LIVING IN A NEGATIVE FREE-LESS WORLD

Can we survive? There are those who love this method of bidding who say we cannot! Theirs is the best way, the only way. Let's look.

We are, of course, talking about bidding after the opposition overcall. The normal approach (as we teach to new players) is that following an overcall a bid by opener's partner should have 6+ hcp if made at the one level and 10+ hcp at the 2 or higher levels (maybe more at the 3 level, depending on the length of the suit/strength of the hand) and that a simple suit bid is **forcing**.

So, **West**	**North**	**East**	East should have at least 10hcp and
1♦	1♠	2♣	normally 5+ but occasionally 4+ clubs.

The same applies in these sequences:

West	**North**	**East**	**West**	**North**	**East**
1♥	2♣	2♠	1♦	1♠	2♥

All three sequences are forcing for one round.

However, if you adhere to the negative free bid philosophy, all three of East's bids above are non-forcing and are normally made on less than 10hcp. How much less? Well, over to partnerships to decide but all three hands held by the responder in the above three sequences which occurred at Akarana this week would have qualified. Would life have been easier for responder if they could have made a negative free-bid? Let's see:

Board 22
East Deals
Vul E/W

	♠ A K 10 5 4 3 ♥ 10 9 8 5 ♦ J 9 2 ♣ —	
♠ 8 ♥ J 7 6 3 ♦ 8 ♣ Q J 10 7 5 4 3	N W E S	♠ J ♥ A K 2 ♦ K 10 7 6 3 ♣ A 9 6 2
	♠ Q 9 7 6 2 ♥ Q 4 ♦ A Q 5 4 ♣ K 8	

West	*North*	*East*	*South*
		1♦	1♠
Pass	4♠	All Pass	

Without playing negative free bids, West must pass after South's overcall. After North's jump to game, it must be doubtful as to whether East will make a

re-opening double at unfavourable vulnerability. -500 or worse might well be the result. Yet, this time, East-West have a brilliant save in 5♣, a contract which would make had clubs behaved. (There is the little matter of dropping the doubleton ♥Q though the save is good if one of two good things happen.) Another good thing that could happen is that North-South head on to 5♠ which a diamond lead from West should defeat.

If West could bid 2♣, would 5♣ have been reached? It is possible, probably more likely than if West was silent. Therefore, one up for negative free-bid supporters. Of the 14 tables, 10 played in 4♠, twice doubled, all making comfortably while 5♣ was played twice, once doubled, while the other two South players were in 5♠, once successful.

Let's move on to Board 6. Playing negative free-bids, the bidding might go as below:

Board 6
East Deals
E-W Vul

	♠ 8 ♥ J 7 6 5 ♦ K 10 9 8 4 2 ♣ J 4	
♠ A 10 7 6 4 3 2 ♥ Q 4 ♦ 6 ♣ 9 7 3	N W E S	♠ Q J 5 ♥ A K 9 3 2 ♦ J 5 ♣ K 8 6
	♠ K 9 ♥ 10 8 ♦ A Q 7 3 ♣ A Q 10 5 2	

West	*North*	*East*	*South*
		1♥	2♣
2♠	Pass	3♠	All pass

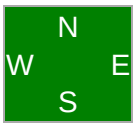
It is touch and go as to whether West accepts the invitation with the ♥Q being a potentially good asset though those three little clubs augur badly if West were to try for game.

Taking the normal approach, West has to double 2♣ which should not really affect subsequent bidding except that it gives a cheeky North the chance of putting in a 2♦ bid… and North-South will find their true fit. Indeed, with no minor suit losers, North-South can make 10 tricks in diamonds and will go positive whether or not the opposition compete to 4♠ which they are likely to do over 4♦. So, once again, the negative free-bid approach seems to work better assuming North-South risk bidding 4♦.

What happened? At 5 tables, 4♠ failed with 6 more playing successfully in a spade or heart partial. At two tables, spades got lost as their opponents played comfortably in 2♣ while at the other table 3♥ failed. While not quite conclusive, it would seem better for East-West had West been able to bid their long suit more quickly.

Finally, to Board 8:

Board 8
West Deals
None Vul

	♠ K Q 10 9 6 ♥ Q J 9 7 ♦ 10 9 4 ♣ 10	
♠ A J 7 5 ♥ 2 ♦ A K Q 8 2 ♣ J 6 2		♠ 2 ♥ A 10 8 6 5 3 ♦ J 7 6 ♣ Q 8 5
	♠ 8 4 3 ♥ K 4 ♦ 5 3 ♣ A K 9 7 4 3	

West	*North*	*East*	*South*
1♦	1♠	2♥	2♠
3♦	All pass		

Where East can call 2♥, South may call 2♠ or even make a value showing double. If South does support spades, West can anticipate a spade shortage opposite and may compete in their own suit to the last making contract. Where East has to double first up, the bidding might go:

West	**North**	**East**	**South**
1♦	1♠	x	2♣
2♦	Pass	2♥	2♠
Pass	Pass	3♦	

after which everyone would be advised to pass! In reality, 7 East-Wests failed in a variety of contracts, mainly 3NT or 4♥ while only one West played in a diamond partial. At most of the rest of the tables, North failed in 3♠ or 4♠.

Nothing very conclusive about those results but also nothing very bad happened when a negative free-bid was used, indeed in any of the three boards. There seemed the opportunity of more good than bad from this approach.

The above, though, is only half the story as using negative-free bids, you have to make a negative double on all kinds of game-going hands, making it much harder sometimes to find the right game or even slam.

I cannot say I am in love with the negative free-bid approach. While all three hands with long suits could have been handled by using the more traditional approach, negative free-bids seemed to come out much more successfully. A sample of three boards is far too small to draw any real conclusions though I will watch out a little more closely in future as to difficulties created by the "normal" approach.

Any thoughts?

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