

FIVE KEYS TO LIFE MASTER

By Jim Kaplan

From the time you start playing competitive bridge, one of your goals should be on the prize: Life Master. An award given to players who have accumulated at least 300 masterpoints in designated amounts from club and tournament events, it certifies that you have played long and played well. Think of LM as a bridge player's version of achieving tenure at a university.

Despite its austere title, Life Master does not require a lifetime of stellar performance. I've seen determined players reach the peak in two or three years. No matter what your timetable is, I think I can help you speed it up with these five shortcuts to reaching Life Master.

Before presenting them, I want to be sure you're using the right ground rules:

- Do you have a good partner? By "good," I mean not only one who plays well (preferably better than you), but someone you enjoy playing with. Otherwise the journey isn't worth the time.
- Do you treat partner right? If you want a harmonious relationship, don't criticize play in the heat of the moment. In fact, don't raise any point unless there's a basic misunderstanding about bidding or carding. To the contrary, praise partner every chance you can: "If you hadn't pre-empted, we never would have had a chance to set the contract."

Yes, I know there are disputatious pairs who play high-level bridge. You don't want to be around them. You don't want to be like them. O.K. now is the time for some specific suggestions. These are insights and shortcuts that have helped intermediates and experts reach the 'promised land'.

1) There's something I call the 5-4-7 Rule. You probably know that you can raise to game when partner opens 1♥ or 1♠, and you have 5+ support, an outside singleton or void and fewer than 10 high-card points. Bridge columnists will tell you that something similar is at work when you have 4+ support.

Here's where the "7" comes in. If partner opens 1♥ or 1♠ and you have four-card support with no more than seven losers, you should raise to game.

How do you determine losers? Assume that in any given suit, the ace is led first, then the king, then the queen. No need to worry about the fourth trick. Therefore, Axx and Kxx are two-loser suits and KQx is a one-loser suit. With Qxx, you'd better assume 2 1/2 losers, since the queen may not hold up.

O.K., let's take an example. Partner opens 1♠, your RHO passes and you hold these cards as North:

♠ 9 6 5 3
 ♥ K 7
 ♦ K Q J 6 5
 ♣ 10 9

This looks like a standard 1♠-3♠ hand, but there are only seven losers: three spades, one heart, one diamond and two clubs. Bid 4♠.

Here's partner's hand:

♠ A Q J 10 8
 ♥ A J 9 5
 ♦ 9 4 3
 ♣ 3

Not everyone would bid 4♠ with the seven-loser South hand. North should eliminate any doubt by bidding 4♠ immediately. This 21-HCP partnership is virtually certain to make 10 tricks.

2) You've probably heard of the Rule of 3 and 2. Relating to pre-empts at the three level or higher, it says to pre-empt with a hand three tricks short of your bid when you're nonvulnerable and two short if you're vulnerable. But what if you're nonvulnerable and your opponents are vulnerable?

Enter the Rule of 4, 3 and 2. With favorable vulnerability, pre-empt *four* tricks short of your bid. Let's take a classic three level pre-empt:

♠ 10
 ♥ K Q J 8 6 4 3
 ♦ 7 5
 ♣ 9 4 2

You have six tricks all but guaranteed in a heart contract. Most players will automatically bid 3♥. But imagine how much more obstructive you could be by opening a level higher with favorable vulnerability:

	NORTH	
	♠ A 7 4	
	♥ 10	
	♦ J 10 9 8 3	
	♣ K Q 5 3	
WEST		EAST
♠ K Q J		♠ 9 8 6 5 3 2
♥ 5 2		♥ A 9 7
♦ A K Q 6 4 2		♦ —
♣ J 7		♣ A 10 8 6
	SOUTH	
	♠ 10	
	♥ K Q J 8 6 4 3	
	♦ 7 5	
	♣ 9 4 2	

South	West	North	East
4♥	?		?

Over a 3♥ pre-empt, West might bid 4♦. Over 4♥ and vulnerable, who's going to compete? Many East-West pairs will miss an easy to make 4♠ contract.

3) This tip comes from Marty Bergen: When you open one in a major and partner makes a limit raise, always go to game with a singleton or void. Let's say you open 1♠ with:

♠ A K 8 6 4
 ♥ 7
 ♦ K J 9 6
 ♣ J 4 3

Doesn't look like much, does it? But if partner bids 3S, you should accept the invitation to game. Partner might have nothing better than:

♠ J 7 3 2
 ♥ A 4
 ♦ Q 7 4 3
 ♣ K 10 6

Even with this raggedy partnership, you'd be unlucky not to make 4♠.

4) Cherish the two-suited fit.

With combined strength in two suits, a partnership can bid game with as few as half the high-card points in the deck. Consider:

NORTH

♠ 9 8
♥ K J 2
♦ A 7 5 4 3 2
♣ 4

SOUTH (D)

♠ 10 4
♥ A Q 10 5 3
♦ K Q J 8
♣ 8 3

South	North
1♥	1NT*
2♦	4♥
Pass	
* Forcing	

Once North hears South bid 2♦, game looks enticing indeed—even for a partnership with 20 HCP.

5) Constantly review.

As your game improves, your convention card will grow. You and partner will also share numerous agreements on carding. It's important to review regularly, lest you blow opportunities when they appear. For lack of study, I've failed to use—or misused—the gambling 3NT and Lebensohl, among other conventions, when opportunity knocked.

You need to review on your own as well. Learn to recognize situations that come up all the time. I was sitting West, with East dealing and both sides vulnerable, in a January 18 game at my home club in Northampton, Massachusetts:

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

South	West	North	East
			Pass
Pass	1 ♠	Pass	Pass
2 ♣	Pass	Pass	2 ♥
Pass	Pass	3 ♣	All Pass
Opening lead: ♠ A			

I cashed two spades, led a heart to the ace and won the heart return. But that was it. When I switched to a club, South cashed the ace-king, led a diamond to the closed hand, cashed the club queen and claimed.

As his club 10 crashed under the queen, my partner said, “Uppercut, Jim! You could have beaten them by leading a third spade. My club 10 uppercuts the queen, and your club jack set them.”

Exactly. And here’s where review helps. If I’d been thinking about bridge situations, I’d have known that any hand with jack-third or queen-second of trump could win a trump trick by uppercutting.

Tough it out. You’ll get there. It’s a great feeling when they call you Master.

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