

# Developments in Bidding

## The Alpha System

Many readers have asked us to devote more space to the interesting and varied bidding systems that are now being developed all over the world. Always willing to oblige, we start with a fascinating introduction to the Alpha system devised and played by Dr. Romanet who, playing with his wife, has established a world-wide reputation. Followers of the Philip Morris European Cup will be only too well aware of the regularity of their success.

When you learn bridge bidding, you learn how to inform your partner. Later you realise that your opponents get the information as well, which is quite often to your disadvantage. Then you try to exchange only the information that is absolutely necessary.

But you may find it rather difficult to withhold information without losing too much of your bidding efficiency. So the next step is artificial, and some twenty years ago I found that the most logical solution is to use a codified system where only one hand is described. This means, of course, an important reduction of information available to the opponents, especially if you manage to keep the described hand in dummy, so that the concealed hand remains totally unknown.

Leading and planning the defence can then become really difficult, and this is why I devised the Alpha system, incorporating the transfer technique, even when opening the bidding. Now, after a lot of work in three main centres (Paris, Le Raincy and Lyon) we have achieved the two main goals: minimum information with maximum efficiency.

The principle is very simple: the opener describes his hand, step by step, whenever the responder asks him to do so. The responder bids an economic relay, and the information is always given in the same order: structure of the hand, strength, short suits, number of aces, number of kings, then queens and, sometimes, jacks. When you come to the kings, if you want to know their colour, you just relay one step higher than necessary. Of course, 3NT or game in one of opener's suits are not relays.

Opening bids are very important and they are designed to convey the maximum possible information at the minimum possible level. There are about twenty-one, and some of them are two or three way bids:

- 1♣ (i) 15-18 point 1NT  
 (ii) any 'canape' with a 4-card major and a 5-card minor.  
 (iii) a 6-card major, strong, with 16-18 points, but 6 losers.  
 (iv) a very strong no-trump (23+ points, but only 3 or 4 aces and kings)

(v) a game forcing hand; but then it is opener who asks for information at a very low level:

- 1♣                      1♦ (relay)  
 1♥ (asking for aces, kings, queens and distribution)

- 1♦ (i) a 5-card heart suit.  
 (ii) red canape (4 hearts/5 diamonds), 10-15 points, 6 or 7 losers.  
 (iii) super strong no-trump (19-22 points)
- 1♥ (i) a 5-card spade suit.  
 (ii) black canape (4 spades/5 clubs), same strength as the red one.
- 1♠ (i) one 5-card minor suit at least, including mixed canapes (4 hearts/5 clubs, 4 spades/5 diamonds)  
 (ii) one-suited hands with a 6-card minor suit.  
 (iii) minor canapes (4 diamonds/5 clubs) with a major singleton.
- 1NT is 12-14 points, but if the points are concentrated in two 4-card suits, the hand can be considered as a 7-loser canape.
- 2♣ (i) 4-4-4-1 or 5-4-4-0, from 6 to 3 losers.  
 (ii) any 7- or 8-card solid (or semi-solid) suit, 4 losers.
- 2♦ (i) a major weak two.  
 (ii) a minor 5-5 or 6-5, with 6 losers.  
 (iii) a minor strong one-suited hand, with 6 or 7 cards and 4 losers.
- 2♥/♠ natural, from 12 to 15 points, 7 to 6 losers.
- 2NT/3♣ transfer opening bids to describe:  
 (i) either a minor pre-empt, or  
 (ii) a strong two-suiter (5-5 or 6-5) including the minor opened in transfer, 5 or 4 losers.
- 3♦ shows a strong major two-suiter, 5 or 4 losers.
- 3♥/♠ are natural pre-empts.
- 3NT an eight-card pre-empt in either minor.
- 4♣ a strong eight card heart opening, 5 losers.

- 4♦ a strong eight-card spade opening, 5 losers.
- 4♥/♠ are natural weak pre-empts.
- 5♣/♦ are very strong eight card pre-empts (4 to 3 losers) but missing the ace or king in the long suit.

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So, most of the time, the opener wants to describe his hand, and his descriptions are codified. For instance, if the bidding goes: 1♥ - 1♠? - 2♦ responder knows nine cards at least in spades and diamonds are held. His next relay is 2♥?, and there are five possible answers:

- (i) 7 losers
- (ii) 6 losers
- (iii) 5 losers
- (iv) 5-5 shape 6 losers
- (v) 6-4 shape 4 losers

Now let us suppose that the bidding went: 1♥ - 1♠? - 2♦ - 2♥? - 3♣ the opener is strong (5 losers) and three diamonds is still a relay asking for short suits. There are seven possible answers:

- (i) 2-2
- (ii) 3-1
- (iii) 1-3
- (iv) 2-1
- (v) 1-2 with 1-6-4 shape
- (vi) 3-0
- (vii) 0-3

The next eventual relay is Blackwood for aces, the next one for kings, and then you still can ask for natural queens. When the opening bid is limited, for instance: 2♠ - 2NT? the first relay asks for short suits, if any, and the responder, knowing the singleton, can easily judge if he has "lost" points in his hand, or not.

Let us look at some examples:

**A**

♠ x		♠ Axx	W	E
♥ QJxxx		♥ K10xxx	—	1♦(i)
♦ Kx		♦ Axx	1♥?	1♠(ii)
♣ AKxxx		♣ xx	1NT?	2♦(iii)
			2♠?	2NT(iv)
			3♣?	3NT(v)
			4♦??	4♥(vi)
			6♥	

During a 1978 European Bridge Cup heat, there were only three pairs who could reach that laydown slam. West's bids are all relays, except the conclusion, and East has described:

- (i) five cards in hearts,
- (ii) balanced distribution (5-3-3-2) or black canape,
- (iii) 5-3-3-2 shape and 11 to 12 points,
- (iv) club doubleton,
- (v) two 'mixed' aces,
- (vi) the heart king.

**B**

♠ AQJ8xx		♠ Kx	W	E
♥ K10x		♥ Qxxx	2♠	2NT?
♦ J10x		♦ AQxx	3♦	3♦
♣ x		♣ xxx		

West decided to open an intermediate 2♠, in spite of his 11 points (12 is the minimum requirement), because he had a concentration of small honours. After the 2NT? relay, he

showed his club singleton (second step). With none of his 11 points "lost", it was easy for East to go to game.

**C**

♠ K103		♠ Q6	W	E
♥ A63		♥ J7	1♦	1♥?
♦ AKJ2		♦ Q109	1NT(i)	2♣?
♣ A85		♣ KQJ762	2♦(ii)	2♥?
			3♦(iii)	3♥?
			3NT(iv)	4♣?
			4NT(v)	6♣

- Here West describes:
- (i) a super strong no-trump (19-22 points),
  - (ii) no major,
  - (iii) 3-3-4-3,
  - (iv) 0 or 3 aces,
  - (v) 2 "mixed" kings.

East knows enough to jump to the right conclusion. The sequence in C was automatic, but you sometimes need more judgement:

**D**

♠ AQ83		♠ 10754	W	E
♥ A3		♥ KQJ42	1♦	1♥?
♦ KQ103		♦ A	1NT	2♦
♣ KJ7		♣ Q103	2♥	2♣
			3♠	3NT

This time it is East who describes himself: transfer to hearts, then spades. When opener bids 3♣, East returns to 3NT to show the very weak spades and all his points outside. The final pass is not very difficult.

**E**

♠ 976		♠ AK108	W	E
♥ AK32		♥ J94	1♣	1♦?
♦ A2		♦ Q8	1NT	2♣?
♣ A652		♣ KQJ7	2♥	2♠?
			3♣	3♥??
			3♠	3NT

West has described a strong no-trump (15-18) with four hearts and four clubs. In spite of the fit in clubs, East, with only four controls must relay one step further (super relay) at 3♥, instead of 3♦, to ask for strength. When opener says he is minimum with 3♠, it seems wiser to forget about the slam.

**F**

♠ AK3		♠ J876542	W	E
♥ Q		♥ AKJ	1♠	1NT?
♦ A974		♦ Q3	2♠	2NT?
♣ AQJ103		♣ K	3♥	3♠?
			4♣	4♥??
			4♠	4NT?
			5♣	7NT

Opener has described: 3-1-(5-4) distribution, 5 losers, 0 or 3 aces. Responder needs to know about natural honours now; hence the 'super relay' of 4♥ (instead of 4♦). When opener shows the spade king and the club queen, the jump to 7NT is obvious.

Only long queens (i.e. queens in your long suits) are useful when you evaluate losers. And this brings us to a very important rule: the rule of 19.

The rule of nineteen enables the responder both to locate the long queens in a two-suited hand and count the exact length of a one-suited hand.

For example, if you know of a 5-4 shape, with 5 losers, two aces and one king, you just add: 5 + 4 + 5 = 14, and subtract from 19, giving 5, which is the number of honours (aces and kings) that opener should hold. And if Blackwood tells you that he has only 3, then he must have the two queens of both long suits to make the total up to 5.

For example:

G			W	E								
♠ -	<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 10xxx	1♠ 1NT?
		N										
W			E									
		S										
♥ Axx	♥ Kx	3♣(i) 3♥?										
♦ AQxx	♦ KJxx	4♣(ii) 4♦?										
♣ AKxxxx	♣ QJ10	5♣(iii) 5♥?										
			5NT(iv) 7♣									

Opener has described:

- (i) a 4-6 minor canape, 6 losers or less,
- (ii) 4 losers,
- (iii) 0-3-4-6 distribution,
- (iv) 0 or 3 aces.

East just adds 6 + 4 + 4 = 14; 19 - 14 = 5, So West, who has 3 aces, must hold the club king and diamond queen too, so that the total is five.

H			W	E								
♠ Kxx	<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A1098xx	1♦(i) 1♥?
		N										
W			E									
		S										
♥ AKQJxxx	♥ x	2♠(ii) 2NT?										
♦ xx	♦ KJx	3♣(iii) 3♦?										
♣ 10	♣ AJx	3♥(iv) 3♠?										
			4♦(v) 4♠?									
			5♥(vi) 6♥									

Opener has described:

- (i) a heart suit,
- (ii) a 6-card heart suit, 5 or 4 losers,
- (iii) 3-6-3-1 shape,
- (iv) 1 ace,
- (v) 2 kings,
- (vi) the heart queen.

Responder adds: 6 + 3 ('long' short suit) + 5 + 1 + 2 + 1 = 18. The result means that opener's hand is one "piece" short for a 5 loser strength; so the long suit must have seven cards.

I discovered this simple rule years ago, when I started using the loser count for unbalanced hands. And it proved to be the key to many difficult bidding problems.

Sometimes, and especially facing a powerful 1♣ opener, responder wants to describe his hand. The requirements to follow this line are:

- (i) An ace, a king and a queen at least, or three "pieces" or four "pieces",
- (ii) A usual shape: 4-4-3-2, 4-3-3-3, 5-3-3-2, 5-4-...., 6-4-5-5-...., 6-....
- (iii) No more than two queens (they'd better be long) and from 9 to 14 points.

The initial responses:

1♣	1♥	transfer to spades
	1♠	transfer to clubs
	1NT	no 5-card suit
	2♣	transfer to diamonds
	2♦	transfer to hearts

Responder gives successive information, step by step, and always in the same order: shape of hand, number of pieces, short suits, number of aces, natural kings, queens, and sometimes jacks.

I			W	E								
♠ -	<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ AKQ2	1♣ 1NT(i)
		N										
W			E									
		S										
♥ AKQJ6	♥ 93	2♣? 2♠(ii)										
♦ AK64	♦ 10753	2NT? 3♦(iii)										
♣ AK105	♣ 876	3♠?? 3NT(iv)										
			4♣? 4♦(v)									
			4♥? 4♠(vi)									
			4NT 5♠(vii)									
			6NT									

Responder has described:

- (i) a balanced hand,
- (ii) four spades,
- (iii) four diamonds,
- (iv) two hearts
- (v) one ace,
- (vi) spade king,
- (vii) spade queen but nothing else.

So, frustrating as it is with such a beautiful hand, opener has to stop at 6NT.

J			W	E								
♠ A10	<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ Kxx	1♣ 2♦(i)
		N										
W			E									
		S										
♥ AQ	♥ KJ10xx	2♥? 2NT(ii)										
♦ K10xxx	♦ AJx	3♣? 3♥(iii)										
♣ AKQx	♣ xx	4♣?? 4♦(iv)										
			4♠? 4NT(v)									
			5♣? 5♦(vi)									
			5♥? 5NT(vii)									
			6♣? 6♥(viii)									
			7♥									

Responder has shown:

- (i) a heart suit,
- (ii) 5-3-3-2 distribution,
- (iii) 3 pieces,
- (iv) club doubleton,
- (v) no queen,
- (vi) diamond jack,
- (vii) heart jack (no more = 6♦)
- (viii) heart ten (no more = 6♦)

This sort of super-precise description happens once in a blue moon, but it happened.

The "special" positive responses are much like those of the "Power Precision" of Weichsel and Sontag, that is to say:

2♥	4-4-4-1 or 5-4-4-0 with a black singleton or void
2♠	4-4-4-1 or 5-4-4-0 with a red singleton or void
2NT	eight cards, semi-solid
3♣	six cards, semi-solid suit
3♦	seven cards, semi-solid suit
3♥	any A-K-Q-J-x-x, with one piece or not
3♠	any A-K-Q-x-x-x-x, no outside piece
3NT	any A-K-Q-x-x-x-x, with one piece outside
4♣	any A-K-x-x-x-x-x (or A-K-Q), with one piece or not

When the 1♣ opener has a game forcing hand and the responder relays with 1♦, he simply rebids 1♥? so asking, step by step, for: ace(s) and king(s), but three are improbable (positive response), natural queens, distribution.

It goes:

1♣	1♦?	
1♥?	1♠	0 to 1 piece
	1NT	2 kings
	2♣	1 ace + 1 king, no queen
	2♦	2 aces, no queen

K			W	E								
♠ A9	<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; vertical-align: middle;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 7	1♣ 1♦?
		N										
W			E									
		S										
♥ AKJ5	♥ 843	1♥? 1♠(i)										
♦ A82	♦ K63	1NT? 2♦(ii)										
♣ AKJ3	♣ Q109752	2♠?? 3♣(iii)										
			3♥?? 3NT(iv)									
			4♣? 4♠(v)									
			6♣									

Responder has shown:

- (i) 0 or 1 piece,

- (ii) diamond king,
- (iii) long suit,
- (iv) six cards,
- (v) spade singleton.

<b>L</b> ♠ AKQJxx ♥ A ♦ A ♣ KQJxx	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W      E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W      E	S	♠ x ♥ KJxxxx ♦ Kxxxx ♣ x
N					
W      E					
S					

<b>W</b> 1♣ 1♥? 2♥??? 3♠?	<b>E</b> 1♦? 1NT(i) 3♥(ii) 4♠(iii)
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Responder has shown:

- (i) 2 kings,
- (ii) long suit,
- (iii) five diamonds.

<b>M</b> ♠ AKJxxxx ♥ Ax ♦ AQJx ♣ -	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W      E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W      E	S	♠ Qx ♥ Jxxx ♦ Kxxx ♣ xxx
N					
W      E					
S					

<b>W</b> 1♣ 1♥? 1NT? 2♥? 3♣?? 4♣? 4♠? 5♥? 7♦	<b>E</b> 1♦? 1♠(i) 2♦(ii) 2♠(iii) 3NT(iv) 4♥(v) 5♦(vi) 5NT(vii)
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Responder has shown:

- (i) 0 or 1 piece,
- (ii) diamond king,
- (iii) spade queen,
- (iv) no 5-card suit,
- (v) heart suit,
- (vi) diamond suit,
- (vii) spade doubleton.

Now, those who were patient enough to read this article

have a good idea of the Alpha System's mechanisms:

- only one hand is described, and it becomes dummy most of the time;
- you almost never need asking bids, so that there are no negative responses to make opponent's lead easy.

ALPHA IS: Making life difficult for the enemy, but very efficient, aggressive, and relatively easy to learn.

Do I consider it to be "the best in the world"? No, because, in my opinion, there is no such system at the bridge table, and there never will be. There is, indeed, a severe limit to memory if you are to keep your bridge efficiency.

Bidding icy contracts when opponents just pass all the time is certainly rewarding, but it is not enough to make a winner out of you!

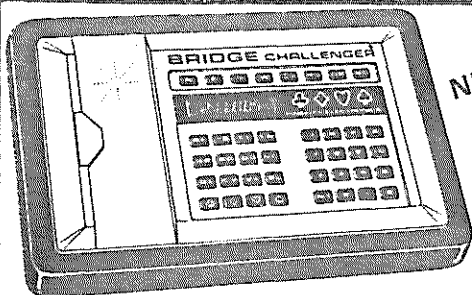
You still have to play the dummy, find the good leads, play a persistent "pressure" defence, overcall accurately, and count, count, count (points, distribution and tricks).

So the system you choose must make your life easy, and not the opponents. Incidentally, we use competitive systems too: when opponents open the bidding, and when opponents enter the bidding.

High level bridge is getting more and more difficult nowadays, and the main reason is that the game has become much more scientific. I believe that codified bidding systems are the future. Of course, one can always keep on bouncing, hoping for the best...

But don't you think that it will be time for you, very soon, to join the club?

*Fascinating but readers in the U.K. should note that, as yet, the Alpha system is not licensed. However, our feeling is that with the aid of this article, the first publication of the system in English, this omission may soon be rectified by one of our readers bitten by the codification bug.*



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