

Partnership Style

by Larry Cohen

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I've been mislabeled. No doubt, in this first of a series of articles on strategic thinking, you thought I'd be writing about the Law of Total Tricks. Don't get me wrong. I'll always have my affection for the Law, but it's not even close to my favorite bridge topic. I have many "pet peeves," and lots of random stored-up ideas about expert strategy that I'm going to air.

Let's begin with a topic that I've experienced more than anyone I know: "Sound versus aggressive style." Is it wise to play solid opening bids and preempts (and conservatively in general), or is it better to adopt the modern style of light openings, wild preemption (and general recklessness)? Or should one search for a happy compromise somewhere in between?

Before I answer those questions, let me present my special credentials.

Mr. Sound

In the early 1980's, my regular partner was Ron Gerard. I played his style of sound openings, sound preempts, solid values for actions, and general caution. Just read some of his Master Solver's Club answers and you'll know which school he attends. With nobody vulnerable, he'd open two hearts with,

♠ 4 3 2 ♥ K Q 10 9 8 2 ♦ K Q 10 ♣ 5

whereas most of today's modernists would open one heart. Vulnerable, Ron would pass his right-hand opponent's one-spade opening holding,

♠ K 10 ♥ K 8 5 3 2 ♦ K Q 7 3 ♣ A 2

His comments include words of contempt for practitioners who abide flimsy requirements, such as, "I'm emotionally capable of failing to overcall two hearts on a nonsuit or one notrump on a nonhand." Or, "Pass doesn't automatically lose piles of imps."

He proceeds slowly, cautiously, carefully and cerebrally--and I don't hold it against him. When I was his partner, I was young and impressionable, so I played it his way. We knew each other's style, and however stodgy that style was, it worked.

Mr. Aggressive

My next partner was Marty Bergen, and my world was turned upside down. From 1983-1990, I played things Marty's way. That meant we could open the bidding because one of us was dealt 13 cards (*Points*

Schmoints). I could preempt with a five-card suit (even some chunky four-baggers!). Perhaps the highlight of our partnership came when the ACBL imposed the now defunct "Five-and-Five" rule, which required Marty (and any other imaginative ACBL member) to have at least five HCP and a five-card suit to open a weak two-bid.

Marty's approach was to try continually to make life miserable for the opponents. Even the description thus far does not illuminate the full extent to which he pursued this theory. He once opened a weak two-bid in a suit in which the opponents were cold for slam. Here's a memorable deal from the 1985 Team Trials. (Of course, not all similar manifestations led to such happy endings for us.) One warning: If there are any small children reading along with you, cover their eyes while you examine our auction. With North-South vulnerable,

WEST (Bergen)

♠ J 9 x x x

♥ 8 x x x x

♦ Q x

♣ x

2 ♦*

2 ♠***

*weak two-bid in spades

**relay

***minimum

EAST (Cohen)

♠ A x x

♥ A

♦ A K 10 x x

♣ A 9 8 x

2 ♥**

Pass

Yes, you've read correctly. Marty dealt and, at favorable vulnerability, decided to open a transfer preempt to show a weak two-bid in spades. (Why pick spades? His spades were chunkier than his hearts, and to show a weak two in hearts required an opening bid of two *hearts*, which doesn't allow partner room to find out the nature of the weak two at a low level.) My two hearts asked whether he had a minimum or a maximum. (You might not believe what he would consider a maximum at these colors. In fact, his maximum would be less than most people's minimum). Anyway, he showed a minimum, which, at this vulnerability, was typically 0-4 points and at most a five-card suit (this was before the "5 and 5" rule).

Opposite some people's weak two-bid, my hand might have qualified for the Grand Slam Force. With Marty, I took the low road and passed two spades. True, we missed a worthwhile nonvulnerable game, but, on a worse day, Marty's minimum could have been,

♠ J 9 x x x ♥ x x ♦ x x x ♣ x x x,

and two spades would have been high enough. Don't think he wouldn't have opened that hand two spades! Of course, these super-light preempts had to be explained to the opponents (or Alerted), and the wideness of opener's ranges often led to unsuccessful guesswork by responder.

On this particular occasion we lucked out: Our opponents balanced and ended up minus 1100. I'm not

suggesting there was a great method behind our madness, but the deal does illustrate how important it is to know your partner's tendencies.

Mr. Medium

Since 1990, my partner has been David Berkowitz. We use Plan C, which is somewhere in between Gerard and Bergen (a gap you could drive a tractor-trailer through). We are modern aggressive, but within reason. One might even say that, by today's crazed bidding standards, we could be labeled boring.

So, which strategy is best? Sound, aggressive, or medium? Surprise . . . there is no best one. You should choose whatever level of sturdiness makes you feel most comfortable; but on a technical basis, the choice hardly matters.

No, but something about your style matters a whole lot. Your partner must be in on the secret. Downplay discussing methods; *discuss style*. When I fill out a convention card with a new partner, I try to spend as little time as possible "checking the boxes" on the card, but instead ask questions such as,

With both vulnerable, would you open one club with,

♠ K x x ♥ K x x ♦ K x x ♣ Q J x x?

Would you pass, open one heart or open two hearts, both vulnerable, holding,

♠ K J x ♥ Q J 10 8 x x ♦ K x x ♣ x?

Would you make a takeout double with a triple-four-by-one (one in their suit) 10-count?

Are you aggressive or conservative with game bidding? What about slam bidding?

Those are representative issues that you need to discuss in order to form the right strategy with your partner.

Should you both play the same style? I'd say that's probably best--it would be difficult for Marty Bergen to partner Ron Gerard (although I'd love to kibitz).

On Uniformity

Even when the two partners' styles are generally similar, there are still going to be some differences. As a partnership develops, the members should take careful note of each other's tendencies. As those proclivities appear, try to identify them and to stick with them. Don't be aggressive one session (perhaps because your spouse yelled at you) and passive the next (because you're in a peaceful mood).

If possible, try to play as many situations the same way as your partner; be flexible. There's no need to be stubborn. I've managed to play three completely different styles; each had its good and bad points.

Welcome the opportunity to diversify your thinking a bit and to do something your partner's way.

Going on playing 16 years with David, I have a pretty good feel for his peculiarities. His consistency lets me take advantage of my knowledge. Say he opens two spades in second seat, at unfavorable vulnerability, next hand passes, and I'm looking at:

♠ Q x ♥ A K x x ♦ A J x x x ♣ x x.

David bids aggressively at times, but I know that he goes into a different mode when red against white, especially in second seat. Perhaps he suffered a childhood trauma when he made an unsound vulnerable preempt and went for 1400. Anyway, his two spades in this situation is bonded by Lloyds of London. For me to pass would be out of the question. (But opposite Bergen, I'd pass and hope we didn't get doubled.) To ask with two notrump might seem normal in your partnership, but with David my correct action is four spades. Even opposite his minimums, we should have play. In fact, David's minimum would be something like,

♠ K J 10 9 x x ♥ x x ♦ x x ♣ A x x.

Note the ten and nine of spades; David doesn't like king-jack-empty-sixth for a vulnerable two-bid. I could have loaded the example hand with a perfect fit (king or queen of diamonds, say), but even opposite this typical plain eight-count, game is more than playable.

Later in the session, I might open two spades, in the same seat and at the same colors, with,

♠ K J 8 x x x ♥ x ♦ Q J 9 x ♣ x x.

I know David wouldn't do it, but he knows I would. He knows to pass with a marginal invitation, and all is well.

With no one vul. at matchpoints, my RHO opens one heart. I hold:

♠ Q x x ♥ x x ♦ A J x x ♣ A J x x.

I can make a pushy takeout double for two reasons. One, I don't mind if David has to play some tricky four-three spade fit. (If I were partnering a weak player, I'd avoid a marginal action that had the downside of often putting him in charge of a difficult contract.) Two, more importantly, David knows I like to make aggressive takeout doubles. He won't bury me by jumping to four spades with something like,

♠ A K x x ♥ A x x x ♦ x x ♣ 10 x x.

His takeout doubles are also aggressive, but maybe a jack sounder than mine. This kind of knowledge of your partner's tendencies makes it much easier to judge the auction.

How well should you know your partner's opening-bid style? Let's say that, playing matchpoints,

David opens one heart as dealer at favorable vulnerability. I hold:

♠ K J x ♥ J x ♦ K Q 10 x ♣ x x x x.

I respond with a semi-forcing one notrump and David rebids two hearts. This one is easy, because I know that David opens light, especially under these conditions. We are far more likely to go down if we get any higher than we are to have a game. Especially at matchpoints, there is no reason for me to do anything other than pass two hearts. Of course, with a sounder partner (such as Gerard), I'd have to make a forward going move. I can't stress enough how important it is to know the limits of your partner's fundamental actions. Getting a handle on his various minimums and maximums is vastly more important than adding a new convention to your repertoire. In short, when time permits discussion with partner, your first focus should be on style.

What would your regular partner open, as dealer, neither side vulnerable, with:

♠ x ♥ Q J 10 9 8 x ♦ Q x x x ♣ x x?

Would he call this a clear pass? Is three hearts possible, and, if so, is it potentially weaker than two hearts? Or does it just show more shape? Could his suit be as good as ace-king-jack-ten-seventh for a non-vul. opening three-bid? Does he go totally crazy in third seat? Does vulnerability play a big role? (For Marty Bergen, it didn't--"Colors are for children," he said.)

Here's another of the many situations you might discuss. You hold,

♠ 9 x x ♥ A Q x ♦ A Q x x ♣ x x x.

With none vul., your RHO opens one spade. You pass this around to partner, who balances with one notrump. Should you pass, invite, or bid three notrump? Lots of meat here. Does the form of scoring matter? At IMPs, you might try harder for game; perhaps your partner's balancing style is sounder at IMPs--ask him. What are his feelings about a one-notrump balance? Is he aggressive? Could he have,

♠ Q x x ♥ J x x ♦ K J x ♣ A J x x?

Must he have a spade stopper? Some people would balance with jack-third or ten-third of spades. What is the high end? Could his hand be as good as,

♠ A J 10 ♥ K J x x ♦ K J x ♣ K x x?

There's no right or wrong here, but you're going to guess a lot better if you know which ballpark your partner plays in.

Informing the Opponents

How much of this information are your opponents entitled to? That's a tricky question, to be sure.

When I played with Marty, I Alerted his preempts. He'd open two hearts (say); I'd Alert, and, when asked, I'd choose from one of many jocular phrases such as, "It's natural, but could be ridiculous," or "In theory, that's a weak two-bid in hearts, but he might be the only one who thinks so."

What should I tell my opponents about my style agreements with David? Severe deviations from "standard" must be announced or Alerted. For example, when our opponents open and raise, we treat both seats as balancing positions. Accordingly, we'd bid three clubs in direct seat after one spade -- pass -- two spades -- ? with as little as,

♠ x x ♥ x x ♦ x x x ♣ K Q 10 x x x.

Even though three clubs is natural, we must tell our opponents that it can be very light. Most experts believe that the majority of Berkowitz- and Gerard-type agreements discussed in this article are not subject to an announcement or an Alert. However, when the opponents ask about style, you are obligated to disclose all your agreements (including known tendencies) fully.

In the same vein, remember that if you are declarer and reach a position in which you need to guess the location of a card, it's legitimate to ask a defender very specific questions about his partnership understandings. I've asked even such pointed questions as, "Would you expect him to open a weak two-bid with king-queen-ten-sixth and out at this vulnerability, or would you expect him to have a side card?" Of course, the answers I get to this sort of question are not given under oath. Still, I'd like to think, in this enlightened era of "active ethics," that people give an honest account.

Could you give a reliable account? Or would your answer have to be, "We've never discussed it"? It's winning strategy to learn your partner's style.

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