



*Jerry Helms*

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# Ask Jerry

**Dear Jerry,**

**A friend of mine recently attended a seminar you gave in Florida. He mentioned some suggestions you made about bridge conventions, which I love to learn and play. Which ones would you suggest for eager-to-improve newer players?**

**Susie**

Hi, Susie,

Almost eight years ago, I published a column covering my thoughts on conventions. What follows is an updated version of the original article.

In S.J. Simon's famous book, *Why You Lose At Bridge* (1946), he wrote:

"Keep your bidding simple ... never feel compelled to use convention, where it cannot help you, merely because you happen to be playing it ... You will lose many fewer points during the year if you stop trying to be 'scientific' all the time."

I am not opposed to conventions; in fact, in my most regular partnership we have nearly 100 pages of system notes including a vast number of conventional agreements. With another expert partner, we play approximately

12 conventions: Stayman, Jacoby, limit raises, etc.

I enjoy the scientific approach, but also appreciate what Simon was trying to say. The essence of bridge is judgment and taking tricks. Many times, new players try to play hockey before they learn to skate.

Read what others say, but adopt conventions only when they make sense to both of you. Dabble with new ideas, but do not add them permanently until you have fully mastered the ones you currently play.

I consider some agreements to be "Standard American" because they are in such widespread use. For my students, I break down conventions/systems into three levels, ranging from the ones I think all duplicate players should learn, up through the ones they should aspire to master.

Be aware, my attempt to categorize and list conventions is incomplete. Some conventions may be omitted because of space considerations, others because I didn't think of them while writing the article, and several because I don't think much of them. In addition, my opinion of what should be on Level 2 could be someone else's idea of Level 3.

**Level 1:** Stayman, Jacoby transfers, weak two-bids, weak jump overcalls, limit raises, negative doubles, Blackwood, Gerber, unusual 2NT, Michaels cuebids.

**Level 2:** 2/1 game force (with 1NT forcing), four-suit transfers, Texas

transfers, preemptive raises in competition (cuebid as limit raise), Jordan 2NT, Jacoby 2NT, splinter raises, some form of Drury (I prefer two-way), new-minor forcing, responsive doubles, maximal doubles, some conventional defense to 1NT openings (HELLO is my preference), Roman Key Card Blackwood.

**Level 3:** Adjust 1NT to semi-forcing, lebensohl (over notrump interference and reverse sequences), leaping Michaels, Smolen, inverted minors, McCabe adjunct over weak two-bids, fourth-suit forcing, support doubles, unusual vs. unusual, puppet Stayman (3♣ over 1NT), DOPI/DEPO. (DOPI is *not* one of the seven dwarfs!)

Beyond Level 3 are numerous expert treatments and agreements that I think can be useful in an experienced partnership. Among those are mixed raises, in and out of competition, exclusion Blackwood, two-way check-back, XYZ, good/bad 2NT, upside-down count and attitude.

If you and your partner can get through the lists above, you are well on your way to potential confusion. Despite my suggestions, I totally agree with this advice, offered more than 80 years ago:

"For those players ambitious to improve, I should proffer the following advice: study card valuation, develop your imagination, rely on your common sense and adopt as few conventions as possible." Lelia Hattersley, *Contract Developments* (1928).