

Eight Ever, Nine Never?

Not long ago I was playing with a long-time friend and partner when he picked up the following: (first position, red versus black)

♠Qx ♥AJ109xxxxx ♦x ♣x

Only NINE hearts.....so PASS he says!!

By the time the auction had gotten back to him the opponents were in 4S with partner (me) having bid diamonds in between. When he now bid 5H, I was out of the loop and didn't understand that I should pass this. The end result.....we played six hearts which was one level too high.

When I told this story to a quick-witted friend, he immediately offered up: "Oh I've got it.....EIGHT EVER, NINE NEVER!"

I have no idea who came up with this maxim, but it wasn't meant to apply to bidding as above but rather to declarer play. Regardless the quick response from my friend has prompted me to review that age old adage to try to ascertain its validity and its origin.

Just in case you haven't yet figured it out I am referring to the saying 'Eight ever - nine never' as it applies to whether to take a finesse for a Queen or to play for the drop. I've heard this expression since I first started playing bridge.....even though in my early years I doubt that I knew what it meant. But I soon learned that it refers to whether you should finesse for a missing queen (1) when you have eight cards in the suit (say xxx opposite AKJxx) and (2) when you have nine cards in the suit (say xxxx opposite AKJxx). Its edict is clear and those who abide by it never need to think. They just follow the rule so with just eight cards they always finessethe 'eight ever' part of the rule. But with nine cards (they play for the missing Queen to drop....the 'nine never' part.

Is anything in bridge really that simple? I have always thought that bridge "rules" were meant as guidelines, not as a determinant for rote play. Well lacking any further information, this maxim is close to the truth although percentages do slightly favor playing for a 3-1 split when you have nine cards in the suit. Thus finessing may often be right. Of course advanced players usually try to gain more information about the entire hand before deciding on their play.

Be aware though that this really only refers to when the declarer cannot afford a loser in the suit. If declarer can afford the luxury of a loser there are many more things to think aboutsuch as possible ruffs, keeping the dangerous hand off lead, etc.

Also it no longer applies if both the Queen and the Jack of the suit are missing (say K98x opposite A10xxx); this often becomes more of a restricted choice position.

Restricted choice is actually a fairly complex mathematical problem, but in simple terms (if there is such a thing) it comes down to believing that an opponent will play the card that he holds simply because he has no other choice. He cannot falsecard as his play of a particular card was “restricted” to that of the one and only card that he actually held in that suit. So if you are the declarer holding the K98x opposite dummy’s A10xxx and you happen to cash the Ace first and your LHO plays either the Queen or the Jack, you should probably play the other opponent for the missing honor.

So who was the bridge enthusiast who came up with the phrase “eight ever, nine never?” If someone out there knows, I sure wish they would share it with me.

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