

AS TIME GOES BY

It was some 20 years since I last wrote about bridge and I don't recall having missed it before or even thought about it. I don't know where the idea and the inspiration came from now, but here I am again.

The purpose of this book is to describe the methods I like to use today. In the process, I also try to explain how our partnership go about when we design a system, and how we try to make agreements based on our common logic and experience. We also have a lot of new ideas that might interest you.

In chess, the use of computers has made it impossible for the best players to find new and better ideas in the first 10-15 moves. In bridge there is still much to explore and, for many years to come, no computers are smart enough to decide if we are right or wrong when we do!

Bridge bidding is stuffed with choices: to pass or to bid, how high to bid, etc. Many of those considerations are *tactical* options.

A complete system consists of many minor parts, all the agreements we have with our partner. Not only opening bids, responses and rebids but also what happens when opponents enter our auctions.

The *strategic* considerations are to make those small parts work together and formulate general principles rather than loose agreements for every situation. That is what this book is about - a design that runs through the system.

One of the principles I believe in, is that a way for better players to win against opponents who are just almost as good, is to increase the number of occasions where they can use their own judgment. As I assume that you are a little better than your adversaries, this goes for you too.

In many situations, our system presents alternative paths to go when we are about to describe our hand. And that's the way I like it.

Why and How

I hope you are a good bridge player, so then, why should you bother to read another book? One reason could be that you agree that bridge is a game where there is always more to understand. There is really no point where we even can pretend to know all there is to know about bridge!

My system description is based on where we are right now but we keep on working to develop it further as we gather more knowledge and experience.

Before you ask, I want to say that, when building bidding methods, I think of bridge as a team game. The system is made for team players.

Another prerequisite when I discuss bidding theory: I always presume that the opponents are top class players. In real life that is not always true, but for me it is important that my methods will work even if they are.

By presenting our methods, I hope to inspire you to keep working with your own bidding methods. I am convinced that you can find something useful here.

Keep Bridge Alive!

Times that have past

Together with Björn Fallenius I played on the Swedish Open Team in the '90s. In those days we successfully played systems like MiniMajor and later on the F-Club, a Strong Club system with relays to find out partners distribution.

When Björn returned to Sweden in 2018, we started to discuss bridge and play together again, but this time with a more natural system.

At least it was more natural when we started ☺

The 5542 system

Before playing with Björn, I played for a number of years with the editor of this book, Anders Wirgren, and we invented the now popular 5542 with 1♣ as either clubs or a balanced hand in a system called Super Standard.

Magnus Lindkvist proposed to incorporate the transfer responses.

The “balanced” 1♣ together with the transfer responses were first combined in practical play by Anders Wirgren and Johan Bennet.

The main reason for constructing the 2+ Club was to solve a problem with balanced 18-19 HCP hands in the normal, natural system.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♣	1♠
2N	

In the natural system 2N shows a balanced hand with 18-19 HCP.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♣	1♥ (4+ spades)
1N	

In the 2+ Transfer Club, 1N shows the same strong balanced hand. With the weaker balanced hand (12-14), opener instead rebids 1♠, responder major

And since we were able to rebid 1N with 18-19, the 2N rebid could be used for other hands. And so on. You can perhaps even say that we were a part of starting a trend since the 2+ club now has become extremely popular.

Now I will try to turn that tide back!

Bridge and science

A great french bridge theorist, Jean-René Vernes, also a philosophy teacher at the University of Montpellier, 1967 published a thorough scientific research of about 5000 deals played in the Bermuda Bowl competitions (the hands was in fact collected by his students). Bernard Charles, a mathematics teacher in the same university was also involved. Vernes was first to expose the law of total tricks, which later was made popular by the writing of Larry Cohen.

Parts of Vernes research was translated to Swedish by Alvar Stenberg, who also was one of the greatest bridge theorists of all times, in my view.

The research settled among other things, that – in competitive bidding – the side who first found a fit had an edge. They won more IMP's in the long run.

Being able to make direct raises with support is therefore fundamental in the bidding. The advantage of opening with your “longest” minor is best utilized if we can show support already in the first round. That is one of the reasons why I believe that 5533 works better in the long run than 5542.

The same research also established another point: When both tables played the same contract, the partnership that used the fewest bids was the winner because they gave away less information.

There is for sure much logic in that conclusion.

I can't say that our system uses fewer bids than other systems, but that is not really the point. At that time, fifty or more years ago, almost everybody used fairly natural systems. Some pairs used a conventional or strong club opening, but apart from that, the bidding was very natural. More bids also revealed more information about the hands. “Giving away information”, that is the clue.

One of the success factors for “relay-systems” is that one player asks the other, and then bids the final contract with the “hidden” hand as the declarer. The opening lead, and perhaps the continued defense too, becomes a guess.

In the same way, also in the natural system, we can use more smart bids to tell the opponents less. And *that* is a part of our system.

The times they are a-changing

When I was young, the “correct” bid on a given hand wasn't always the same as today. After your right hand opponent opens with 1♦, you hold:

♠ AQxxx ♥ KQx ♦ x ♣ A10xx

I am not sure you will believe this, but the experts said:

Double for take-out! You have 3+ cards in all unbid suits.

Probably because of my “scientific” mind, I began to question a lot of the principles at that time. I learned that when you have a 5-card suit, it is more than a 53% chance that partner has 3+ cards in the suit. So why not bid 1♠?

If you overcall 1♠, instead of double, another question may be: what should you do next if the bidding continues 2♦-pass-pass?

Not even the delayed take-out double was invented at that time!

It was really a paradise back then for upcoming bridge theorists.

Everything is changing “as time goes by”, and most of the methods I discuss in this book are not “standard” now, but who knows, maybe some of them will be in the times to come! So let's leave the past and look at the future.

More why's and how's

All bridge players are aware of the importance of remembering the system and the conventions you play. In terms of strategy, I think it is also crucial to know *why* the bids in a system have their actual meanings.

The above may sound philosophical, but to know why the system bids are arranged in a certain way, helps us to remember agreements that may apply in similar bidding situations.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1♦	1♥
2♦	2N

When one of us shows a suit with at least six cards, as in this auction, it is seldom right to stop in precisely 2N. This "why" leads us to the "how":

The bid 2N is always regarded as *forcing* over a 2-level bid that promises six or more cards. A rule like this one is easy to remember, and the idea can be used in several different bidding situations.

This is an example of the type of logical reasoning I use in the system.

Our system description includes many "general principles", which should be interpreted simply as the sum of all logical conclusions that our partnership has reached in the specific area. Our partnership agreements.

Positional factors

Most players instinctively consider the "positions" in the bidding. In 3rd hand, after two passes, it is quite normal to open light for the lead or for other tactical reasons. In 1st hand, pre-empts tend to be more aggressive, at least when being non-vulnerable. And we all hesitate to open the bidding with a borderline hand with short spades in 4th hand.

Position also influences hand evaluation when the opponents are competing, as your honors' value depends on the actual circumstances. That is often purely tactical decisions, but we can also change our strategy due to inferences from the bidding. One example is when we use transfers in competitive bidding.

Using transfer responses is usually only thought of as a way to make the stronger hand declarer. But there is another point. After a transfer bid, we can wait to decide who is going to declare, depending on our holding in opponents' suit or what happens later in the bidding.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♣	(1♦)	?	

Even if you don't use transfer responses without interference, there are good reasons to do so now. When double shows at least 4 hearts and the 1♥ bid promise spades we can more often play the contract from the right hand.

Independent of our holding in their suit, in the example above, it will often be easier for South to lead partner's suit than it is for North to lead the suit.

Positional factors are important in most competitive auctions.

When you consider pre-emptive bids or raises, it is significant – for tactical reasons – whether one (or perhaps both) of the opponents is a passed hand.

The system should have tactical weapons at hand, should we want to adjust our bids due to positional factors. That is a part of our system, where we often have several bids to choose from in a given situation.

Position is also important if we conceal “unusual” distributions.

You can see players, without a blink, fearlessly open 1N with any 4441 or 5431 with a singleton honor, 6-card minors and all kinds of 5422 hands with or without stoppers in the short suits. I don't believe in that strategy! It may lead to that we don't find the right games and miss a few slams. There is, though, a difference if partner is a passed hand or not!

Say that we hold in 1st position:

♠ Ax ♥ Kx ♦ KQ10xx ♣ A10xx

I guess this a 1N opening for most players: all suits well guarded and 16 nice points. In modern bridge, the current trend is to open with 1N as often as possible, for some players even when it looks impossible!

Our system should cater to the possibility to describe these hands also when we prefer a natural opening bid, with the hand above 1♦, which is my choice when my partner is an unpassed hand and slam is still a possibility.

The opponents are counting

A very popular treatment in a number of situations is using raises to the 2-level to show exactly 3-card support, while a raise to the 3-level shows 4 trumps.

I don't approve of that. Not at all.

In “standard” methods, a single raise in a major show about 8-11 HCP with 3-card support. Just change the word ‘with’ to ‘if’, and I agree.

After 1♠ from partner, I will bid 2♠ with both these hands, because they have roughly the same value.

a)	♠ Kxx	b)	♠ Jxxx
	♥ xx		♥ Qx
	♦ Axxx		♦ Axxx
	♣ Qxxx		♣ Qxx

I don't prioritize showing the exact number of trump cards when I support partner's suit. That principle runs through most parts of our system, but is more important when opponents still can be expected to compete.

The reason is simply that we have to consider the fact that the opponents get the same information. In addition, you can be sure that there are many bridge hands where they can use that information better than our side.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
(1 ♠)	Pass	(3 ♠)	?

♠ xxx ♥ KQJx ♦ AQxxx ♣ x

What is your bid in this situation? Pass? Double? 4♥!?

After a 5-card opening and a weak pre-empt that promises *four* spades, it is tempting to bid. You know that partner has at most one spade, and thus we probably have a nice fit in a red suit.

But if the raise to 3♠ could be made on only 3-card support, would you act then? Even if responder will more often have four, it still changes the odds!

The opponents' expected total trump length is a very important factor when you are thinking about entering the auction.

Consider this table (the percentage is not exact but a hint):

<i>Opponents have</i>	<i>Your side has in other suits</i>	<i>An 8-card fit in %</i>
7 trumps	20 cards	50%
8 trumps	21 cards	75%
9 trumps	22 cards	100%

I try to make use of those simple figures. The obvious reason is, of course, that I want to make it more difficult for the other side.

Knowledge about opponents' trump length is also important in the defensive play. When we are on lead against a suit contract and know they are on a 5-3-fit, leading a trump is often a good choice. If they have a 5-4-fit, however, a trump lead is often too passive and seldom needed.

Systemic facilities

To have several ways to bid the same hand (distribution and strength), may seem like a waste, but there are not two hands that are exactly alike.

Look at these two hands when partner opens with 1♦:

<p>a) ♠ AKQxxxx ♥ Ax ♦ Qx ♣ xx</p>	<p>b) ♠ AQxxxxx ♥ Ax ♦ Qx ♣ Kx</p>
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Both hands have 15 HCP and a long spade suit, but they are not even close to identical. In both cases, though, if partner has the right cards, a slam is quite possible.

With hand a) we would like to show a solid suit and preferably let partner play the contract, in case he has something like Kx of clubs.

With hand b) we don't mind playing the contract ourselves, but we have to find out if partner can help us with the spade suit if we are moving towards a slam.

These hands also illustrate a problem with so called "relay systems", where one of the players "relays" out the other's distribution. They sometimes lack the flexibility to find out the difference between two similar hands in time.

In this case, our methods can make a difference. Instead of having only one way to bid a certain strength and distribution, I prefer, whenever it is possible, to have a choice of different ways to show my hand.

Working around interference

As soon as one of the opponents enters the bidding with a double or an overcall we have a situation where both sides are competing for the final contract.

When the bidding gets competitive in this way, there are a some well-known factors that should affect our decisions:

- when we have a fit, we want to bid at the highest level we can, to make it harder for the other side
- when we don't have found a fit yet, we want to have bids that help us to find one as soon as possible
- we want to play the contract from the right hand, depending on our holdings in the opponents' suit(s)
- having no other clues, we are trying to get the overcaller to make the opening lead, since it is often easier for his partner to lead their suit
- we want to make general, logical agreements when we can, so that we can remember what we have agreed upon

This is why I put a lot of work at the common competitive situations in the early stage of the bidding. In this area we have many ideas about how to handle opponents' interference. In several situations, by "switching" two bids or apply transfers, you can increase the conditions for your partnership.

If you want an overview of the whole system first, you can simply avoid those chapters and perhaps study them later!

How we handle strong opening hands

In our current system, we open 2♣ with a balanced hand and 18-21 HCP. The 1N opening shows 15-17 HCP. That means, *we don't* have a balanced hand with 15-19 HCP when we open with one of a minor.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1 ♦	1 ♠
2N	

Here, we use the jump to 2N as a two-way bid. It shows 16+ HCP, either with 4 spades or with 6+ diamonds without a spade fit (0-2 spades).

Because 2N takes care of the hands with lots of HCP, rebids like 3♦ and 3♠ instead show good minimum hands with distributional values.

The same advantage can be found in the 2+ Club opening used with transfer responses. The 1N rebid shows the strong balanced hand and 2N can be used for other hands. So what is gained?

When we look at competitive auctions we have a beneficial difference:

West	North	East	South
1 ♣	(1 ♥)	bid	(3 ♥)
Dble			

Because all strong balanced hands with 4432, 4333 or 5332 are excluded from the minor suit opening bid, our double now promise an unbalanced hand with 5+ clubs. In the normal system, as well as the 2+ Club, opener may also have the balanced 18-19 HCP hand. We don't have to cater to that possibility.

To open with 2♣ holding a balanced 18-count may of course also be wrong. If partner is very weak, we may end up playing 2N down three.

When responder has a weak hand with a 5+ suit, we can stop in 2Ma or 3mi. The response 2Ma is weak and natural, while 2N shows a useless hand with a long minor, often with 6 cards since we have to play at the 3-level.

The 2♦-response very often is either a balanced hand or some strength.

A recent board from "Divisionen" in Denmark. We were non-vulnerable.

<i>Mads Eyde</i>	<i>Mats Nilsland</i>
♠ AKQ	♠ J109x
♥ 9xxx	♥ xx
♦ AQJ10	♦ xxx
♣ Ax	♣ xxxx
2 ♣	2 ♠
3 ♠	pass

My 2♠ wasn't exactly by the book, but I guessed that 2N was not going to be a success. Perhaps a suit contract could be cheaper!? And I get to play too!

Mads had a nice fit to my presumed “0-4 HCP 5+ card spade hand”, and ventured an invitational raise. Ouch! I didn’t see that coming ☺

After a club lead I played a heart from dummy and was able to ruff 2 hearts in my hand, finessing diamonds on my way back. Nine tricks and +140 when spades were 3-3. Together with the Rimstedt brothers’ +150 for 3 down in 2N, it was 7 imps our way. Lucky, of course, but also quite fun!

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
2♣	2♦
2♥	

After the 2♦ response, 2♥ is a two-way bid, either 18-19 HCP balanced or a GF with primary hearts. The 2N rebid shows 20-21.

The sequences where 2N shows a strong balanced hand:

- 2♣-2♦; 2♥-2♠; 2N 18-19 HCP
- 2♣-2♦; 2N 20-21 HCP
- 2N opening bid 22-24 HCP
- 2♦-2Ma; 2N 25+ HCP

The 1Ma opening bid can, in contrast to 1mi, also include the balanced hands (5332) from 11 to 19 HCP. With 15-17 we more often open 1N, but with the stronger 18-19 we tend to prefer to start with 1Ma.

The Gazilli convention (or "Häxan", as it is also called in Sweden) is a great invention to help opener describe strong hands. We have adopted it.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1Ma	1♠/N
2♣	

Gazilli is used after a 1Ma opening. Opener’s rebid 2♣ is two-way and forcing for one round. Responder will bid 2♦ with a positive hand (8+), and after that, if we have the strong hand, we can establish a game forcing situation.

Our version of Gazilli is designed to give special attention also to hands with 14-16 HCP and 3-card support (after 1♥-1♠).

Furthermore, if we hold a hand like this one:

♠ AJxxxx ♥ KQx ♦ Axx ♣ x

After 1♠-1N, there is a problem in a natural system. When we rebid 2♠ and partner passes, we may have missed a making 4♥. If we try a NF 2♦, other bad things may happen.

Instead, we can bid:

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1 ♠	1N
2 ♣	2 ♦
2 ♥	

Our 2♥ here shows either 4 hearts and 16+ (a GF hand), or 3 hearts and 14+. If partner has less than 8 HCP he may, instead of 2♦, bid a 5-card heart suit.

You are welcome to check it out, it works really fine ☺

Reverse bids

The strong reverse bid is a very important cornerstone in most natural systems. A weak spot in most systems is how to handle intermediate hands (14-16 HCP) having 3-card support in partner's major suit. You have a little too much for a single raise and you don't have enough for a reverse bid.

With our version of the reverse bid, I think we have solved that problem.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1 ♣	1 ♥ (4+ spades)
2 ♦/♥	

Briefly described, our reverse bids are "semi-natural" if we, as above, have two bids to choose between. The reverse bid may be completely natural but if we have 6+ clubs or 3-card support in spades the reverse bid can be "our best red suit". The bid is natural or close to natural.

In this sequence, we can thus bid 2♥ with three hearts. That works because if responder has four hearts, and raises hearts, he will always have five or more spades. With 4-4 in majors, he will begin by showing hearts and not spades.

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Responder</i>
1 ♦	1 ♠
2 ♥	

With only one available reverse bid, 2♥ here is completely artificial, very often with either 4 hearts or 3 spades (perhaps both, or in worst case neither).

In all these cases the reverse bid in our system shows either 14+ HCP with 3-card support or 16+ without support and is forcing for one round.

Unfortunately, the continued bidding after a reverse bid is more complicated with our methods, but so far we think the outcome is worth the effort.

If you managed to read this far, you are probably, like me, fascinated by the game of bridge. I hope you enjoy my contribution!