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IN the late 1960s Taiwan started to do very well in international bridge events, beating teams regarded as far superior. In football terms it was the equivalent of Darlington FC challenging to win the Premier League. Taiwan had some good players, of course, but their system, 'Precision Club', was widely credited with much of the success. This article outlines the advantages of a Strong Club system but it comes with a health warning. You can't pop down to the club, pick up a new partner and say: 'How about playing Strong Club?' It won't work, because you need to discuss things more at the start than with other systems, but if you play with someone regularly whether at club or tournament level I hope to persuade you that it is a winning proposition.

Hands of fewer than 16 points

You might expect the principal advantage to be with strong hands but, in my view, it is the limit set for opening 1♣ that helps with a lot of hands where you have, and are showing fewer than, 16 points. The first area where you are going to be better off is those hands where you are weak opposite an opening bid. Suppose you hold:

♠ J x ♥ J x x ♦ K J x x ♣ x x x x.

Partner opens 1♣; playing a traditional method you feel obliged to keep the bidding open, so you bid 1NT and partner punishes you. You often drift miserably off even though you have more than half the points. With a Strong Club you know that partner is limited to 15 points, so you just pass.

Suppose that you hold a weak hand with a bit more distribution, such as:

♠ x ♥ x x x ♦ K J 10 9 8 x x ♣ x x.

When partner opens 1♣ you can bid 1NT which is forcing for one round, and when partner bids at the two level you can bid 2♦ or 3♦ and show just this sort of hand.

A Strong Club system is much better than Acol

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Overall you have much more control in auctions at low levels because partner has limited his hand more precisely.

You open 1♠ with:

♠ A K J x x ♥ K Q J x x ♦ x x ♣ x x

and partner responds 1NT. You can now bid 3♥ to show a maximum 5-5 hand which partner can pass or correct to 3♣, non-forcing if he is unsuitable. Playing traditional methods you won't be able to do this, because you have to cater for opener to have a hand of up to 19 or 20 points.

Of course sometimes partner won't have a five-card major, or lots of clubs, or an opening 1NT, so he will open the dustbin bid of 1♦. This is not as strange as it might seem, as those familiar with five-card majors may open 1♣ on similar sorts of hands, but here too you have more control. Suppose the sequence starts 1♦ - 1♣ - 2♣. When the opening bidder raises to 2♣, he is known to have a maximum of 13 points (because with 14 or 15 he would either have opened 1NT or made a bid of 2NT or above to show shortage), so responder will know much more precisely when to continue or not. With a traditional Weak No-trump system the opener may have to raise to 2♣ with anything from a minimum opening bid up to a bad 16-count.

Strong hands

Let's move on to strong hands. There are two groups here. The first group is those hands which are strong but not enough for a strong two level opening, in the range 16-21. Once you are able to open these with a strong club, you know early in the auction whether you are in the part-score, game or slam zone. Of course you need the bidding to continue to get your chance. Have you been the opener and decided to open 1♣ on something like:

♠ A K J 9 x ♥ A J 10 9 4 ♦ A x ♣ x.

Partner passes and you languish there. He

puts down a fine dummy of:

♠ x ♥ Q 8 x x x ♦ J x ♣ J x x x x.

Would you rather be in 1♣ or 4♥? Of course, the opponents might come to the rescue but if your opening shows at least 16 points you are in with a better chance of getting to hearts. Suppose that you have a balanced 18-count. With traditional methods you open one of your longest suit. Partner dredges up a response and you rebid 2NT. Partner passes and you drift down. Contrast this with a strong club auction where it goes 1♣, partner responds with 1♦ (0-7), and now you can rebid 1NT with 17-18 (with 16 you would have opened 1NT). Partner can pass or transfer at the two level.

The second group is the really big hands that you might open 2♣ Acol or 2♦ Benjamin in a traditional system. Here you start a level lower, allowing more room for investigation. A word of warning here is that your opponents, especially at favourable vulnerability, might like to interfere, so a requirement of a successful Strong Club pair is to know what is happening when this occurs. You can use the interference of your opponents to your advantage, as it allows you to distinguish between very bad (0-4) hands and semi-positive (5-7) hands. Let's suppose that you do open 1♣ with a very strong hand and, joy of joys, partner has a positive so you are on your way to slam. Contrast the auction that starts with an Acol 2♣ - 2♣ - 3♥ with one that starts 1♣ - 1♣ - 2♥. Many Acol pairs won't know whether 3NT now is forcing or not (it should be!) and they are trying to find their fit at the four level. The Strong Club pair can bid 2NT waiting, or a new suit at the three level with no danger they will suddenly play there!

It wasn't called 'Precision' Club for nothing! Taking it up will give you more accurate and helpful auctions in return for a modicum of work on your system. □

Acol is much better than a Strong Club system

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MOST people in the world play an Acol or natural-based system, where you open (essentially) naturally at the one level, showing any strength of opening bid, except for very strong hands that are opened usually with a 2♣ bid (higher than that it might be weak twos, or strong hands, according to preference). Why is this so much more popular than Strong Club systems, where all or nearly all hands of around 16 points or more are opened with 1♣, and can it really be that the vast majority of people are wrong?

There are three main points in my argument:

1. Acol is much better at handling intervention;
 2. Complexity – Acol is simple, Strong Club is not;
 3. Acol avoids the unsatisfactory ‘dustbin’ 1♦ opening.
1. **‘We are gentlemen – if you have more points than us, we will pass and let you get on with it, so we can admire your sophisticated system.’**

Consider this Precision auction: 1♣ – (2♥) – Double – (4♥).

At this stage, most Precision players will know that the 1♣ opener has 16+ points, that responder has 5-7, or perhaps more. They will know absolutely nothing about the distributions of the hands, and whether there is a fit or not. An Acol pair may have bid the same hand 1♦ – (2♥) – 3♦ – (4♥), and already know about the diamond fit, or 1♦ – (2♥) – Double – (4♥), and already know that responder has four spades. It is far more important to know about the fit than the points, and Acol players will be in a much better position to judge whether they should be doubling 4♥, or bidding on.

At the higher levels of the game, the auction tends to be fiercely contested, and

this sort of sequence is very common. But even a simple auction such as 1♣ – (1♥) – Double – (2♥) has similar problems. In Precision, no suits are shown yet, making it much harder to find the best fit, or indeed to decide whether to bid on at all.

Not only is a Strong Club more susceptible to intervention, but it is also much more likely to attract intervention. When an opponent has opened 1♣, you know that he has a strong hand, so there is much less need to bid constructively – you can come in willy nilly (what – surely not!?) simply to make life difficult for him and his partner.

I recall that one of my first encounters with a Strong Club was against a top county pair. The auction started 1♣ – (1♠) – Double – (2♠), at which point our 4-2 spade fit was about to be outgunned by the opponents’ 6-1 fit. If you were of a nervous disposition, this would have been a good time to pay a visit to the toilet and hope things had blown over when you returned. I couldn’t possibly reconstruct the auction that ensued, spiralling to 6♣ minus one in the opponents’ 4-3 fit – such precision! Each blamed the other, but the fact was that they were an experienced pair and their system was simply making life difficult for them.

2. ‘The precision of Precision’

One of the main advantages of a Strong Club can be its precision. At a low level you can use all sorts of asking bids to establish exactly what sort of hand partner has, which can be valuable for bidding slams. This can be true, but for it to be true, you need two things:

- (a) The ‘gentleman’ school discussed above where everyone else dutifully



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passes; and:

- (b) Much complexity – typically many asking bids and relays.

Complexity means a lot of strain on the memory and concentration, as well as the enhanced likelihood that things will go wrong. I have rarely seen a pair that has actually gained from a lot of complexity – the few times it helps them reach the right contract are more than offset by the disasters when it goes wrong. One silly result usually takes years to earn back.

In fact the very last time someone played Precision against me, they wound up in a 4-2 fit 6♦ contract. In this case we had pre-empted all the way up to the pass level! Even with no opposition bidding, the Precision pair got things badly wrong.

The odd top pair do put in literally thousands of hours to perfect their systems, but there are far more who prefer to bid essentially naturally, and spend their time perfecting their agreements in contested auctions, where the battle is lost and won.

3. ‘The imprecision of 1♦’

Most Precision pairs use 1♦ as the dustbin that contains everything that doesn’t go somewhere else. It allows the opponents a cheap entry into the auction, and at the same time tells partner very little about your hand. Or rather, it tells him point count, but very little about your suits, and for all the reasons above this is not to your benefit. I see Precision pairs opening 1♦ and rebidding 2♦ with 5-4 in the minors, and playing in some horrible fit.

Well, every system has its drawbacks, but some have more than others. □



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