

## ***Bridgematters: The Eric Rodwell Interview***

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As a leading bridge player and theorist, Eric Rodwell needs no introduction. However, for the benefit of those who may be new to reading about bridge tournaments, here is a short sampling of Eric's many accomplishments.

Eric's long time bridge partnership with Jeff Meckstroth - known to all as Meckwell - may be the greatest bridge partnership of all time. A professional player, Eric is currently ranked #2 in the world, just behind Bob Hamman. He has won the world team championship Bermuda Bowl three times and both the World Olympiads and the World Pairs once. As a leading bridge theorist, Eric has incorporated a number of original ideas into his Meckwell bidding system. He has also invented many bridge conventions and treatments, including Support Doubles.

Eric is a graduate of Purdue University. And, if you're fortunate to find Eric at the piano during a bridge tournament, consider yourself in store for a real treat.

In January 2001, *BridgeMatters* asked Eric Rodwell to speak about a number of bidding considerations and issues that might concern many players. For the convenience of the reader, background or reference details have been added to clarify certain systems or auctions. Also, short explanatory notes - surrounded by [ ... ] - have been added for the benefit of the reader.

**BridgeMatters:** Eric, we will start off by asking you what you think about various No Trump ranges, first 16-18.

**Eric Rodwell:** I don't like 16-18. I like to open 1NT more frequently than 16-18 would allow. We did play against a pair using 16-18 recently but you hardly see it anymore on the tournament scene, although it is still popular among casual players.

**BridgeMatters:** What about 13-15, the old Precision range?

**Eric Rodwell:** I prefer either 14-16 or 12-14. For the 14-16, playing Precision, it is nice not to open 1C with just a balanced, flat 16 . . . because your partner is often in a situation where he needs to stretch to force to game in a competitive auction. And 16 balanced opposite 8 might not make a good game. So if you open 1NT with 13-15, that means you open 1C with 16 plus balanced. And you are opening 1D, presumably, with whatever you open that is less than that, something like 11 or 12. It seems to me that it is better to put it all into three point ranges: 1D with 11-13 balanced, 1NT with 14-16, and . . . your strong club starting at 17 if balanced.

**BridgeMatters Note:** In Meckwell, 1NT is essentially 14-16, except 10-12 not vulnerable vs. vulnerable opponents in first or second seat. In bridge, not vulnerable is often called "white" and vulnerable "red," so not vulnerable vs. vulnerable would be referred to as white vs. red. Below, when Eric talks about "we," he is referring to Meckwell, his partnership with Jeff Meckstroth.

**BridgeMatters:** Some people worry that when playing 14-16, responder must invite with many 9 counts. That means a balanced 14, opposite many 9 counts, will reach 2NT, while in standard, the 14 count will open one of a suit and rebid 1NT to play. The corresponding problem with the 15-17 No Trump is 15 opposite 8. However, the 14 opposite 9 problem occurs more frequently.

**Eric Rodwell:** If it is more frequent, it is not very much more frequent. There would be a very small difference in terms of that. Probably the biggest downside of 14-16 No Trump is that you are going against the field. If you have one of these good 8 or so-so 9 counts, you face a more awkward decision because you might want to be in game if opener has 16 but might not want to be beyond the one level if opener has 14. I have found, however, that . . . the advantages of being able to open No Trump with 14 outweigh the disadvantages. It is nice to be able to make an immediate limit bid with a hand that is pretty good, and get all the Stayman, transfers, and whatnot started. It is possible to play a strong club with a 15-17 No Trump opening - that is what we did originally - and open 1D with 11-14 balanced, 1NT with 15 to 17. In that way, we avoided the anti-field problems.

**BridgeMatters:** What do you think about the weak No Trump, 12-14?

**Eric Rodwell:** I have played the weak No Trump . . . but . . . having to play it vulnerable makes me uncomfortable. I know a lot of the theorists who talk about weak No Trump say that you are very well placed - if your partner opens 1C, he either has a strong No Trump or a shapely hand with clubs. In practice, I have found that in many auctions it is not really that safe. Say you open 1C. It goes a 1S overcall, partner makes a negative double, and the next hand jumps to 3S preemptive [1C-1S-Double-3S-?]. Are you really going to be doubling with just a flat 15 here? The weak No Trumpers call a double here the strong No Trump double - when you open and then double to show that you have a strong No Trump - which can work well at relatively low levels. Let's say it goes 1D, Pass, 1H, 2C, you will usually be all right to double to show a strong No Trump. When the bidding gets more escalated, you might be on 15 opposite 5 with no particular fit. You would then have a problem. If you pass instead of double to show the strong No Trump, partner may make an erroneous assumption of what your hand is, perhaps assuming you have an 11 count with clubs.

**BridgeMatters:** Have you see the Nightmare system by one of the Italian pairs?

**Eric Rodwell:** You are talking about: Lanzarotti and Buratti. I have played against them some.

**BridgeMatters Note:** Massimo Lanzarotti and Andrea Buratti have won many European events as well as the 1998 World Rosenblum teams. They play a system called Nightmare (see note below).

**BridgeMatters:** What they do is use a 2C opening [like a Precision 2C opening but limited to 9 to 14] to take the weak club hand types out of the 1C opening. Thus, 1C is 15-17 balanced or clubs starting at 15.

**Eric Rodwell:** So what do they open with 4-4-1-4 or 4-4-0-5?

**BridgeMatters:** I think they play a 2D opening to show the Precision 2D opening [short diamonds and a three suited hand].

**Eric Rodwell:** One thing I have found playing Precision is that I much prefer requiring six clubs for a Precision type 2C opener. The Achilles heel of the strong club system, in my opinion, is having to open 2C. That's because responder . . . is left guessing whether or not to look for a 4-4 major suit fit at the two level. In standard, he would have been able to bid his major to see if opener could raise or bid 1S over a 1H response. It is bad enough when it promises six, but it just becomes a complete nightmare when opener could have only five clubs. Therefore, it is necessary to have a three-suited short diamond opening in my opinion . . . so they do that as well?

**BridgeMatters:** Yes [see note below].

**Eric Rodwell:** It seems to me they are playing Multi 2D [where 2D shows a weak two in either major or some strong hand type].

**BridgeMatters:** That's right, and the three suited, short-in-diamonds hand opens 2H.

**Eric Rodwell:** That is something that can work also. So I guess they open 1-4-3-5 with 1D?

**BridgeMatters:** That's my understanding. The problem is, they don't have a lot of documentation on their system right now.

**Eric Rodwell:** So it sounds like they sort of play a strong club system, only starting at 15 instead of 16. And the 1C is balanced, clubs or a bigger hand. A little like the Polish Club, except they have the strong No Trump instead of the weak No Trump. In the Polish Club, there is a medium club hand, a weak No Trump, or a strong hand with any shape. With the Polish club, there are variations as to what type of good hand can open 1C - some do it with any hand that has 18 plus while others require more like a standard 2C opening.

**BridgeMatters Note:** After some post-interview investigation including help from Massimo Lanzarotti, Eric Kokish, Isabel Gallego, and João Fanha, we have found out the Nightmare opening structure is actually this:

1C: 5-17 balanced, or 15+ with 5+ clubs, or any 4-4-4-1 with 4 clubs 15+, or any very strong hand (22/23+).

1D: 18-20 balanced, or 11-21 with 5+ diamonds, or any 4-4-4-1 with four diamonds & 11-14, or 4-4-4-1 exactly with 15-21.

1H, 1S: 11-21, 5+, if 5-3-3-2 shape then 15+. 1H can also be 4-4-1-4 exactly 12-14.

1NT: 11-14, 5-3-3-2 hands with a five card major open 1NT if 11-14.

2C: 8-14, 5+ clubs, if 8-10 usually a one-suiter.

2D: Multi - 5-10 with a weak two in a major, or 21-22 balanced.

2H: 8/9-12, 6+ hearts, can have another four card suit.

2S: 8/9-12, 6+ spades, can have another four card suit.

The real exciting news is this: a book on the Nightmare system will be published spring 2001!!!

**BridgeMatters:** Do you think, when opening a Polish 1C or a Precision nebulous 1D, that there is an advantage in that responder and the opponents do not know what opener's better minor suit is?

**Eric Rodwell:** Let me answer this way. Eric Kokish, one of the chief proponents of weak No Trumps, once said that weak No Trumps bury *your* fit but they also bury *their* fit. I think, to a certain extent, that is true with artificial one-of-a-minor openings. They make it harder to find where your minor fit really exists, but you have advantages with the opponents having less information. For example, if you open a Precision 1D and rebid 1NT, and the opening leader is

4-4 in the minors, he has no idea which one to lead or whether to punt with a short suit lead. Playing standard, the leader has a much better idea.

**BridgeMatters:** How would you weigh that trade-off - responder not knowing what opener's best minor is but also hiding it from the opponents?

**Eric Rodwell:** It is a loser for the strong club if that was all there was to it. In other words, in standard, I would not want to open 1C or 1D randomly. The combination of limiting the hand with a well-designed system - and there are a lot of ways to do it, and we are just talking about some of them - can more than compensate for that disadvantage. You are limited to certain value ranges, and there are fewer types of things you need to clarify later, especially in a competitive auction. So, depending on how well the system is designed, the strong club is my preference, though a lot of people would disagree with that, obviously.

**BridgeMatters:** Playing a standard system, what would you open with 4-4-3-2 - two four-card majors, three diamonds and two clubs?

**Eric Rodwell:** I am not a fan of opening 1C with a doubleton though I know a lot of people do that. You can open 1D with that distribution and partner can just assume you have four . . . every once in a while, the fact you have only three will hurt you. I find it preferable to opening 1C on two small, which can really be a calamity. Let's say I open 1C in standard, they overcall 1S and my partner has xxx Axx xxx ATxx. I think he should bid 2C here - it is already dangerous enough when partner could be a three-card suit but the fact he could even have a two-card suit can take away the responder's ability to raise clubs. Also, let's say the opponents get to two of a major and it comes back to responder - he shouldn't have to worry about opener having a two-card suit. If you open 4-4-3-2 with 1D, a lot of the time the three-card diamond suit is lead directional - for example, if I have AQx of diamonds and Jx of clubs.

**BridgeMatters:** I always hate it when I pick up the 4-4-3-2 hand and have three little diamonds.

**Eric Rodwell:** If I have three little diamonds and AK tight of clubs [doubleton AK] - or something like that, I suppose I might lie and open 1C. Players should be able to make exceptions if the hand calls for it.

**BridgeMatters:** What do you think of the 10-12 No Trump openings?

**Eric Rodwell:** I am relatively timid about playing them - I like to play them white vs. red [i.e. not vulnerable vs. vulnerable]. They are definitely too dangerous vulnerable . . . I know there are a few intrepid souls who play them at any vulnerability.

**BridgeMatters:** I have been playing them at any vulnerability during the last year but I agree that they are not successful when vulnerable, that they lose at IMPs [a form of scoring in tournament bridge].

**Eric Rodwell:** You just get hung out to dry sometimes. Playing a 14-16 No Trump, you open with 14 and a 4-4-3-2 pattern. When responder passes with a seven count, you can miss your 4-4 major fit. That sort of thing is just going to be . . . much more common opening No Trump with 10-12. Responder will be able to bid with fewer hands so you bury more of your fits. And when you are vulnerable, playing 1NT down two or more is a poor result, and, of course, down one is a bad result if you can make something else. Besides, there is the obvious risk of going for a number. Another thing . . . if you open 10-12 No Trumps, you are going to push aggressive opponents into aggressive game contracts - which will sometimes make you glad and sometimes make you sorry. The preemption aspects of the 10-12 No Trump cut both ways, like any other opening preempt. My partner and I had a hand in the Tampa regional - it went Pass,

Pass, and they opened 3C in third seat on a six-card suit. My partner overcalled 3NT on 16 with AQx of clubs. I had a 4-3-3-3 6 count but it just happened to make on the favourable lead we got. I've certainly seen that sort of thing happen when 10-12 No Trumps are opened.

**BridgeMatters:** Why don't you like the 10-12 No Trump white vs. white?

**Eric Rodwell:** . . . I like them more for IMPs than matchpoints. At matchpoints, it is a frequency thing, and you are burying too many of your fits. At IMPs, you are willing to have some small losses to hope for those 12 IMP pickups when they get to the wrong game, or 10 IMPs if they miss game, or when they go for a number overreaching. You are going to suffer some losses, you are going to go for some numbers and lose some fits. It's a question of when you have the least amount of risk and most amount of gain. Another thing, playing standard, if you play 10-12 No Trump, it just gums up the rest of your system. What do you do with 13-18 point balanced hands? If you are not playing a strong club, you basically need to have a very wide range 1NT, a very aggressive 2NT rebid or you need to play artificial minors where you open 1C with one of the ranges and 1D with one of the other ranges. The disadvantage is that partner does not know what your minor is, in competition, for instance. So I would feel that the 10-12 No Trump would have to be a devastating weapon to cover up all those minuses. If I go for 500, I have a chance of it being a good result at favourable [not vulnerable vs. vulnerable], but it is definitely a bad result at both white. That's more of a personal preference thing. The weaker the opponents, the more effective bids like the 10-12 No Trump are going to be.

**BridgeMatters:** If you were playing matchpoints all the time, would you play the 10-12 No Trump even white vs. red?

**Eric Rodwell:** On the few occasions when Jeff and I do play matchpoints or board-a-match, we pretty much stick to the same system, including 10-12 No Trump at favourable. At one point, we considered just dropping the 10-12 No Trump all together at board-a-match.

**BridgeMatters:** That's right, board-a-match is like matchpoints.

**Eric Rodwell:** It is a little different in the sense that you are only comparing with your - hopefully - well-selected teammates. We had some feeling that it was randomizing things in a way that we really didn't want to be doing. Plus, another problem with the 10-12 No Trump is that I can't open a strong No Trump, and I hate to open a balanced 15 count with one of a minor. I would much rather open it 1NT. At least if I'm white vs. red, I have some chance to collect a nice penalty if things go the right way.

**BridgeMatters:** How key do you think it is to right-side the contract? You play a number of transfer methods, for example, and we are seeing more and more transfer bids in current bidding.

**Eric Rodwell:** The question of right-siding the contract has more than one aspect to it. Like, if one player is substantially stronger than the other, then the right-side is almost always the stronger player's side - more tricks are going to be swung through declarer play than on positionally. Assuming that's not a factor, then, I do think, especially in focused situations where you can see what the problem is likely to be, that positionally can be very important. You want to get the overcaller on lead against 3NT, for example, so he either has to lead away from his suit or guess what other suit to attack . . . instead of having his partner being able to lead it through it.

**BridgeMatters:** Do you find in terms of some of your methods, where you use transfers to increase bidding space, that it allows your opponents to sometimes make a lead directional double?

**Eric Rodwell:** It certainly does. Any time you make an artificial bid, you are exposing yourself to that sort of a risk. Plus, you expose yourself to a bunch of additional sequences. It may seem simple enough to say we are playing transfers over No Trump, but what do we do if it goes double and I pass, or double followed by redouble? I was playing in a regional last year - I was sitting out actually, we were a three pairs team - and at one table they were plus 200 on a hand where they figured the other table would likely go minus. At the other table, our teammates played a Jacoby transfer, redoubled down 4, on a misunderstanding on whether it was a retransfer or an attempt to play there, for minus 2200!

**BridgeMatters:** Do you think when the opponents make a lead directional double - and in the expert community, we see some pretty aggressive lead directional doubles - that the partnership should focus on nailing them?

**Eric Rodwell:** At the two level, absolutely. At the three level, the chance for collecting a redoubled penalty is substantially less. It is definitely dangerous to make lead directional doubles at the two level against a pair . . . looking for the opportunity to redouble. I was playing in a Vanderbilt semi-final, and the player holding my cards had KJT<sub>x</sub> of hearts and an ace, nobody vulnerable. It went a strong 1NT opening, Pass, 2H Jacoby Transfer, he doubled, and it went Pass, Pass, Redouble, swish, making five. Dummy hit with something like AQ9<sub>x</sub> of hearts behind him. I had the same problem but did not double 2H, and I got to defend 3NT. They made five, so we won 12 IMPs. The point is, it is definitely dangerous to double - especially at IMPs - when the lead might not be the critical trick. And you should be doubling on a more secure type of holding, or a hand where you think you can make something. For example, if I have an opening hand with 14 points and the KJT<sub>x</sub> of hearts, I am not so worried - it is unlikely to be redoubled.

**BridgeMatters Note:** For a good introduction to lead directional doubles, see the book *25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know*, by Barbara Seagram & Marc Smith. This book also contains a description of Drury, discussed later.

**BridgeMatters:** What about modern No Trump structures? They have a lot of artificiality in them, which increases the chance that the opponents can make a lead directional double. In the old days, an auction might go 1NT-2NT. Now, it might go 1NT-2S range check or 1NT-2C-something-2NT - both provide chances for the opponents to get in.

**Eric Rodwell:** There is a lot to be said for just plain old vanilla “bid-what-you-think-you-can-make” bridge. There are a lot of tactical advantages - not allowing the opponents in, not giving them extra information, not giving them extra opportunities to overcall or double. All are big advantages of natural bidding, like 1NT-2NT-3NT. The most popular one in that realm is Stayman, followed by 2NT. That gives them a chance to double 2C or overcall any suit at the two level, an opportunity they would not have had if it had gone 1NT-2NT. Using 1NT-2S as a range-ask only gives them a chance to double 2S. To me, it is better if your system works around that principle. Just in general, there are a lot of potential downsides to playing artificial conventions. The main one is not having thought out the sequences carefully enough to see when you are benefiting and when it is necessary.

**BridgeMatters:** What about the new No Trump structures we are seeing, where Jacoby Transfers can be used with four card suits – with a four card major responder makes a Jacoby transfer to the major, and then rebids No Trump or makes a special bid. In this way responder does not often use Stayman to ask opener for a four card major, but instead uses a Jacoby transfer to show opener which four card major responder has.

**Eric Rodwell:** Jeff and I actually tried that for less than a year. It came up twice and we had two calamitous results. In one, the guy was able to make a lead directing double of 3NT because he knew that was dummy's four-card suit. In the other, I forgot what it was - so we decided that it was not a good idea. That is the Scanian system that the Swedes play.

**BridgeMatters:** Exactly, and there is an Italian version, and *BridgeMatters* has a posted version as well. When I played it, it didn't seem to deliver a real net plus IMPs position over 1,000 boards or so.

**BridgeMatters Note:** The Swedish version is described in the book, *Notrump Bidding - the Scanian Way*, by Magnus Lindkvist, Mats Nilstrand & Anders Wirgren. One Italian version is described in the article, *1NT Burgay*, by Leandro Burgay, in the December 1992 and January 1993 *Bridge World*.

**Eric Rodwell:** The only reason to play that, as I recall, is that you can bid Stayman, followed by 2NT as a transfer to 3C, as a way to get out in clubs after bidding Stayman, and then being able to follow up with various things.

**BridgeMatters:** Yes, you can use Stayman followed by a transfer sequence [for example 1NT-2C-2D-2NT is a transfer to clubs].

**Eric Rodwell:** Which, superficially, has some appeal. We found that . . . not being able to follow up Stayman with 2NT natural was just giving up too much. That was one approach we tried. I just scrapped the whole sequence and went back to transferring with five-card majors and Stayman followed by 2NT as natural. Another thing on Stayman not promising a major issue - the 4-4 fit is a major problem. I know lot of people have found an advantage of bidding Stayman followed by 2S to show an invitational hand with five spades, and there is a direct conflict with that if, over hearts, a 2S bid [1NT-2C-2H-2S] is needed to show four spades and a raise to 2NT.

**BridgeMatters Note:** Stayman followed by 2S to show an invitational hand is described in the January 2001 ACBL *Bulletin*, *Dear Billy II* [the one for intermediate players] and is also available online for OKBridge members.

**BridgeMatters:** Some play that all 2NT invitational sequences [without a five-card major] go through Stayman. What is your feeling on that?

**Eric Rodwell:** I like 2C followed by 2S to be invitational with five spades. Consequently, I don't really like Stayman without a four-card major. I prefer the 2S range-ask approach, which can be combined with other meanings.

**BridgeMatters:** Light openings - is there a certain point where light openings become ineffective?

**Eric Rodwell:** Absolutely. Paul Soloway and Bobby Goldman tried it back in the 80s when there was a real proliferation of extremely aggressive pre-empting and whatnot, before 1-3-5-8 came along [doubled not-vulnerable contracts now go down 100-300-500-800]. They thought they should really be doing some light stuff, so they had a system they called Attack, where, not vulnerable, they were playing that opening one bids were 8 to 14 and the strong club started at 15. One of my students was playing with one of them, so he played this. I found that partner opening 1S with 5-3-3-2 distribution and an 8 count just really made for a lot of problems for us, more than for the opponents. I find it is better to either pass or, if your spades are good enough, to open some sort of weak two bid, rather than open a super-light one bid. The range I prefer is starting at 11, with hand evaluation always being relevant. Plenty of 10 counts, some 9 counts

and maybe even some 8 counts . . . would qualify if they have enough playing potential. I don't think opening a hand like Jx Axxxx Kxxx Qx with 1H is winning bridge.

**BridgeMatters:** Do you think opening light has more advantage at matchpoints?

**Eric Rodwell:** I think opening light, though not too light, has advantages at all forms of the game, in the sense you are announcing certain minimal values and something about your shape. You're just positioning yourself well, primarily for a competitive auction. If you knew your opponents were never going to bid, you would probably be better off playing sounder opening bids.

**BridgeMatters:** And nowadays, when you know your opponents are always going to bid?

**Eric Rodwell:** Then you are better off playing lighter opening bids. The hand still has to have something that you think is worth 11 points to open. I don't want to go lighter than that.

**BridgeMatters:** A couple of other openings. Your opinion on NAMYATS - opening 4C and 4D to show a long major suit and values [4C shows Hearts, 4D shows Spades]?

**Eric Rodwell:** A lot of people play it - it is one of those things where I say if it works for you, that's fine. I've had a few partners that insisted on playing it. I am not that enamoured by it because I like to open 4C and 4D naturally. Plus I like a Gambling 3NT and I have to give up one or the other if I'm going to play NAMYATS.

**BridgeMatters:** What form of Gambling 3NT do you like - no stopper?

**Eric Rodwell:** If I'm playing Standard American, I like no stopper because when your hand is weaker, the bid is more preemptive to the opponents. Also, partner can tell whether or not 3NT is playable more readily. If you have a side card, you could describe that by opening and jump rebidding the minor.

**BridgeMatters Note:** Two books, *Better Bidding with Bergen, Volumes I & II*, by Marty Bergen describe the Gambling 3NT, and items discussed below, like Negative Free Bids, Fit Showing Bids and Bergen Raises.

**BridgeMatters:** Negative Free Bids in competitive auctions - do you like them in standard or just with a strong club base?

**Eric Rodwell:** It is something that I only play with a couple of partners. It is difficult to play because you have a lot of trouble clarifying the better hands. If you just put everything in an omnibus multi-meaning negative double, and then have the eventual three level jump raise by the opponents, you are just going to have terrible trouble sorting it out. Playing standard, I definitely don't like them. I just want to be able to make my forcing free bid. The only time I play them is playing a strong club system where my partner's hand is limited. As for . . . Negative Free Bids, I recommend not using them.

**BridgeMatters:** What about Marty Bergen's switch idea, where after you open and they overcall a suit, you flip the meanings of the other two suits?

**Eric Rodwell:** So if we open 1D and they bid 1S, we bid 2C to show hearts and 2H to show clubs?

**BridgeMatters:** That's right. The idea is that there are two potential advantages - one it gets the overcaller on lead and, second, when there is a spade overcall, it gets hearts into the auction a bit easier.

**Eric Rodwell:** You are saying that 1D-1S-2C could be like a hand that would make a negative double and then bid hearts?

**BridgeMatters:** Right.

**Eric Rodwell:** I have considered such ideas independently and have decided not to use them in that sort of an auction. In general, there is a problem with using transfer type bids when neither hand is limited and neither hand is known to be balanced. For example, what does opener do if I have stiff heart and 11 high, so 4-1-4-4? Or the same hand with 14? It is just very hard - we are losing the standards for a free bid at the two level. So if 2C showed the same thing that 2H showed that would probably be OK. Of course anytime you are switching hearts and clubs - like clubs to show hearts and hearts to show clubs - you are going to do better when the other guy has hearts and do worse when you have clubs. Like I can't rebid 2D anymore over the bid that shows clubs.

**BridgeMatters:** Part of the theory after a 1S overcall is that if partner has five hearts he still can have four clubs, but if he has four hearts and five clubs he would likely make a negative double instead.

**Eric Rodwell:** Let me think about that one. If I have five hearts, four clubs and an 8 count, I don't see anything wrong with starting with a negative double. On most of these hands, I don't really want to play hearts at the three level or higher unless opener has a good hand - I just want to invite a natural description from opener's hand. If I am starting with 2C, I am preventing opener from showing his clubs. Let's say it goes 1D-1S-2C showing hearts, and it now goes 2S-Pass-Pass. If I now balance with 3C, is that a 5-4 8 count or is that forcing with a better hand? You really open a Pandora's Box full of these kinds of questions every time you adopt a new convention. I am not saying it can't be done, I'm just saying that as someone who has been designing systems for 20+ years, it's not as easy as it seems to be sometimes. I had to scrap a lot of these ideas just because they were too complicated, too difficult to play.

**BridgeMatters Note:** Marty Bergen's Switch idea was described in the *Bridge Today* magazine and the book, *Bridge Additions 96*, by Matthew Granovetter. See the section titled *Switch Plus* in: <http://www.bridgetoday.com/books/add96.html>. This link also discusses Support Doubles and the 10-12 No Trump. A good description of Support Doubles, in the question below, can also be found at: <http://www.in.net~blubaugh/Suppdbl.htm>.

**(BridgeGuys.com:)** *The quoted URLs no longer function. However, the Switch Plus can be found at: <http://www.ny-bridge.com/bt/add96.html>. Mr. John Blubaugh has ceased his website, but descriptions of Support Doubles can be found at numerous sites on the Internet.*

**BridgeMatters:** In regard to Support Doubles - or "Rodwell Doubles" - do you like the idea of optional Support Doubles, where opener can pass with three-card support for responder's suit, or do you believe Support Doubles should always be made when holding three-card support?

**Eric Rodwell:** I am coming to the conclusion that they should not be absolutely mandatory. I had a hand in a regional . . . a 3-4-3-3 12 count with Jxxx of hearts. My partner passed, I opened 1C in third seat, and it went Pass, 1S, 2H [P-P-1C-P-1S-2H-?]. I don't see why I need to compel our side to declare this hand. I feel that if you wouldn't even consider a three-card raise . . . then you should not be obligated to make a Support Double.

**BridgeMatters:** The shape vs. point bidders. Say, making an overcall, one group believes that the overcall should be wide ranging - showing your shape first - while other people believe that at a certain upper range you should start by doubling, in a sense showing your points first, then show your shape later. Where do you sit on this?

**Eric Rodwell:** I don't think it is practical to be overcalling 1S on 20 high, for instance. There has to be some sort of upper limit at which you start by doubling and then bidding your suit. Now, traditionally, we have been more aggressive on doing this than a lot of other players but we backed off on . . . hands that can't handle certain major suit responses. For instance, if I'm a 1-5-3-4, I will be overcalling 1H more often over 1D than I would with a 3-5-1-4.

**BridgeMatters:** If you do double more, aren't you worried about the opponents aggressively bouncing the bidding, leaving you pickled about unwinding the bidding later?

**Eric Rodwell:** I have to feel that my hand is good enough. For example, if I have a 3-5-1-4 and they open 1D in front of me, with most 16 counts I will just be overcalling 1H. With 17, I would want to start with double generally though most other experts would have a slightly higher standard for that. With a 1-5-3-4, I want to overcall 1H with 17 and probably start doubling with 18.

**BridgeMatters:** What is the advantage of having a lower upper range for overcalls than what experts play at the moment?

**Eric Rodwell:** The thing is, when it comes to using points as a guide in any situation, unless both hands are balanced, it is going to lead to some very incorrect conclusions. I have doubled instead of bidding my suit on hands with less than 16 if they are good distributional hands, especially if they have long spades, for instance.

**BridgeMatters:** What is the advantage of limiting the playing value of your overcall?

**Eric Rodwell:** The thing is, most everybody overcalls with light hands that are well below opening bid strength at the one level. So there is substantial risk in responding 1NT with 6 or 7 points. And responder could have had a penalty double of the overcall. You need to be passing the overcall with nondescript hands that have up to a poor 8. If you think you are running a significant risk of missing a game opposite those hands, you need to be bidding more aggressively by starting with a double. But a lot of hands with 16 high can't make game opposite hands that can't answer the overcall. It's like the decision to open 2C in standard - how likely are you miss a game opposite a nondescript hand with less than 6 points that wouldn't respond? That depends on your playing strength, your distribution, and all that. To a lesser extent, it is how easy the hand is to bid. Let's say I have a 1-4-3-5 20 count - I am more inclined to open that hand 1C than a 5-4-3-1 20 count, where I more inclined to open 2C.

**BridgeMatters:** Do you like equal-level conversion doubles?

**Eric Rodwell:** I only like converting clubs to diamonds. I definitely think that anytime I double and then bid a major it should be a good hand though I know some people don't agree with that.

**BridgeMatters Note:** Equal-level conversion doubles say if you double and, over partner's suit response, you then bid a suit at the same level (i.e. equal level), you are not showing extra values. For example, with 13 points and 4-2-6-1, you could double a 1H opening, and if partner bids 2C you could bid 2D without showing extra values.

**BridgeMatters:** What about the Raptor No Trump, sometimes called the Polish No Trump Overcall, to show four cards in an unbid major and five or longer in an unbid minor?

**Eric Rodwell:** I just find the strong No Trump overcall too valuable to give up . . . for any other purpose. Certainly, there are some hands - say they open 1D in front of me and I have AQxx xx xx KJxxx - where it would be nice to play a 1NT overcall showing four spades and a longer minor. But I can pass and hope to later make a club-spade showing takeout double. Or, if I feel like overcalling my four-card suit or my five-card suit, I could do that and get along most of the time. So I definitely have to say I don't care for that idea.

**BridgeMatters:** Some people in competitive auctions use double as always takeout; others are fans of over/under doubles. Comments?

**Eric Rodwell:** The main proponents, from what I can see, of "every double is takeout at the two or three level" seem to be the Swedes. If it goes 1H, Pass, 2H, 3D, then double is takeout, showing a desire to go to 3H but checking to see if partner has diamonds. It is a style I did not grow up playing. I did play in the Cavendish one time with a fellow who told me that he wanted to play that all doubles at the two level were takeout - so I said OK. It clearly doesn't make sense when you have set up a penalizing situation - like 1S, Double, Redouble for example, or something, No Trump overcall, double. So we had one of these, where it went like: 1NT, Double, and I redoubled showing values, and they got somewhere, and I had a penalty double but I couldn't make it. I passed and he didn't balance with a double, so I said if you are going to play this way you have to reopen with a double in case I have a penalty double. I think, in general, it is pretty clear when the opponents immediately find a fit at the two- or three-level that a double shouldn't be penalty. What it should be depends on the situation - playing it "as do something intelligent" is a reasonable agreement. As far as over/under doubles, which could be at the two-level, unless you want to discuss specific sequences you could say unless somebody has set up a penalizing context, that the over/under principle would apply as long as they don't have a fit and raise. In that case, all doubles are not penalty - like 1D, 1H, 1S, 2H, Pass, Pass, Double - even though you are over the hearts, they have a heart fit, so double shouldn't be penalty.

**BridgeMatters Note:** For the Swedish idea on doubles, see the book, *Absolute Doubles - the Scanian Way*, by Mats Nilstrand.

**BridgeMatters:** Forcing passes in competition: in general, do you like them?

**Eric Rodwell:** The single most valuable call in bridge is the non-forcing pass, if you think about it. If you were compelled to bid, as dealer, on a balanced 3 count, it would completely change the game. In order for a forcing pass to be applicable, it has to be clear that, on balance, we should be acting. And that we should be cooperating on the decision, instead of just doubling them on general principles. So it has to be in selected situations where we know we have a substantial majority of the high cards . . . situations where we have not already established a game force like 1S, Pass, 2C in 2/1 style would be an obvious forcing pass situation. I don't like forcing passes based just on the vulnerability. Just because I bid 4S to push them to 5H, I don't want my partner to assume I have a bunch of defence. Also, a lot of forcing passes just wind up transferring the headache to partner, in my opinion.

**BridgeMatters:** But that helps with the guilt later.

**Eric Rodwell:** I am more interested in getting good results than winning in post-mortem. Not that winning in post-mortem is irrelevant.

**BridgeMatters:** Drury - some people play one-way, some two-way. For example, 2C as constructive, 2D as limit or 2C showing 3 trumps and 2D showing 4.

**Eric Rodwell:** As an aside, I know that Marty Bergen has something he calls BROMAD that stands for **B**ergen **R**aises **O**ver **M**ajor **A**fter **D**ouble. Every single bid - except for the sequence 1H, Double, 1S - was some sort of raise. You have no bids for other hands [besides Redouble or Pass]. Now, most times when I am playing I don't have a weak 2D bid available because I'm playing Multi or maybe Precision 2D or something. So, not all those hands are suited for opening 3D. So if I pass, and I can't respond 2D to one of a major, that is a loss that I feel. I think, in general, two areas of bidding are over-emphasized by many partnerships: one is responses to 1NT and the other is Drury sequences. I've seen people with, like, 10 pages of notes on Drury sequences, and it rarely seems to make any difference from what I can see. I am perfectly content to play just simple 2C Reverse Drury, though some partners do insist that 2C shows three trumps and 2D shows four, in which case I like the idea that they are both just limit raises. The problem with showing four trumps is it makes the opponents much more aware that they can balance if they know there are four trumps in the other hand.

**BridgeMatters:** Why do you think the No Trump structures are over-emphasized or why do you think it is not an effective use of the partnership's time?

**Eric Rodwell:** Obviously, this would depend on what they have discussed and how much time they are willing to put in. If you are going to spend six hours talking with somebody, then taking half an hour or 45 minutes to discuss No Trump structures is fine. But if you . . . only have half an hour to spend, then spending 15 minutes of it on No Trump structures and 15 minutes on everything else isn't giving proper weight to everything else. So it is nothing against No Trump structures. Basically, the old-fashioned Walsh structure, for example, is perfectly adequate really, or just simply four-suit transfers. About the only thing that I really like, that's not that standard really, is a 3C response that, instead of being a weak 5-5 in the minors - which is a waste as far as I'm concerned - is Puppet Stayman.

**BridgeMatters Note:** The Walsh No Trump structure is described in the book, *Two-Over-One Game Force*, by Max Hardy.

**BridgeMatters:** Bergen raises to 3C and 3D?

**Eric Rodwell:** I think Bergen raises have a lot of merit but I am not sure that 1S, Pass, 3S preemptive seems to come up that much or be all that effective. Most of the time that I have 3 high with four spades they don't pass over the 1S opening. I am content to play 1-3 as a four-trump limit raise, or perhaps to play 1-3 as a mixed raise, or constructive raise as he calls it. The thing is, I like 2/1 game forcing but I don't like 2/1 game forcing except when the suit is rebid. Therefore, every one of these artificial three-level suit jumps . . . means I can't make an invitational jump shift, which is what I like to play. I like to play 1S, Pass, 3C as invitational with clubs. So perhaps 1-3 as limit, select one of the other bids to be a mixed raise, and then just bid a forcing No Trump or something with a preemptive raise - that way you can have the best of both worlds.

**BridgeMatters:** Say the opponents use a Bergen raise. It goes 1S, Pass, 3C, and you double. Is it better for the partnership to play it as a lead directional double for clubs or a takeout double for the major?

**Eric Rodwell:** I think that depends on the strength of the Bergen raise. The rule that I typically use is, if they are showing a limit raise or better, the double is lead directional. If they are showing a constructive raise or preemptive raise, the double should be takeout of the opened suit . . . You are sometimes going to have hands that favour the opposite treatment but that's what I found useful.

**BridgeMatters:** What are your feelings about artificiality later in the bidding? Say you are playing Standard - there is the Cole method where opener's rebid of 2C is artificial, usually a puppet to 2D, and then opener shows various hand types. For example 1D, Pass, 1S, Pass, 2C, Pass, 2D forced, Pass, 2S, showing three card support [1D-1S-2C-2D-2S].

**Eric Rodwell:** Some people are big fans of that - I think Boyd and Robinson are the main pair using them right now. I tried to develop a system with that when I played with Ronnie Rubin in 1985. Michael Becker's wife was having a baby and he couldn't play so I was going to play half with him and half with Meckstroth. I tried to learn his system, called the Ultimate Club, but it was too complicated, even for me. So I came up with some stuff and burdened him with quite a bit as it turned out. That was one of things I tried, but I just concluded that not being able to open 1D and rebid 2C was too much of a loss of a natural bid. Say I have x xxx AKxxx KQTx, to take a less extreme example, why do I have to rebid 1NT over a 1S response? Why can't I just bid 2C?

**BridgeMatters Note:** The Cole convention was described in articles in the March and April 1991 *Bridge World* magazine. An update on the BART convention, discussed below, can be found in the article, *Extended Bart*, by Marshall E. Schwartz, in the July 2000 *Bridge World* magazine.

**BridgeMatters:** What about BART, where 1S, forcing 1NT, 2C, 2D [1S-1NT-2C-2D] asks?

**Eric Rodwell:** That is one of those conventions that I could be swayed either way on. I seem to pick up a hand with diamonds with fair frequency, in which case I am kind of screwed playing BART. It is interesting that lot of people who play BART also play that the 2C rebid could be made on any of the 5-3-3-2 hands, i.e. possibly with a doubleton. So they can't pass 2C very readily as partner could have only two. And they can't play it in 2D either. You are really defeating a lot of the purpose of the forcing No Trump if you can't get out in low level playable contracts.

**BridgeMatters:** Do you think that is important at IMPs? Obviously it is at matchpoints, but also IMPs?

**Eric Rodwell:** Life just seems to be fine without it, I'd say. But if someone was to come up with a well conceived system for it . . . I don't think it should be used in conjunction with 2C possibly being a doubleton . . . then I could probably buy into it, for it definitely has some advantages. I don't think you need it playing a strong club system because the need to distinguish between 9/10 preferences and weaker preferences is not really very prevalent.

**BridgeMatters:** What about weak jump shifts in competition compared to fit showing jump shifts?

**Eric Rodwell:** Fit showing jump shifts are very popular in the Washington area. Again, it sort of seems to come from the 'the only hands that matters are those that have a fit for partner' type of thinking, which I don't think I buy into, really. Say it goes 1D, 1S, certainly it is nice if I have seven hearts to the KJT to bid a preemptive three hearts but I don't think it is critical. After 1D, 1S, bidding 3H is a little unwieldy anyway because I am forcing the bidding to 4D. I think probably the best situations to be using fit showing jumps are passed hand jumps. Like Pass, Pass, 1S, 2C, 3D, showing diamonds and spades. The need for a natural 3D is very minimal by a passed hand. When partner overcalls, I think they are a little more useful than when partner opens. But just the same, if I have a long suit, I have no way to express that.

**BridgeMatters:** How do you prefer to play your jump shifts in competition, playing standard?

**Eric Rodwell:** Jump shifts to the two level can be played as preemptive, showing a pretty terrible hand usually, and jump shifts to the three level are preemptive but a better playing hand when partner opens. When partner overcalls, you can play them as preemptive if it is clear they own the hand, but in general, I think just showing a good playing hand has the most utility. In other words, sort of invitational. Especially if you overcall light, it is nice if you have a solid opening bid with a good six-card suit or something to be able to show an invitational hand and see what happens.

**BridgeMatters:** Some carding questions. First, are there advantages to upside-down suit preference?

**Eric Rodwell:** There's no technical advantage or disadvantage. I know that when we started doing it, virtually nobody was playing upside down signals in the U.S. so there wasn't any standard to follow. My thinking was, 'if we are going to change our signals, let's just change it all.' It is clearly going to be random whether it works well to have high means spades or high means clubs on any given hand. Sometimes one will be easier to read than the other.

**BridgeMatters:** Do you think an expert partnership needs to use Smith Echo against No Trump contracts [where the defensive pair, at the first opportunity after the opening lead, play high-low if they like the opening lead suit and low-high if they don't. Reverse Smith Echo uses low-high to show like and high-low to show dislike]?

**Eric Rodwell:** No, I don't think they do. It is useful in certain selected situations but it is another one of these things that can lead to problems. I think it is good to be able to make your Smith signals in tempo, since that particular signal is more subject to abuse in that area.

**BridgeMatters:** Fourth best vs. third & fifth leads against No Trump. See any advantage to one or the other?

**Eric Rodwell:** I definitely favour fourth best against No Trump because you can use the rule of eleven, plus wasting the third highest spot is more likely to matter in No Trump, where the fourth round of the suit is more material than it is against a suit contract.

**BridgeMatters:** Trump suit plays to show suit preference or trump suit plays to show parity of the hand?

**Eric Rodwell:** I tried playing the Vinje parity signal at one time and decided I didn't really like it. Trump suit preference can work OK but I just find a lot of the time you need to play certain trump spots for tactical reasons, either as a falsecard or simply to save your high trump for possible overruffing or trump promotion purposes. I don't think the case is particular clear on that one.

**BridgeMatters:** So, in general, if you were filling out a quick convention card and partner asked: "What does a trump echo show?"

**Eric Rodwell:** With the partner I played with last week, it showed I can ruff something, I guess the old fashioned way to play it. You can play trump count - Jeff and I played that for a while - or you can play trump suit preference. It really depends. It is not something I insist on one way or other.

**BridgeMatters:** Rusinow leads [leading the second touching honour: Q from KQ for example]?

**Eric Rodwell:** I don't like Rusinow leads in situations where the leader could be short in the suit. Like, say it goes 1S, Pass, 4S, I definitely don't like Rusinow leads. Rusinow leads, if you bid the suit, make sense. Then partner doesn't have to worry about it being a singleton or doubleton

10 when you lead the 10. Rusinow leads in partner's suit clearly don't make sense either for the same reason. Rusinow leads against No Trump make some sense since, presumably, you are not punting with a doubleton.

**BridgeMatters Note:** Vinje leads, together with Rusinow leads and other ideas, are described in the book, *Defensive Play in Bridge*, by Helge Vinje.

**BridgeMatters:** AK leads showing count, another Vinje idea?

**Eric Rodwell:** I did read that book carefully and looked at some of his ideas. There is a lot of complexity and involvement that I don't really see as necessary. So I would have to say I don't really care for that one.

**BridgeMatters:** Do you think there are potentially new defensive signalling methods that are going to come about, or do you think that it is not much of an area to develop?

**Eric Rodwell:** Other than for those partnerships . . . that want to take care to define various situations and what kind of signals apply, any pair that is playing ethically and using one type of signal, there really is a limit as to what can be done. I think the possibilities have pretty much been found out. We have the distribution of the whole hand, the distribution of the suit being lead, the surrogate count for some other suit, suit preference. As a practical matter, I don't see it. But I'm not going to be like the turn of the century people who said that in the 1900s that we had invented everything that could already be invented. I certainly am not going to make that statement.

**BridgeMatters:** Obvious Shift Principle?

**Eric Rodwell:** I don't really understand it. The idea seems to be the attitude about some other suit seems to be more important than the attitude of the suit that we are leading, and I don't accept that premise. If it is clear that we should be shifting, then it can just be suit preference between the other two suits. If it is not clear, then it should just be talking about the suit we are leading. Then, obviously in some cases if I think I know and I want to tell partner what to do, I could tell him to keep leading the suit even if I am not excited about it or visa-versa.

**BridgeMatters Note:** For a description of the Obvious Shift Principle see the book, *A Switch in Time*, by Pamela and Matthew Granovetter.

**BridgeMatters:** If . . . for some reason they banned forcing club systems, what do you think you would be playing?

**Eric Rodwell:** What I do typically play is 14-16 or 15-17 No Trump, 2/1, five-card majors, with not a ton of gadgets. I play in a number of different partnerships and too much system tends to leads to more problems and more memory units being taking up than seems to be productive. If it was going to be a very long term partnership - maybe we were going to compete in serious events - then I would want to try to have the best agreements in as many situations as possible.

**BridgeMatters:** What would your 2D opener be?

**Eric Rodwell:** A weak two bid.

**BridgeMatters:** Any opinion on Flannery [a 2H opening to show five hearts, four spades, 11 to 15 points]?

**Eric Rodwell:** I don't like using conventions to show hands that are easily biddable in another way, like mini-Roman [a 2D opening to show a three suited hand with 11-15 points], for example. Why open a 4-4-4-1 at the two level when you can open it at the one level? If, indeed, you can. Playing Precision, you need the three-suiter, short-in-diamonds thing. Playing standard opening, you can find a fit at the one level. Flannery is the same thing. It is not an unbiddable hand opening 1H though I will say, that in practice, Flannery seems to be a convention that works OK when my opponents open it. So I do have a few partners that insist on playing Flannery, and I play Flannery with them.

**BridgeMatters:** Where do you think bidding theory is going over the next 10 years, or, where are you taking it?

**Eric Rodwell:** People are trying to come up with new and better ways to try to get the information they need without giving any more information to the opponents than necessary. The frontier of destructive preempting and whatnot seems to have run into a regulatory wall from the World Bridge Federation and the ACBL, so we are not going to be seeing a whole lot of development there. People come up with things like the Swedish Club, with the two-way club opening to try to reduce competition over the strong club. There is always somebody coming up with their home-baked system, but I am pretty happy with what I am playing so I am not looking to make a bunch of changes. But some people aren't happy with what they have.

**BridgeMatters:** Finally, when you do implement a new idea, how do you know it is not going to cost you? How do you test it or know it is going to work or not?

**Eric Rodwell:** I have to look at a number of example hands to be objective about it. There are a number of computer programs that can simulate so I can look to see what would happen in this situation or that situation. I think that in the majority of cases with most ideas, I find that the downside is certainly as great as the upside. It is hard to create a new convention in which the case is compelling.

**BridgeMatters:** Thank you the interview, Eric.

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