

The Mini Experiment

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"I know you can't help being middle-aged", said my kind partner the day the congress began, "but we don't have to play like we're middle-aged. Let's liven up our pairs game by playing those mini-notrumps."

"Harumph," I replied in my best middle-aged manner while considering the alternative to achieving the maturity so valued in some cultures.

"Besides," he continued, "you - uh, we, have been playing so badly of late that a change can scarcely hurt. And look how well Meckstroth and Rodwell do using them."

While that logic wasn't entirely clear to me, I wasn't about to admit to stodginess. So I asked for clarification.

"A four-point range is optimal", he explained, "because we have two levels to use for range inquiry. We'll always get to game with 25 or 26 points. The best values for the range are 9-12, since that would let us bid with hands other pairs are passing.

"Unfortunately, the bridge league is run by people even more senior than you, and they have an arbitrary rule that you can't use Stayman or transfers if the bottom of the range is below 10. So we'll adopt a 10-13 range.

"We'll use the toy only in the first three seats, of course, and only when not vulnerable.

"Also, we'll try to have balanced hands (no five-card majors, no 5-4-2-2 patterns) so that responder's escapes to a five-card suit or to a 4-4 two-suiter are likely to find a decent fit."

"To keep things simple," partner went on, "we'll play our usual conventions over 1NT. The only new thing will be the run-out sequences after we're doubled. You can be in charge of the statistical evaluation of the new method."

He had raised a tricky issue. In some cases, the

bid will keep the opponents from reaching their best contract through its preemptive value. But what if they reach a stupid spot because of poor preparation for the range? More generally, should one judge the method on the basis of the contract achieved?

In a theoretical sense, that might be best; but matchpoints isn't played that way. Although poor card play sometimes masks the impact of the contract, simply looking at the matchpoints is probably the best way to judge the value of a convention.

I decided also to ignore another subtle question: what about the auctions displaced by the new bid? What results would have occurred on the hands we used to open 1NT? The notrump rebid would now be 14-17; would the extra round of bidding help us to explore more carefully or instead hurt us by revealing too much on auctions that would have been relatively blind for the opponents had we used the antiquated methods?

For this report, then, we shall consider the matchpoints received on deals where we began with a 10-13 notrump.

The sample is a useful one. We played eight sessions (26-27 boards each) in a pairs field which Reese would deem to be of moderate standard.

The first point to note is that unlike most new conventions one wishes to evaluate, this bid actually came up. We used it 14 times in the eight sessions. Surprisingly, perhaps, we never went for a number (-200 or worse). Our average matchpoint percentage on those deals was 61.5. This was unfortunately a considerably higher percentage than we achieved on the remaining boards.

One of the recurrent themes in our exploration was the determination of the opponents to nail us, to the detriment of their own constructive bidding.

For example, with a worldclass player in the East seat:

♠ 8 7
 ♥ J 5 4
 ♦ K Q 7 3 2
 ♣ 8 7 6
 ♠ K 10 9 6 4 3
 ♥ K 3
 ♦ J 10
 ♣ Q 10 2
 ♠ J 2
 ♥ A 9 8 7
 ♦ A 9 6 4
 ♣ J 5 4



♠ A Q 5
 ♥ Q 10 6 2
 ♦ 8 5
 ♣ A K 9 3

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
—	—	—	1NT ¹
Pass	Pass	Dbl	Pass ²
Pass	Rdbl ³	Pass	2♣ ⁴
Dbl	2♦	Pass	Pass
2♠	All Pass		

- 10-13 (we always alerted the mini).
- Denies four spades (part of the runout structure).
- Forces 2♣, suggesting a one-suited run-out.
- As ordered.

Was this missed game the result of inadequate preparation or excessive greed? It's hard to know; obviously West thought the 2♠ call was forcing.

In this next case, similar questions are raised, but this time the opponents "only" missed a part-score:

♠ K 9 6 5 2
 ♥ K 6 5
 ♦ 7 2
 ♣ 9 6 3
 ♠ A 10 7
 ♥ J 2
 ♦ K J 9 6 5
 ♣ A K 5
 ♠ Q J 4 3
 ♥ A 7 4
 ♦ A 8 4
 ♣ J 8 7



♠ 8
 ♥ Q 10 9 8 3
 ♦ Q 10 3
 ♣ Q 10 4 2

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
—	—	—	1NT ¹
Dbl	2♣ ²	Dbl	2♦ ³
Dbl	2♠	Pass	Pass
Dbl ⁴	All Pass		

- 10-13.
- Forces 2♦, suggesting a one-suited run-out.
- As ordered.
- A slow double, so an ethical East felt barred.

We received an 80% score for -100 (too bad opener was not 4-4-3-2 and responder 5-2-2-4!). It is certainly a comfortable feeling for dummy to deliver four trumps and two aces for partner's escape.

It seems clear that standard defensive methods, in which all good hands start with double, are overly penalty-orientated. After numerous bad experiences of our own against mini and weak notrump openings, we changed our methods so that the focus is now towards finding our own best spot. We use the double to mean "I would have opened a strong notrump". Partner bids as though 1NT was our opening bid; we use transfers, Stayman, etc. We pass the double only if it is clear we will not have a more lucrative spot. It's much easier to declare the hand when the opponents' points are marked than it is to defend 1NT against a blind auction. When the strong hand is unbalanced, we do not double, preferring instead a distribution-indicating call. We use a Hamilton structure (2♣ = one-suiter, bids at the two or three-level show two-suiters), but it's the philosophy rather than the specific methods that are important here.

For our final example, let's look at the unusual kind of defensive problem that can arise when playing this range:

Dr: West Vul: Nil

♠ J 6 2
 ♥ A J 10 9
 ♦ A K 8
 ♣ Q 10 8
 ♠ A K 7 3
 ♥ 8 7 3 2
 ♦ J 7
 ♣ A J 7



WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1NT ¹	Dbl	Pass ²	2♦
Pass	Pass	Dbl	All Pass

- By now you don't need this.
- Forces redouble, to set up two-suited run-outs or to punish . . .

The double of 2♦ may be somewhat aggressive, but these methods call for such decisions. It's too late to find a major-suit partscore, in any event, so one might as well go for the throat. On the lead of ♠10, how would you defend?

On defence, the mini gives and the mini takes away. The auction marks the high cards pretty closely; partner either has all the unseen goodies or is missing one queen. But conversely, the distribution is masked, in that all you know is that partner has at least two diamonds.

The winning defence is to win ♠K and switch to ♣7. The spot card partner chooses for his club return after winning the king should tell you about the spade queen. Then you can cash the clubs, return ♠3, and collect your entitlement. You can't be sure what will cash, but partner can probably tell what to do if given the spade count. As the cards lie, a trump promotion is necessary to collect +300. Your counterparts using traditional methods are likely to find their spade partial, so you must overcome the weakness in your bidding with precise card play.

	♠ J 6 2										
	♥ A J 10 9										
	♦ A K 8										
	♣ Q 10 8										
♠ Q 10 9 4	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center; width: 40px; height: 40px;"> <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> </div>		N		W		E		S		♠ A K 7 3
	N										
W		E									
	S										
♥ K 4		♥ 8 7 3 2									
♦ Q 9 6		♦ J 7									
♣ K 5 4 3		♣ A J 7									
	♠ 8 5										
	♥ Q 6 5										
	♦ 10 5 4 3 2										
	♣ 9 6 2										

Actually, I exaggerated the need for care. At the table, North raised to 3♦ prior to the double, thinking for some reason that 2♦ showed values. He told his partner that pass was the mandatory call with all bad hands. We didn't find the double-dummy defense (did I mention we weren't playing too well?) - but defeating 3♦X by two tricks was easy, and was worth a 96% score on the board.

The experiment would have to be deemed a success. Not only were the results generally good, but it is fun to play. After all, you get to bid more often, and isn't bidding more fun than passing? Ah well, perhaps I'll change my perspective when the opponents start sharpening their methods and clip us for the numbers which must be lurking.