

Smith Peters are an awful method

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR).
Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

ALTHOUGH I have played them in the past, I loathe Smith Peters. There are two major technical reasons why they should not be used and I will discuss them later. There is also a practical reason, one of disclosure.

There are various different ways of playing Smith Peters: a high card from responder means that he likes opener's lead; alternatively, a low card carries the same meaning; a high (or low) card from either hand means that the lead is liked; a high card from one hand but a low card from the other means that the lead is liked. In all cases, 'Smith Peters' will be found on the convention card: rarely will there be a full explanation of what the signals actually mean.

This does not disadvantage me since I know about it and am prepared to enquire further. However, most players are not aware of the possible variations and that clarification is required. Of course, if Directors enforced *Orange Book* regulation 4C1 ('The convention card must give the meaning of all but the most well-known and unambiguous agreements on it'), this would not be an issue...

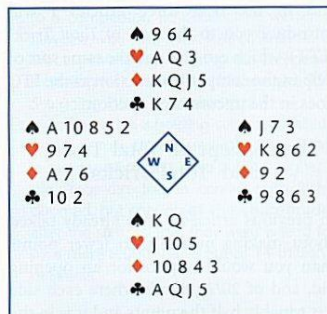
The main problem with Smith Peters is that they are impractical. Quite simply, they do not work. I have no doubt that Paul Hackett has produced beautiful examples of how the use of Smith Peters avoids a guess. Well, guess away here (see diagram in next column).

South opens a weak 1NT and is raised to 3NT. West leads the five of spades and South wins East's jack with the king. To trick two, South leads a diamond and West wins with the ace (to see why this is necessary, step into West's shoes and imagine that declarer holds:

♠ K 3 ♥ K J 5 2 ♦ 10 8 4 3 ♣ A Q 3).

East now has to decide whether or not he likes his partner's spade lead. Assuming that the most common version of the

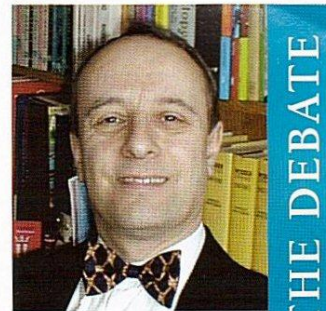
convention is being used, the nine of diamonds will say that East likes spades and the two will say that he doesn't.



Poor East: does he like spades or not? He may conclude that the best chance for the defence is to take four spade tricks immediately and so decide to signal encouragement for spades with his higher diamond. West lays down the ace of spades and the contract is beaten, a resounding triumph for the method.

Unfortunately, the play would go in exactly the same way were West's spade two and South's club five to be interchanged. In this case, the contract is beaten so long as West plays anything except a spade. East is in exactly the same position and has exactly the same guess to make.

Now, it might be argued that the 4-3-3-3 West hand should defend passively however East signals, since it is obvious that five tricks cannot be taken immediately. In response to this, I would merely observe that it is not unknown for South to open 1NT with a bare king; secondly, the difference between holding the contract to nine tricks and allowing two overtricks (for example, if declarer held the 2-4-4-3 hand hypothesised earlier) would be enormous in a pairs event.



Richard Fleet

THE DEBATE

The second undeniable problem with Smith Peters relates to unauthorised information. In my example hand, East has a guess to make and it is unrealistic to assume that he will be able to make his choice of play in perfect tempo. Whether he plays a high diamond or a low one, he will inevitably transmit to his partner the message that he was unsure.

This is not only my opinion. It is shared by one of the greatest players the world has known, possibly the best ever. In his autobiography *At the Table*, the American Bob Hamman wrote as follows:

'One of the most offensive conventions is the so-called Smith Echo. [...] My problem with this convention concerns the information that can be passed by either player's tempo. [...] You've got to make a split-second decision here - to hesitate for even a millisecond will pass information to partner [...] The only holding you could have where you would have doubt about your signal would be the holding you actually have - and your tempo has just relayed this information to your partner.'

If it's good enough for Hamman, it should be good enough for you also. Have nothing to do with Smith Peters. □

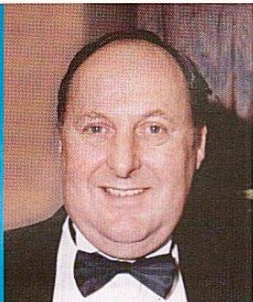
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Paul Hackett

Smith Peters are a great method

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at elena@ebu.co.uk

IN 1963 Ian Geoffrey Smith, known in Hampshire as 'Geoff Smith', suggested a new signalling method that came to be known world-wide as the 'Smith Peter' (or 'Smith Echo'). What exactly is a Smith Peter?

It only applies in a no-trump contract. After the opening lead has been made, both defenders can inform their partners as to whether they liked the opening lead.

How do they do that? The first time declarer leads from his own hand or dummy, the play of an unnecessary high card says: 'I like the opening suit led'. A play of a low card suggests that you would prefer something else.

Do you always Smith Peter at the first opportunity? No. There are four common situations where the first card played by a defender is not a Smith Peter:

1. When you are winning or trying to win the trick.
2. When you have a singleton in declarer's suit.
3. When you cannot afford to play a high card (for example if your holding is Q-3).
4. When there is a long broken suit in dummy with no visible means of a certain side entry.

In the fourth scenario it is more important to give count, so that partner knows when to win and dummy makes the minimum number of tricks in that suit. In cases 2 and 4 your next card is the Smith Peter.

There are pairs who prefer to play 'Reverse Smith'. In this variation, a small card encourages the suit originally led to be continued, while a high card says: 'Partner, I do not like the suit led'.

Why do I like the Smith Peter? Here is a famous hand from around the 1960s; everyone agreed that West had a complete guess as to how to defend:

Opening lead: ♠7.

| | |
|------------|-----------|
| ♠ 4 3 | ♠ Q J 9 |
| ♥ K J 9 | ♥ 8 5 |
| ♦ J 10 6 4 | ♦ 9 8 5 2 |
| ♣ 9 8 6 2 | ♣ K Q 7 5 |

♠ A 10 8 7 5 ♠ K 6 2
♥ 7 6 4 ♥ A Q 10 3 2
♦ K 7 ♦ A Q 3
♣ 10 4 3 ♣ A J

South opened 2NT and North raised to 3NT. West led the ♠7 to the ♠3, the ♠J and the ♠K. With eight top tricks South knew he was home if the diamond finesse was right or if the spades were 4-4. Declarer played the ♥10 to the ♥K, concealing his heart length. He now took the losing diamond finesse. From West's point of view, declarer could easily have started with ♠K-Q-x, and another spade lead may have given away the ninth trick. He therefore switched to a club and South wrapped up ten tricks.

How much easier it would be playing Smith Peters! On the ♥10, West would have played the ♥7, saying: 'I like my lead', and East would have played the ♥8 giving the same message. Now West would have continued with the ♠5 to defeat the contract.

There are other situations in which Smith Peters gain. Let us suppose partner's opening lead is through a good suit in dummy and you are known to have little or no points. A Smith Peter encouraging the suit led, even if it is clear that you have no winners in the suit, should suggest to partner that you hold no outside card of value which partner might play you to hold. Therefore partner has to plan the defence entirely on the basis of his own hand.

The other great advantage is when you

decide to lead passively from three small. You can safely lead the smallest. Dummy may well hold A-K-10-x, with declarer holding 9-x-x. Declarer ducks, partner winning with the jack. Now tell me how many declarers will not finesse you for the queen?

Still unconvinced? Let me give you one more deal:

Opening lead: ♥Q.

| | |
|-----------|--------------|
| ♠ A Q 4 | ♠ K 10 8 6 5 |
| ♥ 7 6 5 4 | ♥ 3 2 |
| ♦ 9 5 | ♦ K 4 3 2 |
| ♣ K J 3 2 | ♣ 9 6 |

♠ 7 3 2 ♠ J 9
♥ Q J 10 9 ♥ A K 8
♦ A J 10 6 ♦ Q 8 7
♣ 7 5 ♣ A Q 10 8 4

In an international event virtually every South declared 3NT. Most Wests led ♥Q. South won with the king and took a losing spade finesse. East was on lead. What to do? If West had five hearts and an outside ace clearly a heart continuation would be best – West might even have started with five to the A-Q-J. Equally, however, a switch to a diamond might well be the winning line.

Where Smith Peters were used, West played the ♠2 on the first spade, suggesting that he was not keen on his opening lead. It was now much easier for East to find the killing diamond switch and the defence took their four diamond tricks to beat the contract.

I love Smith Peters; they are an important part of my armoury. Try them if you have not done so (but be sure partner is also playing them!). I am sure you will become a fan. □