THE GRADED RAISE CONVENTION

by

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INTRODUCTION TO GRADED RAISES

It is fairly easy to bid makeable slams in the combined 33-35 hcp range. It is also easy for your opponents too. Experience teaches us (1) that there are many makeable slams with a combined 30-32 hcps and occasionally 29 hcps and (2) they are easier to bid than to make. Excluding bad breaks, the most common second trick loss is in the trump suit. If the potential trump trick loss can be detected, the low hcp slams will be more makeable. It can also prevent going to the five level with trumps of AT982 opposite 765.

GRADED RAISES

Graded raises are game forcing raises to a major suit opening. They are complementary to, but do not require Bergen raises. The grade stratification is similar to Ogust, with hands defining themselves as good trumps/good hand, not good trumps/good hand, good trumps/bad hand and not good trumps/bad hand.

GOOD TRUMPS are defined as any 4 trumps or 2 of the top 3 honors (AKx, AQx or KQx) or three of the top 5 honors (AJT, KJT or QJT). Any lessor holding is ipso facto a Not Good Trump holding. The holding need not be a bad one, but just one that does not qualify as a Good Trump holding. The mathematical best Not Good holding is AJ9. Fewer than 1 out of 10,000 of the Not Good Trump holdings will be AJ2 or better.

HAND HOLDINGS, Good and Bad, are related to the support points held. A Good hand has 14+ support points. The 14 support point hand must have trick values such as an AKQx/x side suit or 3 1/2+ quick tricks. A not good hand has 12 to 15- support points.

Since Graded Raises is a slam oriented convention and uses Fast Arrival as a given principle, the raise using the least space will have the greatest slam potential and the raise using the most bidding space will have the least slam potential. Following these principles, the Good Trump sequence using the least space must be the Good Trumps/Good Hand holding. The Not Good Trumps/Good hand must take less room than the Not Good Trumps/Bad Hand sequences.

GOOD TRUMPS/GOOD HAND

The Good Trumps/Good Hand sequence begins with the familiar Jacoby 2nt response. The difference being that now the Jacoby 2nt response requires both Good Trumps and a good hand,14+ support points. No Jacoby 2NT responses are affected.

NOT GOOD TRUMPS/GOOD HAND HOLDINGS

These are responding hands that have 14+ support points and Not Good Trumps. This with a 2/1 response and is followed by a non-jump raise. *A RETURN TO OPENER'S SUIT IS A PREPARED RAISE NOT A PREFERENCE*.

Sample 1S opening sequences

1S   2C   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 14+ support points.
2D/H 2S   Subsequent bids are cue bids. Notrump bids under Blackwood are a waiting bid. Similarly, the below game bid of the trump suit is a forcing, waiting bid.

In the next sequence, Opener rebids his major. This does not promise a 6 card suit, although Opener may have one. It merely denies either the extra values needed to bid 2NT or a new suit at the 3 level. (Extra values are 14+ hcps. The 14+ requires a near solid opening suit for 2NT or 2 good suits for 3 of a minor.)

1S   2X   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 14+ support points.
2S   3S   Subsequent bids are cue bids. 3NT by opener is a forcing, waiting bid. It asks Responder to cue bid his lowest ace.

In then next sequence, Opener rebids 2NT. This shows a hand equivalent to a strong notrump opener with a 5 card major. It may be done with 14 hcp if the trump suit is solid or semi-solid. It does not promise stoppers in the side suits.

1S   2X   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 14+ support points.
2NT 3S   Subsequent bids are cue bids. 3NT by opener is a forcing, waiting bid. It asks Responder to cue bid his lowest ace.

Responding with 3-4-3-3 presents a slight problem in that if the 4 card heart suit is the responding suit, the 2H response promises a 5+ heart suit.   It generally being less troublesome to inaccurately describe minor suit length, Responder responds with a short minor. The club suit is arbitrarily designated as the short suit. Hence, in the 1S 2C sequence, 2C is alertable as possibly being a "short club" with as few as 3 cards in length.

Sample 1H opening sequences

1H   2C   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 14+ support points.
2D   2H   Subsequent bids are cue bids. Any notrump bid is a forcing, waiting bid which asks partner to cue bid his lowest ace. Similarly, the below game bid of the trump suit is a forcing, waiting bid.

In the next sequence, Opener rebids his major. This does not promise a 6 card suit, although Opener may have one. It merely denies the extra values needed to bid 2NT or a new suit at the 3 level. (Extra values are 14+ hcps. The 14+ requires a near solid opening suit for 2NT or 2 good suits for 3 of a minor.)

1H   2X   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 14+ support points.
2H   3H   Subsequent bids are cue bids. 3NT is a forcing waiting bid.

Responding with 4-3-3-3 presents a slight problem in that a 1S response does not create the same forcing situation as a 2/1 response (and in Flannery situations, promises 5 spades). To create a force situation, Responder must respond with a short minor. The club suit is arbitrarily designated as the short suit. In Flannery situations, with 5-3-3-2 distribution, the 2C bid may be made on a 2 card club suit. Hence the 1H 2C sequence 2C is alertable as possibly being a "short club" with as few as 2 cards in length.

<u>GOOD TRUMP/NOT GOOD HAND HOLDINGS</u>

Being weaker than the Jacoby 2NT response, the Good Trump/Not Good Hand sequence starts a higher bidding level with 3NT. The 3NT response shows a hand with Good Trumps, to 12-14 support points and no singleton. Depending on partnership understanding, a 4C opener rebid can be Key Card Gerber or a cue bid.

<u>NOT GOOD TRUMP/NOT GOOD HAND HOLDINGS</u>

These are responding hands that have 12-14 support points and Not Good Trumps. Being the weaker supporting hand, they use Fast Arrival to distinguish themselves with a jump raise after the 2/1 response.

Sample 1S opening sequences

1S   2C   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2D/H 3S   support points. Subsequent bids are cue bids. (By prior agreement, Trumpwood can be used instead of cue bids.) A 3NT rebid by Opener is a waiting bid and asks Responder to cue bid his lowest ace. If a double jump to 4S is available, the single jump is a top of range bid promising at least 1 1/2 Key Cards, or a Key Card plus the queen of trumps.

In the next sequence, Opener rebids his major. This does not promise a 6 card suit, although Opener may have one. It merely denies the extra values needed to bid 2NT or bid a new suit at the 3 level. (Extra values are 14+ hcps. The 14+ requires a near solid opening suit for 2NT or 2 good suits for 3 of a minor.)

1S   2X Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2S   4S   support points. 4NT is Key Card Blackwood.

In then next sequence, Opener rebids 2NT. This shows a hand equivalent to a strong notrump opener with a 5 card major. It may be done with 14 hcp if the spade suit is solid or semi-solid. It does not promise stoppers in the side suits.

1S   2X   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2NT 4S   support points. 4NT is Key Card Blackwood.

In sequences where a double jump raise is available, Fast Arrival dictates that it must be the weakest of the forcing raises available. Since weak trumps and weak hand strength are a single jump, the double jump must indicate still further weakness. The only remaining undefined area is that of controls. Hence, the Ultra Fast Arrival (UFA) speaks to a further weakness in Key Cards, or 1 or less. Further extrapolation leads to the conclusion that the failure to use UFA promises more than 1 Key Card, or at least 1 Key Card and the queen of trumps (1/2 Key Card). Here are the UFA sequences.

1S   2C   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2D/H   4S   support points and 1 Key Card or less. Ultra Fast Arrival Responding with 3-4-3-3 presents a slight problem in that if the 4 card heart suit is the responding suit, the 2H response promises a 5+ heart suit. It generally being less troublesome to inaccurately describe minor suit length, Responder responds with a short minor. The club suit is arbitrarily designated as the short suit. Hence, in the 1S 2C sequence, 2C is alertable as possibly being a "short club" with as few as 3 cards in length.

Fast Arrival Responding with 3-4-3-3 presents the same problem in that a 2H response would promise a 5 card heart suit. The lessor misrepresentation is for Responder to respond with a short minor. The club suit is arbitrarily designated as the short suit. Hence the 1S 2C sequence 2C is alertable as possibly being a "short club". With Not Good trumps and a Not Good hand, there is much to be said for a forcing notrump response followed by a jump to game.

Sample 1H opening sequences

1H   2C   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2D   3H   support points. Subsequent bids are cue bids. (By prior agreement, Trumpwood can be used instead of cue bids.) Any notrump bid is a forcing, waiting bid. Since a double jump to 4H is available, the single jump is a top of range bid promising at least 1 Key Card, or a Key Card plus the queen of trumps.

In the next sequence, Opener rebids his major. This does not promise a 6 card suit, although Opener may have one. It merely denies the extra values needed to bid 2NT or a new suit at the 3 level.(Extra values are 14+ hcps. The 14+ requires a near solid opening suit for 2NT or 2 good suits for 3 of a minor.)

1H   2D   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2H   4H   support points.

In then next sequence, Opener rebids 2NT. This shows a hand equivalent to a strong notrump opener with a 5 card major. It may be done with 14 hcp if the spade suit is solid or semi-solid. It does not unconditionally promise stoppers in the side suits.

1H   2X   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2NT 4H   support points. 4NT is Key Card Blackwood.

In sequences where a double jump raise is available, Fast Arrival dictates that it must be the weakest of the forcing raises available. Since weak trumps and weak hand strength are a single jump, the double jump must indicate still further weakness. The only remaining undefined area is that of controls. Hence, the Ultra Fast Arrival (UFA) speaks to a further weakness in Key Cards, or 1 or less. Further extrapolation leads to the conclusion that the failure to use UFA promises more than 1 Key Card, or at least 1 Key Card and the queen of trumps (1/2 Key Card). Here is the UFA sequence:

1H   2C   Responder has Not Good Trumps and 12-14
2D   4H   support points and 1 Key Card or less. Ultra Fast Arrival Responding with 4-3-3-3 presents a slight problem in that a 1S response does not create the same forcing situation as a 2/1 (and in Flannery situations, promises 5 spades). To create the forcing situation, Responder must respond with a short minor. The club suit is arbitrarily designated as the short suit. (In Flannery situations, with 5-3-3-2 distribution, the 2C bid may be made on a 2 card club suit.) The 1H 2C sequence is alertable as possibly being a "short club". With not good trumps and a not good hand, there is much to be said for a forcing notrump response followed by a jump to game.

TRUMPWOOD - A HELPFUL CONVENTION

When facing a Not Good Trump holding, knowing whether or not Responder has an honor plus jack holding can be critical. Trumpwood is invoked by relaying to the next highest bid over the Not Good Trump holding response. (3NT though is always to play and 4C becomes the asking relay.) It asks Responder to further describe his trump holding. Trumpwood responses are: Step One = Key Honor (AKQ) plus the jack, Step Two = Key Honor w/o the jack and Step Three = no Key Honor. Either Relay or Standard Blackwood can follow. (This is an optional part of Graded Raises that precedes Blackwood)

OPENER'S REBIDS IN GENERAL

In Standard American, the rebid of the opening major suit always shows 6+ in the suit. This allowed for Responder to give a limit raise with 2 trumps, i.e., raise 2M to 3M. That sequence is now achieved with a forcing notrump followed by a raise of the 2M rebid, i.e. 1M-2x, 2M-3M.

Under Graded Raises, Opener with a hand too weak to jump in M,   now tells responder about a 6 card suit only when the Responder cares. If Responder is interested in a 6-2 fit, a 2NT rebid allows opener to show the 6 card suit with a 3S bid.   This 3S bid shows values identical to the 'standard' 2S rebid. If Responder is not interested in opener's possible 6 card suit, he jumps to 3NT over the 2S bid. Sample sequences are

1M   2x In this sequence, Responder's 2NT is forcing and
2M   2NT asks Opener to further describe his hand. Opener's rebids are:
        3M   6+ in M with 11-15 hcps
        3x   Very weak support for responders suit, 11-13 support pts
        3y   4 card suit, but hand too weak to show it. 11-13 hcps

This done, not only can the 2NT opener rebid can take on a positive value, so can the bid of a second suit. With minimal values, opener always rebids his opening suit. It merely denies the extra values needed to bid 2NT or a new suit at the 3 level. Extra values are 14+ hcps. Only the 14+ requires a near solid opening suit for 2NT or 2 good suits for 3 of a minor. The 15 hcp, ipso facto, meets the extra value requirement without regard to opening suit quality.

In standard or 2/1, the 3 level rebid of a second suit can be made on as little as 11 and as much as 18 hcps. If responder has 17 hcps, he has no idea of whether to think in terms of just game or a potential grand slam. Withholding the existence of a 4 card suit does not mean that suit will be lost. If partner has the requisite 4+ in that suit and an interest in playing in it, he will bid that suit over the 2M bid. You never miss a 6-2 major fit, but find more good minor suit slams and stay out of bad ones.

THE SHORT OF IT

Graded Major Suit Raises can be summarized as follows:
Good Trumps = any 4, 2 of the top three, or 3 of the top 5.
Not-Good Trumps = any lesser holding, i.e. AJ9 or less
Jump response to 2NT =   Jacoby 2nt w Good Trumps and 14+ support points
Jump response to 3NT =   Good Trumps w 12-14 support points
2/1 w simple raise = Not-Good Trumps w 14+ support points
2/1 w jump raise =   Not-Good Trumps w 12-14 support points and usually1 1/2+ key cards
2/1 w dble jump raise = Not-Good Trumps w 12-14 support points and no more than 1 key card

THE ADVANTAGES

The certain definition of "Good Trumps" is a primary benefit. When Opener has no better than mediocre trumps and Responder has Not Good Trumps, there will typically be at least 3/4+ trump losers. If you are off an ace as well, this is a slam to avoid. The opposite is true as well. If you have only mediocre trumps and Responder has Good Trumps, then there is typically 1/4 trump loser or less. This information is sometimes available well below Blackwood and can prevent an embarrassing 5 level discovery. Particularly when used with Trumpwood, fast arrival Graded Raises gets you to good slams and out of poor ones. It also has some decisional value as to whether 3NT or 4M is the better contract

Although not my preference, Graded Raises can use Standard Arrival, i.e., jump with strong hands. In this situation, a 2/1 followed by a single raise is 12-14 with Not Good Trumps. Now Opener is better positioned to decide on 3NT or 4M as the final contract. With a known 5-3 major fit, 3NT is typically the better or equivalent contract in one of three circumstances: 1) a combined 29-32 hcp with the same losers in suit or notrump, 2) a running trump suit with the same winners in suit or notrump, and 3) mediocre minus quality trumps and 25-28 hcp. With mediocre minus trumps, you can stand 1+ losers in the suit because your outside strength prevents the opponents from establishing their suit/s. Frequently, because of trump suit losers, you can make 9, but not 10

tricks. Graded Raises can provide the key trump quality information needed to make the 3NT/4M decision.

<u>DISADVANTAGES</u>

Excluding Fast Arrival considerations, the only disadvantage is taking over 1M 3NT as a limited fit and force. Some use this as a 4-3-3-3 hand with x to y hcps and others use it to show a doubleton trumps with x to y hcps. Since it does not speak to trump quality, the 4-3-3-3 treatment has very limited descriptive value. As for the doubleton trump hand, if Responder has a doubleton trump, he must have two 4 card suits which are now arbitrarily unavailable as a trump suit. Small loss there too. There are also occasions where the 2/1 suit will be 3 in length. Other than that, it adds clarity to an otherwise murky area. See The Bidding Dictionary, Alan Truscott, pg 60, #360.

The Graded Raise convention was originally suggested to me by Steven Lippmann.

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