



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

It seems like my partner and I often disagree on whether we should add a new convention to our convention card. Several years ago, you wrote about this, and you recommended a progression for adopting conventions. Can you address this topic again?

Sue

Hi, Sue,

Advice on the judicious use of conventions never gets old.

“Keep your bidding simple ... Never feel compelled to use a 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.”

– S.J. Simon,
“Why You Lose at Bridge” (1946)

I am not opposed to conventions. In fact, my most regular partner and I have nearly 100 pages of system notes, including a vast number of conventional agreements. Another favorite partner and I play only about a dozen conventions: Stayman, Jacoby, limit raises, etc.

I enjoy the scientific approach, but I also appreciate what S.J. Simon is say-

ing. 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 you need to know, but adopt conventions only when they make sense to both you and your partner. Dabble with new ideas, but do not add them permanently until you have fully mastered the ones you currently play.

Some agreements I consider nearly Standard American because they are in such widespread use. For my students, I divide conventions into three levels ranging from the ones I think all duplicate players should learn, up through the ones they should aspire someday to master.

Be aware that the following list is incomplete. Some conventions may be omitted because I didn’t think of them, and others 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, limit raises, weak two-bids, negative doubles, unusual 2NT, weak jump overcalls, Michaels cuebid, Blackwood, Gerber.

Level 2: 2/1 game force, minor-suit transfers, Texas transfers, preemptive raises (cuebid as limit raise), Jacoby 2NT, splinter raises, some form of Drury, new-minor forcing, responsive

doubles, a conventional defense to 1NT (HELLO is my preference!), key card Blackwood.

Level 3: 1NT semi-forcing, leb-ensohl, Smolen, inverted minors, McCabe adjunct, fourth-suit forcing, support doubles, unusual over unusual, puppet Stayman (3♣ over 1NT).

Beyond level 3 are numerous expert treatments and agreements: exclusion Blackwood, two-way checkback, XYZ, good/bad 2NT, Kokish, mixed raises (in many auctions), upside-down count and attitude, etc.

If you and a partner can get through the lists above, you are certainly well on your way to potential confusion. Despite these recommendations, I totally agree with this guidance tendered 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)

*Please send your letters to
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