



# COMING BACK TO BRIDGE

**Paul Goldfinger**

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# Author's Note

I started proofreading bridge books for Master Point Press in 2011. This is certainly my dream job, since I get paid to read bridge books! After proofreading a number of books, I started wondering if I could write a bridge book on a topic that hadn't been covered already. And I realized that there was a need for a book to help those who learned bridge decades earlier — and who didn't play weak twos, transfer bids, or takeout doubles — to upgrade their bidding. I self-published the original version of this book in 2014 under the title *Goldfinger's Rule of Thumb: Bidding Basics & Other Bridge Tips*. I want to thank Master Point Press for taking on — and improving — this book, now called *Coming Back to Bridge*, a more descriptive title. It is my hope that by reaching a wider audience, this book will help more people to improve their bidding and enjoy the game.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the many bridge partners I've had over the years, especially Julie who introduced me to bridge in 1973. I also want to thank the myriad bridge authors and bridge columnists I've read, all of whom helped me to learn more and better appreciate the game.

Paul Goldfinger

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# Introduction

I couldn't believe it. I had only 6 points, yet the hand was passed out. Somebody must have had an opening hand.

When I mentioned I had only 6 points, one opponent said that he had 13 points but no opening bid, while his partner said that he had 12 points. They had 25 points between them — and possibly game — but neither thought their hand was strong enough to open! Clearly, both of them were playing old-style bridge.

I've seen other examples of old-style bidding where players don't get to the best contract. As this example shows, sometimes they don't even get to any contract! And that's why I've written this book.

This book is designed for those who learned bridge a long time ago and still play the same way they learned. While neither declarer play nor defense have changed that much in the past thirty-plus years, bidding has. And by learning to bid better, you will play better bridge and have more fun.

I've been there. I can still remember one day some years ago when I realized just how little I knew. I had learned how to play bridge decades earlier. While I hadn't played much in the intervening years, I had read the daily bridge column in the local newspaper for more than twenty years, so I thought I knew most of the basics. But on that day, when I passed and my partner almost came across the table, yelling, 'You can't pass — my bid is forcing', I realized that I had some gaps in my understanding.

I immediately started reading every bridge book I could get my hands on. By alternating my reading with play, I quickly raised the level of my game. Considering where I started from, I am especially proud to say that I am now a Life Master.

Most of what I learned is that modern bidding dramatically improves communication over old-style bidding. Those who learned bridge decades ago and haven't updated their systems will find themselves at a disadvantage even at social bridge — and definitely in a duplicate game.

This book is organized into a series of chapters that first give an example of a bidding problem, and then explain a simple convention or rule that solves that problem. Understanding these conventions will greatly improve your bidding. Included in these chapters are some bidding ideas and tips that I've found to be especially useful. Since these chapters provide a lot of information, I've labeled some sections (and all of Chapter 5) as 'Advanced Tips', and these can be skipped in an initial reading of the book. The exercises at the end of Chapters 1-6 will help reinforce your understanding. Exercises noted as *advanced* relate to the Advanced Tips.

This material on current bidding style will allow you and your partner to get into the bidding more often, communicate better, and wind up in better contracts. If you'd rather be declarer than defender, then shifting to current bidding style will certainly help.

One change in modern bidding that will not be covered in this book is what is known as the *two-over-one system*. In this system, some bids at the two-level by the partner of the opener are forcing to game. Clearly, being able to make such a bid at the two-level ensures that the partnership will get to game. But hands that are not strong enough for such a forcing bid can be harder to bid under this system



than the traditional system (Standard American). Since the target audience for this book is those who learned bridge decades ago, I decided to keep things simple and not go into the details of two-over-one, especially since these details can get complicated very quickly.

During bridge sessions I've also seen a number of plays by a declarer or defender that were, to put it politely, not optimal. In response, Chapter 7 provides a number of tips for declarer play and defense to help you avoid similar errors.

Chapter 8 on 'Final Thoughts' suggests ways for you and your regular partner or partners to ensure that you're on the same page when it comes to bidding.

Since this book covers only some of the basics that bridge players should know, there's a lot more that the interested reader can get into. I've listed some books that I've found very helpful in the 'Recommended Reading' section of Chapter 8.

If you hate getting lousy cards when playing bridge, there's an easy cure for that — just play duplicate. Since everyone is playing with the same hands, you can now win with lousy cards. One time my partner and I took just one trick on a hand but got a top score!

Check out the Supplement to learn further benefits of playing duplicate and how to get started. And if you already play duplicate, you may find the section on 'Bidding Strategies for Duplicate' to be helpful.

I love playing bridge. My hope is that this book will help you to become a better bidder and player and thereby increase your love for this game.

*Paul Goldfinger*

# Chapter 1

## Bidding Basics

Some years ago, a woman who was very good at declarer play and defense told me that she would always open a 14-point hand, and sometimes a good 13-point hand. That was certainly the norm when she learned bridge. But today that is far too conservative.

I'm not advocating reckless bidding, just being a little more aggressive. It is the norm today to open most 12-point hands — and even some hands with fewer points if they have long suits.

One thing that hasn't changed is that when you evaluate your hand you should still count an ace as 4 points, a king as 3 points, a queen as 2 points and a jack as 1 point — these are called high-card points (HCP). But there are also adjustments to be made for long suits as well as for voids, singletons or doubletons. We'll get into all that later in this chapter, but for now, simply start with a count of your high-card points.

## OPENING BIDS

I've played enough social bridge to realize that not everybody has a common understanding of some bidding basics. Here are some simple points to discuss with your partner:

- Most players open with at least 12 high-card points, sometimes with fewer points when you have a highly distributional hand (the Rule of 20 is discussed later in this chapter).
- Open 1NT with a balanced hand of 15-17 points, not 16-18 points as was the norm years ago. Why the difference? As we'll see in the next chapter, there are a lot of advantages to opening 1NT, and using the 15-17 point range will allow you to open 1NT more often.
- If you have a balanced hand with 20-21 points, open 2NT — again, you probably learned a different range. If you are stronger than that, open 2♣, an artificial bid discussed in Chapter 3. The 1NT and 2NT opening bids both require a balanced hand — that is, a hand with no singleton or void and no more than one doubleton.
- If you open with a bid of 1♥ or 1♠ you are promising at least five cards in that suit. Since hearts and spades are the major suits, this is often called opening with a five-card major.
- If you have two five-card suits, always bid the higher-ranking suit first, regardless of suit quality. For example, if you have five spades and five hearts, bid spades first.

If you have opening points, but do not have a five-card major and can't open in notrump, you must open in a minor suit — either clubs or diamonds. If one minor is longer than the other, open your longer minor suit. If you have three cards in both clubs and diamonds, open 1♣. If you have four cards in both minors, open 1♦. Note that if your partner opens 1♦, he probably has at least four cards in that

suit. But if his distribution is four cards in both majors, three diamonds and two clubs (4=4=3=2), he'll be opening 1♦ with only three diamonds. When he opens 1♦, he'll actually have a three-card suit less than 5% of the time, so it is rare, but it can happen.

When evaluating your hand, recognize that a hand without any aces is worth about a point less. Shape also matters, so a flat hand — one with four cards in one suit and three cards in each of the others (4-3-3-3) — is worth less in a trump contract since it has no ruffing value. If you have a hand with marginal points, such as a bad 12, don't open unless you know what your next bid will be.

## RESPONDING TO AN OPENING BID

If your partner opened the bidding, you should always bid when you have 6 or more points. But what should you bid?

There are big advantages to finding a major-suit fit. Major suits score better than minors — 30 points per trick as compared to only 20 points — and making game on a single hand requires ten tricks compared to eleven for game in a minor. So you should strive to find a major-suit fit of at least eight cards — such as 4-4, 5-3 or 6-2.

If your partner opens 1♣ or 1♦, you should always show your four-card major, regardless of how weak that suit is. After all, if you have ♥5432, your partner can still have the ♥AKQJ, making it a perfectly good eight-card fit. The modern style is to bypass bidding diamonds to introduce a major suit, unless you have a hand where you plan to bid several times.

If you have a five-card major, always bid that first. If you have two five-card majors, bid spades first, regardless of

suit quality. If you bid hearts first, your partner will never believe that you also have five spades.

If you have more than one four-card major, bid up the line — that is, bid the lower-ranking suit first. To repeat: bid four-card majors up the line, but bid five-card suits showing the higher-ranking suit first. As noted above, if you have four diamonds and also a four-card major, you should skip over the diamonds and bid your major suit if you don't have at least invitational values.

In order to introduce a new suit at the two-level over partner's opening bid, you need at least 10 points. If you have only 6-9 points, and don't have a four-card suit that you can bid at the one-level, you have only two possible actions: bid 1NT or simply raise your partner's suit to the two-level. Either bid tells partner a lot.

*Caution:* I've seen way too many dummies come down with a four-card major after that person made a bid that denied having a four-card major. Don't let that happen to you.

With 6-9 points it's best to raise your partner's major suit to the two-level with adequate trump support. If your partner opened 1♥ or 1♠, having three or more cards in that suit is adequate support, since you know that partner has at least five cards to open in that major.

To raise 1♣ to 2♣, you need to have at least four and preferably five clubs, since partner may have as few as three. Also, this bid denies having any other four-card suit, since with another suit of four or more cards you would bid that suit at the one-level. You can raise 1♦ to 2♦ with at least four diamonds — again without a higher-ranking four-card suit — since opener almost always has at least four diamonds for his bid.

## WITH WEAK HANDS

If you have 5 or fewer points, don't automatically get bored and just pass. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, there are times when you should bid even if you have zero points but have a hand with a beneficial shape, as well as times when you *must* bid with a very weak hand.

Also, I think that a pass after your partner has opened is like ringing a bell for the opponents to tell them that this is their hand. I will often stretch and respond to my partner with fewer than 6 points whenever reasonable, especially if I am short in his suit and don't want to leave him there.

To be clear, don't make a bid that can result in disaster. But do think creatively. If you have 5 points and five spades, responding 1♠ to your partner's opening bid is not likely to get you in trouble and may help keep the opponents out of the bidding.

## FORCING BIDS

Whenever responder — the partner of the opening bidder — bids a new suit, that is forcing for one round of bidding and the opener must bid again. For example, if opener started the bidding with 1♦ and responder bids 1♥, 1♠, or 2♣, the opener must bid again since responder bid a new suit.

There is one exception to this rule: if the responder passed initially, the opening bidder may pass responder's new-suit bid.

If responder simply raises opener's bid, from, say, 1♦ to 2♦, responder is not bidding a new suit and opener can pass this bid. Indeed, since a raise from 1♦ to 2♦ shows only 6-9

points and no four-card major, opener will pass unless he has an extremely strong hand.

## POINTS NEEDED FOR GAME AND SLAM

A game contract of 3NT requires taking nine tricks and usually requires a minimum of 25-26 points between the partners — and, obviously, stoppers in all four suits. While a game contract of 4♥ or 4♠ requires taking ten tricks, it also takes about 25-26 points — and you should have at least eight trumps between the two hands. A game contract of 5♣ or 5♦ usually takes 29 points, since it requires eleven tricks. A small slam requires twelve tricks and usually takes 32-33 points, while a grand slam taking all thirteen tricks usually requires 37 points.

Based on the opening bid, the response, and the subsequent bids, both the opener and responder can get a good picture of the other's point strength and distribution so that the level of the contract can be set with some certainty. But nothing is ever actually certain in bridge. A game contract where the declarer and dummy hold a combined 30 points can fail, while a slam contract with the declarer and dummy holding fewer than 20 points can succeed. Distribution — that is, extra length in one or two suits and shortage in the other suits — can play a huge role in how well a contract does, while bad breaks in the opponents' holdings can doom a contract that seemed cold.

## HAND EVALUATION

When you initially evaluate your hand by adding up your high-card points, you shouldn't add points for shortage. But you can add points for length, by adding 1 point for each card over four in a suit. For example, for a six-card suit add 2 extra points.

It is only after a trump suit has been agreed, and you will be dummy with at least three trumps, that you should re-evaluate your hand and add points for shortage. If you have three trumps, add 3 points for a void, 2 for a singleton and 1 for a doubleton. But if you have four or more trumps, your shortage will be more valuable, so add 5 points for a void, 3 for a singleton and 1 for a doubleton. These additional distributional points are often called ‘dummy points’.

Consider the following example:

**North**

♠ 10 8 7 2  
 ♥ K J 8 7  
 ♦ K Q 4 2  
 ♣ 5



**South**

♠ K Q 5 4 3  
 ♥ 6  
 ♦ A 7 6 3  
 ♣ A 8 7

South is dealer and with 13 HCP opens 1♠. North has just 9 HCP, but with spades as trumps this hand is now worth at least 12 points, thanks to his club shortage. Clearly, the club shortage would not add any points in a notrump contract.

If North bids only 2♠, limiting his hand to 6-9 points, South should pass, knowing that game is out of reach. But when North responds 3♠, an invitational raise, South should accept by bidding 4♠.

As you can see, this is an excellent contract since South can ruff his two club losers in dummy. He'll lose only one spade if the suit splits 2-2 (or if East has either the ♠A or the sin-