



Houston,



Challenging Hands

For the Exciting Game of Bridge

Warren Watson

Second Edition
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Preface

“Okay, Houston, we’ve had a problem here.”

These words were calmly spoken on Monday April 13th, 1970 at 9:07 pm during Apollo 13 following an onboard explosion. The mission was aborted, and fortunately, it splashed down safely five days later¹.

This book, like the rest of the Watson bridge series, is for all bridge players who actively seek improvement. They keep the game thriving and are the advanced and the expert players of the future. This book is the ultimate review and is a must for the library of any bridge player. It is geared to most bidding systems because the lion’s share of the examples involves competitive bidding.

Any advancing player must be prepared for the difficult hands herein. They are brand new hands played online on BBO² and may blow up the game of an unsuspecting player. Problems occur when the opponents are silent, but they are more prevalent in competitive bidding sequences.

One key to solving the difficulties is to use the clues available from the bidding and the lack of bidding of all the players involved. A player must also remember bridge is a partnership game, and the driving forces for bidding are Shape, Fits, Tricks and Controls. Players, who do not recognize that counting just high card points is overrated, limit their bridge.

¹ NASA, We’ve Had a Problem, ABC 13 Eyewitness News, Retrieved March 15, 2022 from <https://abc13.com/houston-we-have-a-problem-weve-had-remember-when-history/1869513/#:~:text=HOUSTON%2C%20Texas%20%2D%2D%20It%20was,Houston%20to%20report%20the%20problem.>

² Bridge Base Online is a bridge playing site at <https://www.bridgebase.com/v3/>





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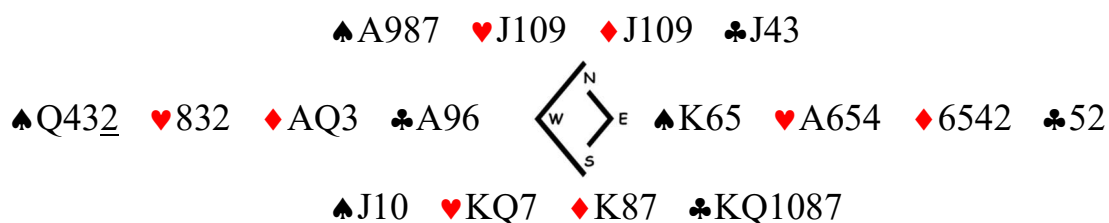


1. Bidding Basics

1.1 Minor Bidding

Problem 1.1.1: Rebidding a Minor Shows Six

E-W vul.



Problematic Bidding

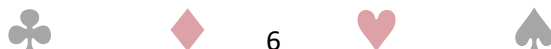
W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♠	P	2♣
all pass			

Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♠	P	1NT
all pass			

A five-card minor is rebid when 1NT and pass are not available. With shortness (singleton or void) anywhere or no stopper in LHO's (Left Hand Opponent) suit, 1NT cannot be rebid. With no stopper in RHO's suit (Right Hand Opponent), a pass can be made without a six-card minor or support for partner.

An opener always plans a rebid by asking, "What if my LHO bids my unstopped suit, and what if my partner bids my singleton or void?"





Problem 1.1.2: Pass is Available When the RHO Bids

Both vul.

				♠J987	♥AJ109	♦J943	♣J				
♠3	♥832	♦A6	♣A10983					♠AK654	♥KQ4	♦52	♣6542
				♠Q102	♥87	♦KQ1087	♣KQ7				

Problematic Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♦
P	1♥	1♠	2♦
P	P	3♣	all pass

Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♦
P	1♥	1♠	P
P	2♦	all pass	

With four hearts, South rebids 2♥ directly over 1♠. In competition, partner needs to know support is held right away. However, South does not have six diamonds and a non minimum, so pass, not 2♦, is his bid.

By passing 1♠, South shows a minimum opener without four hearts. If support doubles are being played, South also denies three hearts by not doubling.

Bidding Ahead of Partner

If South bids immediately after his RHO makes a call, it is called bidding ahead of his partner. This is not done with a minimum. He can pass, and North still gets a bid and the message that South is a minimum hand. One does not tell the same story (that he has an opener) twice. If East passes, 1♥ is 100% one-round forcing.

Once South passes, North can bid 2♦. They play the better minor openings and only have three diamonds when four-four in the majors. Therefore, since South does not have four hearts, he must have at least four diamonds.





Problem 1.1.3: Four-Five in the Minors

E-W vul.

♠AJ65 ♥543 ♦765 ♣J54							
♠1098	♥A976	♦AQ32	♣A6	N W E S	♠Q732	♥QJ108	♦K4 ♣732
♠K4 ♥K2 ♦J1098 ♣KQ1098							

Problematic Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♦
P	1♠	P	2♣
P	2♦	all pass	

Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♠	P	1NT
		all pass	

It is Better to Lie about Length Than Strength

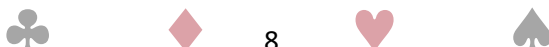
The rule of thumb is to open the longest suit first and rebid the second longest suit next. However, if South opens 1♣ and rebids 2♦, he shows a reverse of 16+ HCP (with the longer lower-ranking suit). He does not have this strength, so he can lie about length instead.

With four diamonds and five clubs and a minimum hand (less than 16 HCP), there are the following possible bidding scenarios.

- Opening 1♣ and rebidding 1NT if 2-2-4-5 and 12 to 14.
- Opening 1♦ and rebidding 2♣.
- Opening 1♣ and rebidding 2♣.

Opening 1♣ and rebidding 2♦ in response to partner's negative double is not a reverse because the original intention could have been to rebid 1NT or 2♣.

Both East and West lead a heart. Fortunately for South, West is on lead. A diamond is wrong because the spots are too small. He may give away a trick on the opening lead in exchange for not even one trick from a small diamond.





The declarer does not have enough heart stoppers to set anything up, but he has no other choice than to go after clubs.

He would be silly to even attempt a diamond. When driving out the Ace and the King in his own suit, a declarer usually needs three stoppers in the opponent's led suit.

This declarer has seven slow winners, but the defense must grab their diamond winners without blocking the suit. When East wins his last heart, he must exit the ♦ King. That is not easy for most defenders.

With good defense, the declarer is -50. 2 ♦ may fare worse.

Right Siding the Contract

1NT is a good rebid by South. He gets the opening lead protection for his doubleton Kings. It is usually best that the stronger hand declares the contract. This is called right siding the contract.

It is often the opening lead which makes or breaks a contract. This is so much so the case that the declarer's skill often takes a back seat to having the stronger hand declare. A player does not count the times he declares. His primary goal is right siding the contract, not being a declarer as much as possible.





Problem 1.1.5: Not Rebidding Hearts

Both vul.

♠A983 ♥A8432 ♦--- ♣9654
 ♠J1064 ♥KJ ♦J1072 ♣KJ8  ♠KQ5 ♥Q1075 ♦A864 ♣72
 ♠72 ♥96 ♦KQ953 ♣AQ103

Problematic Bidding

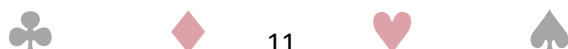
W	N	E	S
			1♦
P	1♥	P	2♣
P	2♥	all pass	

Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♦
P	1♥	P	2♣
		all pass	

As shown in the last example, if South opens 1♦ and rebids 1NT, North must rebid 2♥, but since South has shown nine or more cards in the minors, North should be very happy about passing 2♣. The void in a suit shown by his partner is a red alert telling North not to overvalue his hand.

2♥ has some allure because a major often scores well, but South could have a heart void. Only if he rebids 1NT, he promises two or more hearts (and 12 to 14).





Problem 1.1.6: Barely One Suited

E-W vul.

				♠A76	♥J1098	♦J109	♣J54				
♠Q954	♥32	♦AQ3	♣A1098					♠K8	♥A654	♦6542	♣763
				♠J1032	♥KQ7	♦K87	♣KQ2				

Problematic Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♥	P	1♠
P	1NT	all pass	

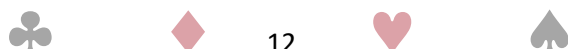
Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♥	P	1NT
		all pass	

If South opens 1♣ and rebids 1♠, he should be two suited not barely one suited. If North replies 1♠, South bids 2♠ because his partner may have some ruffing value. A right sided contract means that South plays 1NT. The stronger hand is declaring. West leads a spade, not a suit bid by the declarer. South likely makes +120.

Against 1NT by North, East leads a diamond not a suit bid by the declarer. North makes +90.

As mentioned previously, right siding contracts should be a partnership priority since the lead often makes a large difference to the success of any contract. A partner must not count the number of times he declares a contract. If he is not declaring enough, he must play more bridge and not steal contracts from a partner just trying to right side each contract.





Problem 1.1.7: Skipping Diamonds

E-W vul.

				♠A9 ♥1098 ♦QJ1098 ♣J52			
♠QJ76	♥AQ6	♦432	♣A93	N W E S	♠854	♥75432	♦AK5 ♣64
				♠K1032 ♥KJ ♦76 ♣KQ1087			

Problematic Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♦	P	1♠
P	1NT	all pass	

Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♦	P	1NT
all pass			

Unless North is a full opener, he skips four or five diamonds to bid a four-card major. A 1♦ response asks South to rebid 1NT unless he is unbalanced. This way South, the stronger hand, gets opening lead protection, and his major holdings are undisclosed.

If North decides to respond 1♦ with six diamonds, four hearts and less than an opening, his rebid is 2♦. A weak hand does not have the luxury of being thoroughly described.

Against 1NT by North, East makes an opening lead of the ♥3 (fourth best). His double diamond stoppers may mean that he gets to cash his long hearts.

When the heart suit is cleared, East plays his smallest heart saying his entry is not a spade. However, this may be hard to read. So West ducks clubs twice, allowing East to discard a small spade. West leads a diamond when he wins the ♣Ace, and North is down one for -50.

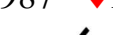
If South declares 1NT, as he should, West has no reason not to lead a fourth best spade. South makes +120.





Problem 1.1.8: Not Skipping Diamonds

E-W vul.

				♠A9 ♥10987 ♦KJ1098 ♣AJ			
♠QJ76	♥AQ6	♦432	♣953		♠854	♥5432	♦AQ5 ♣642
					♠K1032 ♥KJ ♦76 ♣KQ1087		

Problematic Bidding

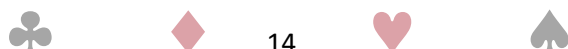
W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♥	P	1♠
P	3NT	all pass	

Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♣
P	1♦	P	1NT
P	2♥	P	2♠
P	3NT	all pass	

North bids diamonds with a four-card major because he has a full opener opposite his partner's full opener. Therefore, he describes his hand with his longest suit first. Four-card suits are bid up-the-line, and a four-card suit is skipped to bid a five-card suit. The higher-ranking suit is bid first if there are two five-card suits.

Once North bids 2♥, the game force is on, and South shows his four-card major. Both auctions above get to the correct spot, but the right one is sound and right sided.





1.2 Major Bidding

Problem 1.2.1: Too Weak to Reverse

N-S vul.

				♠J6	♥6	♦KJ765	♣Q10765				
♠A1092	♥87	♦Q1098	♣K84		♠54	♥QJ109	♦A43	♣AJ93			
					♠KO873	♥AK5432	♦2	♣2			

Problematic Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♠
P	1NT	P	2♥
P	2♠	all pass	
all pass			

Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♥
P	1NT	P	2♥
all pass			

In spades, being forced (long-hand ruffs) is more of a problem than in hearts. Therefore, South opens 1♥ and rebids 2♥. This issue is not cut and dry. Some hands which are 5-6-1-1 may be fare better opening the five-card spade suit and rebidding hearts. This lies about length, and it is better to lie about length not strength.

It may seem odd to represent a two-suited hand as one suited, but the six-card heart suit headed by the Ace and the King can quickly remove three rounds of trump in addition to having more length to handle any minor-suit long-hand ruffs.

South needs 16+ HCP to open 1♥ and rebid 2♠. This is a reverse when a partner, **possibly with 6 to 9 points**, must choose between the two suits at the three-level. He cannot pass 2♠, as that is forcing one round.

A rebid of a lower-ranking suit at the two level by the opener is not forcing. A reverse by the opener at the three-level is forcing to game.





Problem 6.2.9: 4♥ Making Ten Tricks is a Bottom Board

Both vul.

♠AKJ106				♥---	♦J1095	♣AKQ5			
♠Q85432	♥J54	♦Q	♣864			♠97	♥86	♦AK872	♣10973
♠---				♥AKQ109732	♦643	♣J2			

Problematic Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♥
P	1♠	dbl	P
2♣	dbl	all pass	

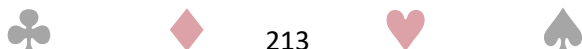
Sound Bidding

W	N	E	S
			1♥
P	1♠	P	4♥
		all pass	

Because of Covid-19, many players are addicted to BBO. This hand was played fifty-eight times, and 4♥ making ten tricks was 21.43% for North and South. This book should help. South must realize from his spade void, that East may have stepped into the wrong auction. South can pass and see what develops. He can always bid 4♥ later.

North wants to bid 6♥, but the heart void and lack of diamond control are serious deal breakers. A double by East can be penalized for at least +800 and 94%, but the double also indicates West is leading blind. Twelve tricks in 4♥ has a shot for 55%.

West leads the ♦Queen, and East determines the number of diamonds he cannot see as three more. Therefore, he overtakes. He cashes the other top diamond and gives his partner a ruff. Even if West has a doubleton diamond, overtaking is correct, and there is a trump promotion which also keeps South to ten tricks.



Problem 7.4.12: Entering a Game Forcing Auction



South's proper bid is 1 ♠, and West stays out. West also leads a club, not a spade when his RHO shows strength in spades by bidding 1 ♠ or making a penalty double. South should bid his four-card suits up the line, and there are other ways to get to game.

The simplest way is to respond 1 ♠ and then jump to 4 ♥. Since he has 16 points, extra values, South uses FSF and goes to 4 ♥ slowly. After 1 ♠, North cannot reply 1NT because he does not have 12 to 14, so he rebids 2 ♣. He treats 1 ♠ like forcing Notrump.

North does not have a 1 ♥ opening, and South hid his hand, but they stumbled onto a 100% because East does not see the warning signs. East can never enter the bidding once West bids 2 ♠, not to mention when there already has been a penalty double made.

East cannot even enter the bidding if West is silent. He has too much in hearts which suggest problems for North and South on offense. When the opponents could have problems on offense, a player does not put them on defense of a doubled contract.

East also has a two-winner poor five-card suit. He gets the ♦ Queen and the fifth diamond.

The 2 ♠ bid does three things. It suggests a sacrifice. A two-suited six-five hand with nothing wasted screams offense, but not so much to risk being doubled at the three-level. West has too poor a suit quality in both suits to risk the three-level with a two-suited bid like 2 ♥, Michaels.

It also suggests a lead, but most importantly, it provides a warning if his partner has spade shortness. West's hand may say offense, but East's hand screams defense.

If North passes, South opens 1NT. West shows clubs and a higher suit. North transfers to hearts and bids 3NT. South plays 4 ♥ after what seems to be a normal auction with no problems.





10. Conclusions

Everybody has had problems in playing bridge. The key is to learn from mistakes and keep those problems in the past. No bidding system is perfect. When the proper bid cannot be found, a player makes the best lie and moves on. It is better to lie about length not strength.

Furthermore, every bidding difficulty should not be solved by adding another convention only known superficially. A simple convention card is best, and every convention must be known thoroughly. What happens with competition and by a passed hand should be known for every single convention.

A player must be familiar with the Law of Total Tricks as well as several useful concepts such as fast arrival, not taking bidding advice from the opponents, the last guess, bidding ahead of partner, doubling under, point swallowing and the double flaw. The rules of 2, 8, 9, 15, 20 and 22 as well as eight ever, nine never are also useful. However, as Mike Lawrence states, rules should never replace judgement⁶.

3NT is not simply a destination like Mexico. It must only be bid when the hand does not scream that a trump suit is needed. Hands with a void and lots of controls should prevent a player bidding 3NT, but he may pass 3NT if his partner bids it. Notrump should be not bid to save a partner from his own bad bidding.

Furthermore, a player must stop over-relying on counting points. He must recognize the value of fits and shortness opposite no wasted points. Splinters and minisplinters are very effective tools which are extremely underused by most advancing players. Who does not hate being passed in a splinter?

This book is the ultimate review book. The rest of the Watson bridge book series (see [Appendix A](#)) can be used when in depth study is needed.

Are you still a high card point counter who does not listen to the bidding and who does not recognize the importance of Shape, Fits, Tricks and Controls? If yes, please reread this book. If no, then be glad you have read this book.

⁶ Lawrence, Mike, *I FOUGHT THE LAW of Total Tricks*, TN, USA: Mikeworks, 2004.





Trail, BC, Pencil on Paper, 24.5cm x 17.5cm, 2016

Warren Watson is a former Aerospace Engineer and is currently an artist, with a diploma in Fine Arts from Okanagan University College in Kelowna, BC, and an avid bridge player. He is an ACBL Diamond Life Master, an ACBL accredited bridge teacher, a writer of 347 columns in the Trail Times, a published author, an ACBL director, an accredited ACBL tournament assistant and the Kootenay Jewel Bridge Club manager (10+ years). He currently resides in Trail, BC, and in winter, likes to ski Grey Mountain of Red Mountain Resort.



Self Portrait, Pencil on Paper
25cm x 20cm, 2015

