The Principles of Bridge

BRIDGE WITH A TWIST

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Principles are the most grandiose form of bridge maxim. They should not be confused with the Principal of Bridge, the Chairman of the EBU; she, too, is grandiose, but only slightly, and in an approachable sort of way.

THE Principle of Fast Arrival dates back many years. In certain circumstances a jump to game (fast arrival) is weaker than a lower bid, the latter leaving more room to investigate a slam. For example, over a traditional strong 2♥ (or the Benji equivalent), a raise to 4♥ is considered weaker than a simple raise to 3♥.

The *certain circumstances* need to be agreed by the partnership. Take the sequence 1NT – 2♥ (transfer) – 2♠ – 3♣. Half the world play this as forcing to 3♠, half the world play it as forcing to game, and half the world haven't discussed it. If it is game-forcing, then 4♠ is weaker than 3♠.

The Principle of Restricted Choice, first proposed by Alan Truscott, and vigorously promoted by Terence Reese, states that the play of a particular significant card increases the likelihood that the player doesn't have another equivalent one. So if you are missing Q-J-3-2 in a suit and a defender plays an honour under your ace or king, then you should play him to have started with a singleton honour. There are three equally-likely relevant holdings: Q, J and Q-J. If you always finesse when an honour is played, you will win two times out of three.

Here is a deal from the 2009 Cavendish Invitational Pairs, played in Las Vegas.

Love All. Dealer East.

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

The declarers who played in 7♥ on a spade lead faced a classic Restricted Choice position. They crossed to the ace of hearts at trick two and East followed with the jack. Some of you are wondering what the problem is. Eight-ever, nine-never, play the heart king, right? But that is only correct when the four missing cards *don't include* touching honours. Players invited to the Cavendish know that a Principle outranks a mere Mantra, and the Principle of Restricted Choice says that East is twice as likely to have started with a singleton jack than with queen-jack doubleton. Add in the fact that West might have led a heart from two small, but would certainly not have done so with Q-7-3, and the odds strongly favour coming back to hand and taking the trump finesse. Unlucky.

Meanwhile, at another table, Polish international Jacek Pszczola, known as 'Pepsi' (really), was in 7NT as South after East had opened 3♦ (not something you should try at home).

West led the nine of diamonds and Pepsi won in hand. He had the luxury of being able to delay the decision in hearts, and so started by cashing a second diamond and playing a heart to the ace, East dropping the queen. Declarer then took all his top tricks outside the heart suit, ending in hand. Now he led a small heart towards dummy and the moment of truth had arrived. With East having pre-empted, it was very likely that he held a singleton heart, but Pepsi did some counting, as experts are wont to do. West had shown up with six spades, three clubs and two diamonds and so he couldn't possibly hold three hearts. Mathematical certainty outranks even a Principle, so it was up with the king, down with jack, and out with pencil to record plus 1520.

I'm sorry if this example hasn't shown the Principle of Restricted Choice in a good light, but it is statistically sound, honest. If you don't believe me, then I hope we meet at the bridge table before you see the error of your ways. ❐

A variation of the Principle of Restricted Choice arose in an American TV show, hosted by Monty Hall. A contestant was shown three doors with randomly placed prizes behind them: a car and two goats. The contestant was asked to select a door but, before that door was opened, the show's host (who knew what was behind all the doors) would choose one of the other two doors and open it to reveal a goat.

Now the contestant was asked whether he would like to stick with his original door or switch to the other unopened door. What do you think he should do?

The producers of the show believed that it didn't make a difference; two doors, one car, it must be 50-50. When it was suggested that the contestant was twice as likely to win if he switched doors, there was a heated debate in scientific journals about the statistics of the so-called 'Monty Hall Problem'.

The key point is that two-thirds of the time the host had a restricted choice and you should assume that he didn't open the other door because he would have revealed the car. Look at it this way: if the door you initially selected had a car behind it (one third of the time), you lose by switching. But if the door you initially selected had a goat behind it (two thirds of the time), you win by switching.

Of course, if you collect goats and you don't drive a car, you might have a different strategy.