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"Fourth For Bridge?"—Say Yes

by Margaret Rutherford

You can enjoy bridge and you don't have to be a shark. Maybe you don't play because you aren't? Maybe you don't play?

Let's start from that angle and see what we can do about it. When the crowd gets together over coffee cups in the Union or after dinner for a few hands, do you sit by wishing you had the courage to take a try?

If you have played any kind of cards at all, you probably realize that this card and that card have different values. The face cards, which are aces, kings, queens and jacks, are the power cards. The idea of contract bridge, the most popular form of bridge, is to make a claim to your opponents that you have the power in your hand to take a named number of tricks.

A trick is four cards, one played by each player. The strongest card takes the trick in each play.

You start the game with 13 cards in your hand. The strength of your hand will depend upon how many of the ‘powercards,’ the honors, you hold. For instance, the ace is almost sure to take a trick because he is the most powerful. He is counted as 1.

If your king is backed by the ace of his suit he's certain to take a trick so you count that combination at 2 tricks. A suit is a group of cards belonging to the same family: spades, hearts, diamonds or clubs.

Kings with one other member of the family or suit can take tricks sometimes, so they are given a count of 1½. And king and queen without the ace each have one chance to score because one of them can nudge out the opposing ace. Together they count 1. Your ace-queen combination with some cards of their suit have a power of 1½. Jacks are good pushers because they will often force out higher powers, so they add strength to your hand. They are not given a power count, however.

How to Bid

Bidding is the next step. When you look at your hand you try to decide by counting honors how many of the powers in the deck you hold. If you have 2½ of them throughout your hand, you can make an opening bid. You tell your partner by your bid where your power lies. Opening bidders usually name their longest and strongest suit. You should have five cards in a suit before you bid it. This assures you against being left with a bid with no help from your partner and a short suit. A partner's return bid should indicate the suit he holds that will help your hand. You should be able to count on your partner's hand holding 1½ honors. If he has no outside suit but 1½ honors he will raise your suit. When a player says, "I pass," he indicates his hand is too weak to bid, has less than 1½ honor count.

Some royal families in your deck are more powerful than others. Overlooking no-trump at present, the spade suit is strongest, then hearts, diamonds and clubs follow. When bidding, you must cover the previous player's bid. This means naming a higher suit or a larger number of tricks.

If you were the opening bidder and said, "One heart," you would tell your partner that you have a strong enough family of hearts and some help in other suits to take one trick over the book.

Anyone who bids after you must bid higher—that is, your heart bid must be covered with one spade or one no-trump or two diamonds or two clubs.

Three players pass. The last suit mentioned becomes the trump suit—the one which will take the offensive in the game. If a player bids no-trump he indicates that his hand holds so many powers in each suit that he can take all the tricks he bids without the strength of any particular family. This is the most powerful bid. A no-trump hand should have 4 honor count with an even distribution of suits and power in those suits, preferably a 3-3-3-4 distribution.

Dummy Hand

When the playing begins, each side maneuvers to take all the tricks it can. The player who has made the final bid is the central player. His partner places his hand on the table and the central player plays from it. This is the dummy hand and is laid down after the person to the right plays the first card. The high card laid down with each trick takes those four cards. Playing moves from left to right with each person laying down one card of the same suit lead.

If you cannot follow suit, you can throw away a worthless card from your hand on the trick or you can trump. If you trump, that means that you are not able to take a trick in your suit which has been bid as the power or trick-taking suit. This card when played will take any card, ace included, of any other suit or any card of the same suit of a lower value. In no-trump there is no power suit so the high card of the suit lead always takes the trick.

You will find that if you study the reasons and logic behind these few simple rules and get in and play you will soon learn the fine points of the game.