

Managing Your Convention Card (Sometimes, Less is More)

I had an occasional partner some years ago that “never met a convention that he didn’t like”... we’ll call him George (because that was his name...). His favorite Convention Card was crammed with every possible artificial bid he ever encountered; many of these conflicted with one another, to the eventual point that many hands which could (and should) be handled with natural bids were harder to bid, because the natural bids were no longer available. Remember that, with few exceptions, every time you add a new artificial bid to your toolkit, you have removed a natural bid... be certain that loss is something that you are willing to do without. Do not add new conventions just because they address something that you are going to encounter once every six months... if the situation is that infrequent, you will probably forget to (or forget HOW to) use the new toy, anyway. Make certain that your new convention solves a real problem and that it occurs frequently enough to be additive to your game.

Additionally, I'm sure you've noticed how demanding this game is on your memory, your focus, and your energy. Despite what your ego tells you, this is not a limitless reserve. During the course of a three-hour game, it is really necessary to be able to put your mind on "cruise control" at times. You need to have all of your focus for those hands where the bidding or play requires a little extra.

The rapid addition of a multitude of new Conventions has several effects, some of which are less obvious than others. Clearly, knowing new Conventions can render much more accurate information during the bidding and (often) during the play, but they come at a very steep price. The concentration required during the bidding to quickly process the calls, to try to recognize those Alertable calls, and to provide on-demand explanations of the meaning of each, does not permit any opportunity for the player to relax during the session. And that leads to diminished resources for the times when difficult decisions need to be made. A sure sign that you're playing too much stuff is when you're not Alerting your partner's bids in a timely manner; perhaps it's time for a Makeover.

Look at your current Convention Card. If you're not sure why you're playing a Convention or what it really does for you, toss it. List each of your Alertable conventions, and decide in which category each falls. **Be brutally honest with yourself...**

Level 1: I know what the convention is by name, and can describe it to another before or after the game.

Level 2: I recognize the convention when my partner uses it, but often not until my right-hand opponent has called (delayed Alert)

Level 3: I recognize the convention instantly when my partner uses it, but almost never use it myself

Level 4: I recognize the opportunity to use the convention when I hold the proper cards and use it with about the same frequency as my partner or my opponents (when they play it).

Level 5: I understand the convention and am able to use it effectively to make decisions that I would not be able to make without the convention.

At least temporarily **shed all of those conventions that fall in Levels 1, 2, and 3.** Work on those in Level 4 until they are comfortably in Level 5. **Do not add another new convention until you are truly comfortable with your existing set.** And don't let your partners bully you into playing something with which you're not totally comfortable. You'll have a lot more energy and focus for those tough games and slams in which you find yourself...!