

How can you tell you are among fellow tournament bridge players? Conversations start with "You hold Axxx....", even before the 1st hello!. Done well, a post mortem, can be a great source of fun and learning. Done poorly and you might be looking for another partner. Success at bridge depends on great communication and a strong trusting relationship with partner. Here are 7 interesting hands from the past 3 months (GNT Qualifier, Vanderbilt KO and Pairs). What insights do you find?

Partner	You	LHO	P	RHO	Us	Conversation
♠KJxx ♥Ax ♦AKJx ♣AKx	♠AQ10xx ♥x ♦Qxx ♣Qxxx	2♥ P	Db1 P ² P	4♥ P	4♠ ¹	RESULT: 4♠ making 6 was a push . We missed 6♠. (We refined our high level auction approach that led to success later). ANALYSIS: Partner shows 4 ♠-cards and 2 ♥-cards.
<p>If true, opponents have a 10 card fit and we have a 9-card fit. This hand is a 19 trick hand (<i>Law of Total Tricks</i>). If opponents can make 10 tricks in ♥s we can make 9 tricks in ♠s.</p> <p>BIDDING 1): In IMPs, we can bid 4♠ with AQTxx and useful shortness (a 2-way bid - either we make or we have a good sacrifice against a making 4♥ contract). Give partner a minimum takeout double (~12 HCP and 4=1=4=4 shape with 7 losers). Our hand values to 10 HCP and 13-14 Support Points (counting shortness we add 3 HCP for a singleton and 4 trumps, and 1 extra for the 5th trump. Note however, shortness in a suit that partner has made a takeout double of is highly overrated. You stand to get only 1 ruff because partner will likely hold only 2 cards in that suit). More importantly we have only 7 losers (1♠, 1♥, 2½♦, 2½♣). Since partner has 7 losers we stand to make 10 tricks (Losing Trick Count: 24-(7+7)=10). Bidding 4♠ seems exactly right... We can discount the following bids:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pass - we fit partner and have a likely game. Passing is out of the question. • 4N Key Card Blackwood - partner doesn't need more than a 6 to 7-loser 3-suited hand to double 2♥. 5♠ might be too high opposite some minimums partner might hold. • 5♥ - standard interpretation invites partner to slam with a 1st round ♥ control. Our minor suits are too weak for this standard action. • 5♥ (expert): Shows a slammish hands with 2nd round control in ♥ or better and both minor aces or 1st round control and neither minor Ace. We do not know if we have this agreement in place. (<i>Best Practice: Avoid self-agreements. They might be creative but they are intrinsically unfair to partner. Do you want partner to make you guess?</i>). Besides, our hand is worth a game, not a slam invite. • 5N - Ambiguous - either Grand Slam Force in Spades, or Pick a Slam in any of the suits we have bid. If partner interprets the takeout double as bidding 3 suits, s/he will bid slam in a 2nd strain. If partner interprets the double as showing ♠s, then partner will bid according to GS Force principles. We do not have the right hand for either interpretation! <p>BIDDING 2): Partner rightly made a takeout double as any other direct action is too weak for this powerhouse hand. Partner has 5 losers and 9 Controls (A=2, K=1; <i>there are 12 controls in the deck. 10 are necessary for a small slam. 11 for a grand slam if we have 13 tricks counted</i>). There are not enough controls to upgrade the hand's loser count. Reasoning for the subsequent pass? Our 4♠ bid does not promise extra values. Partner needs 2 cover card from us for game and 3 to make the 5 level safe. If we explore and find missing Aces, we need to stop safely at the 5 level. Does our hand rate to hold 3 cover cards? Probably. Best Practice: in high level competitive bidding advancer (us in this case) holds 7 HCP. Working on this principle we have 1-2 Kings more than partner expects.</p> <p>In retrospect, 5♥ (expert view) might have been better than 4♠ because of ♠ tops and length & 2 working queens. All our points are working. Nevertheless, partner can make a 2nd bid secure that our expected 7 HCP will cover us at the 5-level safely.</p>						

Bravo to the preempters!

What fascinates...if either of us chose to bid 4N (intending as RKB 1430 by us) then the following ideas emerge:

If Partner bids 4N - we respond 5♣ (1-4 Key Cards)

Partners bids 5♦ (Asks for ♠Q) - we bid 5♥ showing both the ♠Q and a 2nd round control in ♥s. This treatment only works when opponents have shown great length in their suit.

Partner bids 6♥!!! - 5N would ask for specific Kings. Partner has them. Now we can surmise our 2nd round control in ♥s and our 2 Minor Suit Queens are extremely valuable. We can see our way to 7♠!!!

If we bid 4N over 4♥ as RKB (Be sure you and partner agree to this meaning...):

Partner bids 5♦ showing 1-4 Keys. Can you be sure which? Bid 5♥!!! Yes this is the ♠Q Ask, but Partner will bid 5♠ with 1 Key, or show a minor suit K with 4 Keys. What does partner bid holding BOTH minor kings and no ♠Q? Why 6♥!!! Now you know both queens are working and can bid 7♠ with some confidence.

Are your high level agreements in shape to handle these subtle opportunities?

Partner	You	LHO	P	RHO	Us	Conversation
♠KJxx	♠AQxx			1♥	2♣ ¹	RESULT: 1 st hand of 2 nd half of the final....We bid and made 6♠. +13 IMPs.
♥x	♥-	2♥	P	4♥	Dbl ²	
♦Kxxx	♦QJ	P	4♠	P	5♥ ³	ANALYSIS: We hold a 3-loser hand and will take strong action. Should we double or overcall? BIDDING 1): Some might consider making a takeout double. This shape is inappropriate for a double. Better to show a dominant ♣ hand by overcalling (yes, we are stronger than 16 HCP). Think what happens if they bid 4♥ over our double and partner passes... Do we want to introduce ♣s at the 5 level? BIDDING 2): Yes, sometimes we have to complete our description at a level higher than we'd like. The double here implies support for the 2 remaining suits. A direct 4♠ would imply 5+ ♠-cards. BIDDING 3): 5♥ shows 1 st round control. Partner must have HCP in the pointed suits, right? BIDDING 4): Since we have shown 2 suits, this is unequivocally "Pick a slam". Now, which slam should we pick??
♣10xxx	♣AKQ9xxx	P	5N ⁴	P	6♠	
		P	P	P		

At IMPs we should have chosen 6♣, the safer slam. The ♠ holding made a 4-1 or 5-0 trump split a 32% risk, and a ♣ ruff a 24% risk. In ♣s there are no ♠ or ♣ risks! Can we change our bid please?

Partner	You	LHO	P	RHO	Us	Conversation
♠xx	♠KJ	4♠	P	P ¹	5♥ ^{2?}	RESULT: Down 1 was a top board . <i>Whew!</i> The gain was not worth the risk. 4 making 6 or 7 was an average plus.
♥AJx	♥109865432	P	P	5N	P	
♦Qxxxx	♦-	6♠	P	P	DBI ³	BIDDING 1): ...after noticeable hesitation... BIDDING 2): They likely have 9 trumps and we likely have 10 or 11. This is a 19 or 20 trick hand. Partner isn't completely broke - even with RHO's hesitation. The ♦ void is an asset and the ♠K limits losers in that suit with LHO on lead. My spade holding spells success for the opponents if we let them declare. Never put an 8 card suit down in dummy if it's not trumps. Well, let's see what balancing here causes. BIDDING 3): 2 ways to win 1) as a Lightener Double, partner should lead something other than a ♥ or a trump. Usually a long suit lead gets a ruff. 2) As a Matchpoint double, they might have gotten to a good place - we risk little if others don't get to slam, and gain some if we set this contract. PLAY: Partner led the ♣J. Declarer held ♣Axx (and 8♠s and 2♦s). Dummy held ♠x ♥KQ ♦AJ10xx
♣J10x	♣Q98	P	P	P		

♣Kxxx. Declarer chose to rid the ♣ loser by a ruffing ♥ finesse (wouldn't you?). Partner won ♥A and returned a ♦ for us to ruff. If partner led a ♦ instead, we would have to find the ♣ switch and hope declarer continues along the ruffing finesse lines.

If you like bidding 5♥ on this hand, then realize this choice eliminates one way to win - they stay in game when slam is likely. After all, what else could RHO's hesitation mean?

Partner	You	LHO	P	RHO	Us	Conversation	
♠xx ♥xxxx ♦Ax ♣AK10xx	♠AKxx ♥x ♦KQJxx ♣QJx	1♥	2♣ ¹	2♥	3♣ ²	RESULT: By bidding 6♣ you pick up 13 IMPs against the 9 th seed in the Vanderbilt! ANALYSIS: Strain before game, game before slam. When we find a minor suits fit, explore 3N as a possibility. Be sure to pay attention to the inferences partner shares.	
<p>BIDDING 1): Partner shows an invitational hand or better (10+ HCP and 8 or fewer losers). The 2-level free bid is forcing to at least 2 of opener's suit. Other actions imply a game force.</p> <p>BIDDING 2): 2♣ might be right, but we agreed to show support immediately (a style choice we recommend). Support with support.</p> <p>BIDDING 3): We have already agreed clubs. By agreement, 3♦ is a control bid in search of 3N. This implies great controls. With a minimum and ♦ support responder would raise immediately.</p> <p>BIDDING 4): Now 3♠ is not an attempt to play ♠s, but a control bid asking if partner can stop ♥s for 3N. Our search at the 3-level is for 3N 1st. Slam comes later. The opponents have an 8 or 9 card fit. Opponents stopped bidding at the 2-level - infer they hold 8♥s. Partner has 4♥s.</p> <p>BIDDING 5): 4♣ denies a ♥ stopper, therefore partner should hold no wasted values in ♥, and must hold controls in both minors. Partner's likely shapes are 2=4=2=5 /1=4=3=5 or 2=4=1=6/1=4=2=6. Bidding the small slam was money in the bank.</p>							
Partner	You	LHO	P	RHO	Us	Conversation	
♠Q10 ♥765 ♦10972 ♣8542	♠84 ♥QJ108432 ♦6 ♣A93	5♥	5N	7N	2♣ 5♠ 5♥ P	4♥ ¹ P P DBL ²	RESULT: If partner leads a ♣ they are down 1 Doubled for +200 and top board. If partner leads anything else, they make 7N Doubled for a bottom board. We are Not Vulnerable, they are Vulnerable. ANALYSIS: How does partner know what to lead?
<p>BIDDING 1): Just because they open a strong artificial 2♣ this is no time to be timid. We hold a perfect hand for preemption. How high? The rule of 2-3-4 says the 4-level. (6 winners + 4 NV vs Vul = 10, so bid at the 4 level). The beauty of the 4-level bid is we take 4♣ away as a forward going action and we make 4N ambiguous. We win by removing space, transforming bids, and eliminating useful conventions. Not bad for 1 bid.</p> <p>BIDDING 2): This is a Lightener Double - asking partner to lead something other than ♥s - Dummy's 1st bid suit ♣s. With any other lead declarer makes 7NT Doubled.</p>							
Partner	You	LHO	P	RHO	Us	Conversation	
♠A ♥A10x ♦AQx ♣A109xxx	♠Kxx ♥KQxxx ♦xxx ♣Kx	1♣	2♦ ¹	3♥ ³	4♣ ⁵	1♥ 2N ² 4♣ ⁴ 4N 5N ⁶	RESULT: 7♥ making 7 was a Push. The opponents aren't the 9 th seed in the Vanderbilt for nothing! Opponents took 11 rounds of bidding to reach their grand slam. ANALYSIS: We needed IMPs to make up our deficit. This hand offered speculative chances for 7, but not perfect chances. A poor ♣ split will doom the contract.
<p>BIDDING 1): A reverse into a 3-card suit as a jump to 3♣s understates the hand's playing value.</p> <p>BIDDING 2): A natural forward going 2N.</p> <p>BIDDING 3): A fit and a game force.</p> <p>BIDDING 4): A control partner will want to know about.</p>							

BIDDING 5): A control partner will want to know about.
BIDDING 6): We have all the keys and the trump Queen.

Partner counts to 13. *S/he who knows goes!* As it turned out, a 4-1 ♣ split was not fatal. Opponent's led the ♠J. Allowing us to defer the ♦ decision. On a ♦ lead, we have to choose whether to finesse - we might need the 2nd ♦ entry to the ♣s if they break 4-1. Yes, the ♦K was onside. With ♣s 3-2 we never took the finesse. Chance smiled on the bold!

Partner	You	LHO	P	RHO	Us	Conversation
♠10xxx	♠AQ				2N	RESULT: We played 4♥ +5 they played 3♥ +5. +12
♥J9xxx	♥A10x	P	3♣	P	3♦	IMPS.
♦10xxx	♦AK9xx	P	3♠ ¹	P	4♥	ANALYSIS: Partner showed great vision not letting HCP deter the evaluation of the playing power of this hand.
♣-	♣K10x	All	Pass			

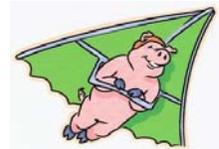
Not playing Puppet Stayman helps. We have more fit finding flexibility.

BIDDING 1): Smolen shows a 4 card major and 5 or more in the other major. This is a Game Force.

Partner valued his playing strength from distribution accurately. 9 losers opposite 4 or 5 losers will make a 10 trick game. **Losing Trick Count:** 24-(Partners + Our Losers) = 24-(9+5)=10. We stand to take 10 tricks. Chances of an 8 card fit in 1 of 3 suits exceed 85%. Too often we can be complacent and ignore the playing power of shape, especially when we hold 1 HCP.

Themes:

- You can't get to everything every time, but you can work on partnership agreements. Good bidding is about thinking, not gadgets.
- Put yourself in partner's shoes. Picture partner's hand. Think through the possibilities together.
- How does each bid change your thinking? What options do you have and which bids are more flexible?
- At some point, bidding turns from HCP and distribution to tricks. Are you counting?
- If you do choose to alter a treatment, make sure you are not reacting to the emotions of the moment. A cool head is necessary to assess the change against expected value over time. Expected value is the product of frequency times the size of the gain or loss.
- Avoid Self-agreements - partner cannot hear your thoughts and might not enjoy your creativity when discipline matters.



Keywords: Good Post Mortems, Losing Trick Count, Law of Total Tricks, Controls, Competitive Bidding, Total Controls and Slam, Avoid Self-Agreements, Best Practices and Standards