jeremy Flint

When Jeremy Flint died in 1990 at the tender age of 62 it was a great loss to British bridge. His career spanned a good many years: he won the European Teams in 1963 and was runner-up in 1987; he was second in the World Teams Olympiad in 1960 and the Bermuda Bowl in 1987. During a 1966 tour of the United States he became a Life Master in eleven weeks, a record that stood for twenty-three years. He was also a great bridge theorist, being co-inventor of the Multi-colored Two Diamonds, the Little Major and the Flint-Pender system. It was said that he was the instigator of many innovations that were developed by other people but he never minded that others took the credit for his ideas. He was bridge columnist of the London Times for ten years until his death. In addition, he wrote several books about bridge as well as one on horse-racing. He was married to Honor, also a British international, who still plays regularly in London's rubber bridge clubs.

It is generally considered an insult to call someone a poker player at our game. Where the implication is that his bidding relies on bravado rather than science, the description is indeed pejorative. But against that there are times when a bridge player would be wise to adopt the poker player's inscrutability.

Here is an elementary example. As West, at unfavorable vulnerability, you pick up this motley collection:

♠ J 6 5 4 3
♥ Q 6 5
♦ 2
♣ 10 8 4 3

Your partner deals and opens one diamond, which South doubles. What do you bid? The only sensible call is pass. Naturally you are nervous that North will pass and that the final contract will be an expensive outing in one diamond doubled. In practice this very seldom happens. Even where North holds five diamonds, experienced players don't pass an informatory double for penalties unless their trumps are sequential. If North should pass, East is still there. If he holds poor diamonds, he can redouble or introduce a second suit of his own. To bid one spade on that miserable West hand is doubly wrong. Firstly, it undermines any sensible constructive bidding understanding after an informatory double; secondly, it exposes your side to a real rather than an illusory danger.

North might be reluctant to pass one diamond doubled, but with four spades, a suit for which his partner has promised support, he will be quick to pounce. Once the North-South guns have opened fire it might be difficult to find a safe haven. Bidding one spade may be likened to the over-cautious driver who slows down sharply at the crossroads even when the lights are green, and is surprised when the car behind runs into his rear.

Many players who use the weak notrump fail to appreciate that it is essentially a tactical weapon. Imagine that at favorable vulnerability you hold, as West:

♠ J 6
♥ 4 3
♦ Q 6 5 4 3 2
♣ 8 7 2

East deals and bids 1NT. South passes. What do you say now? There is something to be said for 3NT. Pass is all right, two diamonds dreadful. Frequently, when the opponents' points are equally divided, you will be allowed to play peacefully in 1NT. Bidding two diamonds is an invitation to them to enter the bidding, discover their major fit and float into game.

Once again you are West, at game all in a pairs contest. East deals and opens three hearts. You hold the following unsuitable hand:

♠ J 4 3
♥ 8
♦ A Q 10 9 6 4
♣ 6 3 2

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Admittedly the prospects are bleak. Pass is certainly the book bid. But you don't have to be a crystal gazer to foresee the likely outcome. If North is short in hearts he will double, offering South the choice of a penalty or game somewhere. If North has good hearts, he will probably try 3NT which, as you can see, will almost certainly succeed. So what can you do? Bid four hearts. This is a possible scenario:

Board 18	♠ A K 2	
East Deals	♥ K 9 7	
N-S Vul	♦ K J 5 2	
	♣ A Q 5	
		♠ 10 8 5
♠ J 4 3		♥ A Q 10 6 4 3 2
♥ 8		♦ 3
♦ A Q 10 9 6 4		♣ 8 4
♣ 6 3 2		
		♠ Q 9 7 6
		♥ J 5
		♦ 8 7
		♣ K J 10 9 7

If you pass three hearts, North will bid 3NT or double and rebid 3NT over South's three spades. Over four hearts he will double and South will usually bid four spades, which on this occasion you will defeat. Dangerous, you object? Not really. You risk a possibly irrelevant extra undertrick on the occasions when you are in trouble. More frequently, you disguise your discomfiture, forcing your opponents into a difficult guess. Remember, at poker it isn't always the best hand that wins the pot.

My BOLS bridge tip is:

BOLS tip: *when you are outgunned, don't let your opponents know.*