

The Five Level Belongs to the Opponents

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"The Five-Level Belongs to the Opponents" was a BOLS Bridge Tip written by the late American expert Ed Manfield. From 1974 - 1994, BOLS Royal Distilleries of Holland sponsored a writing competition for bridge advice. Manfield's winning tip in 1987 recommends avoiding "five over five" bids, e.g. bidding 5 ♠ over an opposing 5 ♥ . From Manfield's tip ¹:

"Many factors combine to make it usually unwise to bid five over five:

- "Even though your hand might be quite distributional, the opponents' hands are often much more balanced. Therefore, you will frequently have more winners against their contract than you might suspect.
- "Partner might have minor honors in the opponents' suits. It is difficult to envisage the defensive power of stray Queens, Jacks and Tens. However, such cards can often help defeat the opponents' five level contract. Other times your five level bid will not fare well because the opponents have minor honors in your suits.
- "In defending high level contracts there are relatively few combinations of cards that need to be considered. Therefore, defenders are much less likely to err against five level contracts than they are to err against lower contracts.
- "Unless the deal is a distributional freak, the combined trick taking potential of the hands (i.e. - the number of tricks you can take in your best trump suit added to the number that the opponents can take in theirs) seldom exceeds 20. Therefore, even if your five over five bid works out well, your profit will tend to be small. For example, suppose the opponents bid 5 Diamonds with both sides vulnerable, and you successfully save in 5 Spades. If 5 Diamonds makes, and you go two down doubled, your gain will be only 100 points (-500 versus -600).
- "The combined trick taking potential of the hands is often 19 or less. In these cases five over five bids are often disastrous."

Manfield's example deal:

Both vul.	North	
Dlr: South	♠ Q83	
	♥ A74	
West	♦ 987	East
♠ J97	♣ JT32	♠ K64

♥ 9		♥ 83
♦ AKJT63	South	♦ Q42
♣ KQ6	♠ AT52	♣ A9854
	♥ KQJT652	
	♦ 5	
	♣ 7	

West	North	East	South
			1 ♥
2 ♦	2 ♥	3 ♦	4 ♥
5 ♦	Pass	Pass	5 ♥
Dbl	All Pass		

South's five-over-five bid cost him -500. However, 5 ♦ would have gone down one.

In contrast, the following deal from the 2011 Venice Cup exemplifies the value of extra distribution at the five-level. Sitting South was American expert Lynn Deas, representing USA 1 against USA 2.

E-W vul.	Palmer	
Dlr: East	♠ AQJ3	
	♥ J87	
Rosenberg	♦ K432	Seamon-Molson
♠ 9	♣ T4	♠ T2
♥ AKQT9432		♥ 65
♦ T5	Deas	♦ Q986
♣ Q5	♠ K87654	♣ AKJ86
	♥ —	
	♦ AJ7	
	♣ 9732	

Rosenberg	Palmer	Seamon-Molson	Deas
		Pass	2 ♦
3 ♥	Pass	4 ♥	Pass
Pass	4 ♠	Dbl	Pass
5 ♥	Pass	Pass	5 ♠
Pass	Pass	Dbl	All Pass

After Deas opened a Multi 2 ♦, East-West found their optimal 4 ♥ contract. North then inferred that her partner held a weak two in spades, and reopened with 4 ♠. East doubled with a balanced, defensive-looking hand. Unfortunately for her, the contract would have made an overtrick. Debbie Rosenberg judged well to sacrifice in 5 ♥.

However, Deas now decided to bid five-over-five on the basis of her void as well as Rosenberg's insistent heart bids, which implied strong distribution around the table. This took guts (and partnership trust!) after East already doubled 4 ♠.

East's second double netted +650 for North-South. In the other room, West was allowed to play 5 ♥, down one, for an 11 IMP swing. On this deal, 20 total trumps produced 21 tricks.

References

¹ Brock, Sally (Ed.). (1998). The Complete Book of BOLS Bridge Tips.