

## A Specialised Convention

To quote from a book of Contract Bridge Conventions:

### **“The Crowhurst Convention**

Playing duplicate bridge, most club pairs choose the weak no trump. They accept the occasional adverse penalty (which, after all, is only one bottom as compared to a potential major disaster at rubber bridge) in order to gain the advantages:

a) You tend to get to the correct contract quicker after a 1NT opening bid, with the great advantage of not revealing the most profitable line of defence! A weak no trump occurs more frequently than a strong no trump, hence it is efficient to use this convenient bid as often as possible.

b) 1NT has considerable pre-emptive effect. It can sometimes be difficult for opponents to enter the bidding when the contract rightly belongs to them. Even if 1NT fails it often gives you an excellent score if opponents can score 110 or 140 in a major suit contract.

c) Using a weak no trump you never need to open a prepared Club. In the highly competitive part-score auctions that develop at duplicate pairs it is important to be able to raise partner's suit without worrying whether it is real!

There is, however, occasionally a disadvantage to the weak no trump. Because no-trump rebids occupy the point ranges above 12-14, with a 12-14 hcp hand you must either open 1NT or lose the chance to rebid no trumps. In practice you have to start almost all balanced 12-14 hcp hands with 1NT, otherwise you have no rebid. Sometimes you then find that you have a good eight-card major fit that would have scored better than 1NT, but as responder was too weak to use Stayman it was never found.

A popular attempt to improve on this is to redesign the 1NT rebid to cover the range 12-16 hcp. The 2C continuation (called the Crowhurst convention) is artificial, asking about opener's point count and simultaneously investigating a major suit fit. For a Crowhurst 2C responders must have at least 10 HCP, as they may be forced to play in 2NT if opener has only 12. This in turn highlights a disadvantage of such a wide-ranging no-trump rebid, as responder must explore game with 10 HCP in case opener has 15 -16 HCP. Nevertheless, the advantages comfortably outweigh the drawbacks.”

End of Quotation

The above is a well-reasoned argument, I concede, until the very last sentence. In practice, there are very few 12 - 14 balanced hands on which the Crowhurst convention is applicable, and they introduce further disadvantages. A primary requirement is that, over a 1-level response, opener must not only be able to rebid either at the 1 level in suit, or 1NT, but also be able to make a satisfactory rebid if partner's initial response were to be at the 2 level. Let us consider a few examples.

With 4-2-3-4, or 4-3-2-4, you would open 1C but rebid 1S. You lose your previous competitive advantage of having this sequence imply 5 clubs. With 2-4-3-4, or 3-4-2-4, you would open 1C and over 1S, you rebid 1NT and Crowhurst applies. Over 1D, however, you have to bid 1H, again losing the competitive implication of holding 5 clubs. In both cases you also make it easy for LHO to compete at the 1 level. People are overcalling lighter than ever nowadays, 8+hcp with 8 losers is considered conservative!

With all 4333 shapes 1NT remains the opening bid. As it has to with: 4-4-3-2, 4-4-2-3, 4-2-4-3, 4-3-4-2, 2-4-4-3, and 3-4-4-2. You may, of course, open at the one level with any 5332 shape, because you may always rebid the 5-card suit if pressed, but it hardly seems worth it for diamonds or clubs. An opening 1NT with a 5-card minor is much more aggressive. Partner can always introduce a 5-card major, by transfer or otherwise. Thus, in my opinion, the potential frequency of Crowhurst is too low, and the only shape that has no disadvantages from being able to use a Crowhurst-like convention is 5332 with a 5-card heart suit. Let us therefore concentrate entirely on that shape.

### **THE CROWHEARTS CONVENTION**

If you open the bidding with 1H and over partner's 1S you rebid 1NT then either:

- a. You hold a balanced hand with 15 -16 hcp, [shape otherwise undefined].
- or b. You hold 2-5-3-3, 3-5-2-3, or 3-5-3-2 with 12-14 hcp.

Partner may pass, but there are various options beginning with the conventional Crowhearts(sic) response of 2C. This enquires simultaneously about opener's hcp and shape. The usual criterion for embarking on the convention is responder's holding 10+ hcp, [but see \* below].

If opener replies 2D, that shows 12-13 hcp with a 3-card spade fit. It is up to partner to determine the next step:

2H, 2S: sign off, to play;  
2NT: 12 hcp, no major-suit fit;  
3C\*, 3D\*: sign off, to play, weak hand, 6-card suit;  
3H, 3S: invitation to game in the suit, 12 hcp;  
3NT, 4H, 4S: to play.

If opener replies 2H, that shows 12-13 hcp with a 2-card spade fit. Partner may pass. Otherwise:

2S: sign off, 6-card suit;  
2NT: 12 hcp no major-suit fit;  
3C\*, 3D\*: sign off, to play, weak hand, 5+-card suit;  
3H: invitation to game in hearts, 3-card fit, 12 hcp;  
3S: invitation to game in spades, 6-card suit, 12 hcp;  
3NT, 4H, 4S: to play.

If opener replies 2S, that shows 14 hcp with a 3-card spade fit. Partner with 5 spades may pass, just!

But:

2NT: shows only 10 hcp, not keen on game, no major-suit fit;  
3C\*, 3D\*: sign off, to play, weak hand, 6-card suit;  
3H: only 10 hcp, 3-card fit, not 5 spades;  
3S: 5-card suit, only 10 hcp, but reluctant to pass, [high card(s) in hearts, and singleton?];  
3NT, 4H, 4S to play.

If opener replies 2NT, that shows 14 hcp with a 2-card spade fit. This is a comparatively simple situation. Partner may pass, and any 3-level bid is a sign off. This could be a 5-card minor suit\*. Otherwise, partner bids game in some denomination.

After the 1NT rebid, responder, who decides that neither a pass nor 2C is appropriate, has other options at the 2 level:

2D: 6 - 8 hcp with a 3-card heart fit, and a singleton in a minor suit.

May also have 5 spades. An ambitious opener with 15-16 hcp may then bid 2NT to ask which singleton, hoping for a tight game contract.

2H: 9 hcp with a 3-card heart fit. May also have 5 spades.

Opener with 15 -16 hcp may wish to advance. 2S would be forcing with 3-card fit. Again 2NT asks for singleton, if any. A minor suit would be a trial bid. A direct bid of game is possible.

2S: 6-card suit, weak hand, to play.

2NT: 9 - 11 hcp, no major suit fit. Opener with 15 -16 hcp will be expected to bid 3NT.

This style gains over standard sequences by being confined to precisely this 5332 opening situation, with exactly 5 hearts, when you do not wish to open 1NT. It deals happily too with those awkward responders' weak hands with 4 spades and a longer minor. Using standard methods one is encouraged to bid the major at the 1 level, but there is rarely a way of signing off in the minor later. As with Crowhurst too, the rebid of 2H over 1S, instead of 1NT, will show a 6-card suit.

Should the opener actually hold 15 - 16 hcp, then the procedure simplifies considerably. The opener no longer guarantees 5 hearts, but could have 5 hearts. The reply to 2C is 3C. Whence common sense applies:

Pass\*!: this is the weak 4-6 situation;  
3D\*: So is this, opener should pass;  
3H: 3-card fit, forcing, could have 5 spades;  
3S: 5-card suit, forcing, not holding 3 hearts;  
3NT: to play, no major-suit fit.

Further bids at the 4 level would be slam tries, according to partnership agreement.