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(75) What to Expect: Captaincy

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General

The *Captain* of the auction is the person in charge! The Captain will frequently make the final important decisions in the auction or ask partner one final question about their hand before the auction ends. The Captain of the auction is frequently faced with decisions like:

- Bid Game vs. play a part score,
- Bid Slam vs. play only a game,
- Which game to bid,
- Invite Game or not,
- Invite Slam or not,
- Defend vs. compete,
- And many other decisions...

For best results from the auction we want the Captain to be the member of the partnership that has the most information about the two combined hands. We do not want someone that knows little about their partner's hand to be making final decisions that require lots of information. *The decision maker should be the most informed player!*

Who is the Captain – Types of Auctions

When we open the bidding we generally have a good hand. It means that we have a lot to say about our hand (to describe it) and it is common to have the feeling that we are in control of the auction. But this is actually the opposite of the way we want to think. When we have opened the bidding then we have started the process of describing our hand to Partner. That means that Partner knows more about our combined hands than we do (Responder's bids say less about their hand than Opener's bids do about theirs.) Thus, the Responder is generally the Captain of the auction when they know more than the opener does (this is generally true, but we will see that this is not always the case.)



Having said this about general bidding for the Responder/Opener let's take a look at the types of auctions from the perspective of Captaincy.

- *Responder vs. Opener* – The Limited hand is easier to describe. This hand can just describe itself and let Partner figure out where to take the auction. The Opener will frequently limit their hand first since they start bidding first.
- *Strong Hand (2 ♣ Opener)* – HCP vs. Tricks.
 - If Opener is balanced then they limit their hand and that leaves Partner to be Captain.
 - If Opener is unbalanced then they try to count tricks and visualize the play. This is a cooperative Captaincy auction since both players are unlimited. But the Opener (strong hand) can generally count tricks easier than the Responder and they will frequently take over being the Captain of the auction as they find out information from partner.
- *2/1 GF Auctions* – In 2/1 GF auctions both players have good values and both players are frequently unlimited. This makes the auction more complex and leads to many more cooperative bidding situations (shared Captaincy.)

There are many auction types, but they are generally divided into either a clear captain (one player) or a cooperative captaincy situation. This determines whether players are primarily making unilateral decisions or shared decisions.

Balanced Hands Open – Responder Captain

When we open Notrump or rebid Notrump we show our Hand Type and Bucket (values) very specifically to Partner. Partner knows a lot about our hand and thus they will be the Captain of the auction. The Captain does not have to make all the final decisions, but they have tools to help them ask questions of Opener (Stayman, Transfers, New Minor Forcing, 4th Suit GF, etc...)

Strong Shapely Hands – Opener Captain

When we have a strong shapely hand we are counting tricks and we know how closely we can make game or slam with little information from Partner. This makes us the Captain of the auction and puts us in a good place to make decisions about game or slam with only small amounts of information from partner – do they have one trick, or two tricks, etc...

Cooperative Auction – Captaincy Shared

When neither member of the partnership has defined their hand specifically then both players still have more to say and neither player is in a good position to take control of the auction. In this situation, both players should continue to describe their hand – just show what they have. In this way, both players will continue to learn more about their Partner's hand. If at some point, one player acquires enough information (hears what they were looking for) to judge what to do then they can take control of the action and drive the auction to the final destination.



Example #1

A great example of shared captaincy vs. “taking control” is in a slam bidding auction. Making a cuebid (Control showing cuebid) is an effort to share information with partner and make a cooperative decision. We will exchange information with partner and try to make an intelligent decision together – either player taking control when they think it is right. In slam auctions, bidding Keycard is a unilateral decision – taking Captaincy. When we bid 4N Keycard we are asking partner to tell us specific information about their hand so that we can then place the contract (make the final decision.)

Example #2

Splinters are a good example of giving up Captaincy (Ex. 1♠ - 4♦*.) This shows a ♠ fit, Singleton/Void in ♦, and 11-14 HCP. This bid describes our hand to Partner and generally leaves it up to partner to be the Captain. Partner can signoff in ♠ or bid keycard with 4N to be in control. Partner can also re-involve us in the decision (cooperative bidding) by cuebidding (say 4♥) asking us what we think – we can signoff, cuebid, or take control ourselves with keycard....

Conclusion

Captaincy is an important part of good communication with partner. Knowing when we are Captain of the action, when it is a cooperative auction, and when Partner is in control of the auction are vital for having steady auctions that go as both partners expect. If we can make sure that we have a good understanding of who is in control of the auction and what options the Captain has available to them then we will have much more successful bidding with our partners. So keep an eye out for who is the Captain in each of your auctions!