

What's Standard?

Is Standard American a Myth? — by David Lindop



This is the first of a series of articles discussing the term “standard” when referring to modern bidding methods.

Is there such a thing as “Standard American” bidding methods and, if so, what is it? To address this issue, let's start with a little history.

According to Hoyle

Edmond Hoyle, an English barrister, was the first authority on the game of whist, the predecessor to bridge. In 1742 he published the first edition of what was to become the best-selling book of the 18th Century. Although the book wasn't very long, the title certainly was: *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist, Containing the Laws of the Game, and also Some Rules Whereby a Beginner May, with Due Attention to Them, Attain to the Playing It Well.*

Some ideas presented by Hoyle are still in use today. He introduced the concept of leading the fourth highest card from a long suit. He discussed the odds of suit distribution and how to draw conclusions about the hands held by the other players at the table from the cards played. His section covering ethics and fair play was incorporated into the laws of auction bridge nearly 200 years later.

Doctor Cavendish

In the latter half of the 19th Century, the popular authority on the game was known as “Cavendish.” This was actually the name of a London club of which Dr. Henry Jones was a member. Jones wrote about the game under the pseudonym of “Cavendish”.

Cavendish emulated Hoyle in the length of the title of his first book in 1863: *The Laws and Principles of Whist Stated and Explained, and Its Practice Illustrated on an Original System, by Means of Hands Played Completely Through.*

He introduced the concept of “duplicate” by running a match with four experts sitting North-South at one table and East-West at another, playing against four average players. The experts won handily, verifying that it was a game of skill, not luck.

Ely Takes Charge

As the current version of bridge took hold in North America, the leading authority on the game became Ely Culbertson. Ely was a master promoter and solidified his position by staging the “Match of the Century” in late 1931 against the leading authorities of the day.

The match was widely covered by the press and millions tuned in to the daily reports on the radio. Ely's victory, playing with his wife Josephine, catapulted him to the top of the field around the world.

Ely's book titles, such as the *Blue Book* and the *Gold Book*, were much shorter than those of his predecessors and introduced a constructive approach to bidding — a new suit by responder as forcing, for example — that is the foundation of many of today's methods. Even today, some players still play “Culbertson”.

Ely founded *The Bridge World* magazine in 1929, and it is still the leading publication on bridge for more experienced players. He was the first person elected to the Bridge Hall of Fame.

The Standard American

As WWII approached, Ely lost interest in the game and focused on politics. It didn't take long for a new standard-bearer to emerge. Charles Goren started winning tournaments in 1937 and became the top master-point holder in 1944, a position he held for nearly 20 years. By the early 50's his books were outselling those of Culbertson and his name became

synonymous with bridge for the remainder of the 20th Century.

Goren popularized the 4-3-2-1 point count method and it is his bidding methods that are commonly grouped under “Standard American.” As stated in the BRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA:

Standard American: A nebulous term applied to the methods of bidding most commonly used in the United States. It approximates closely the methods formerly advocated by Charles Goren.

And Today?

Goren stopped playing bridge in the early 1960's and his methods began to fall out of favor with tournament players in the 80's. Goren's approach included four-card major suit openings, strong two-bids, and forcing jump raises ... very little of which is seen in today's club and tournament play. As the BRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA goes on to say:

... players continue to describe their methods as “standard” when they use a modern style which is far removed from traditional Goren.

So, what is “Standard American” today? There are several possibilities.

1. **Goren (updated).** Goren's methods have gradually been revised by other writers to include five-card majors, limit raises, and weak twos.
2. **SAYC (Standard American Yellow Card).** This is the ACBL's attempt to produce a standard convention card of modern methods as determined by a committee. It has become popular in various circles, including online bridge on the Internet.
3. **Bridge World Standard.** These are the methods that have been put together by the Bridge World magazine from the preferences of over 100 American experts. It was most recently updated in 2001.

4. **2/1 Game Forcing.** A popular trend is to treat a simple new suit response at the two level over an opening bid of one-of-a-suit as forcing to game. This is sometimes referred to as Eastern Scientific or Western Scientific and includes methods developed in the 1960's by Richard Walsh and popularized by the late Max Hardy.

Unfortunately, all these "standards" only add to the confusion for most players. For example, what would you respond to an opening bid of 1♣ with this hand?

♠ K 8 3
♥ Q 10 5
♦ A 7 2
♣ Q 9 6 4

According to Goren, a response of 1NT would be fine since this shows about 9-11 points over 1♣. According to SAYC, you should probably respond 1♦ since 1NT is limited to 6-10 points, 2NT is 13-15 points, and a jump raise to 3♣ would show five-card support. In Bridge World Standard, you can respond 2NT, since that shows an invitational balanced hand of about 11-12 points. (That's the 2001 version. The earlier version had the "old-fashioned" range of 13-15 for a 2NT response.) Playing 2/1, you might choose to respond 2♣ since that's an "inverted" raise, showing 11 or more points and forcing for one round.

In summary, there is no such thing as "Standard American" today. It all depends on what methods you have been taught.

Standard Evolution

It's unrealistic to expect standards to remain static. New ideas are always coming along and, when the benefits are significant, old customs have to go — albeit reluctantly.

Witness the evolution of recorded music. The long playing record gave way to 45's and 8-track tapes. Then came cassettes, CDs, and now DVDs. No one expects that to be the end of the line.

Bidding methods have advanced in a similar fashion. Four-card major suit openings have been replaced by

five-card majors. Strong jump overcalls gave way to intermediate jump overcalls and now weak jump overcalls are almost universal.

Some methods fall in and out of popularity. It may appear that strong two-bids have been replaced by weak two-bids, but the weak two-bid was around long before Goren popularized strong twos.

So, we shouldn't cling too strongly to the methods by which we were taught. If we do, we may be missing some valuable benefits and we will eventually fall out of step with those around us.

Keep in mind that the bidding methods are guidelines, not rules. The rules of the game are that each bid in the auction must be higher on the Bidding Ladder than the preceding bid and that we must follow suit during the play. Counting 4 points for an ace and opening 1NT with a balanced hand of 15-17 points are guidelines, not rules.

Is a Standard Necessary?

Having said all that, perhaps we don't need any standards. No, that doesn't work. A lack of standards leads to more challenges than the problem of setting them. If you try to play a video from Europe in your North American machine, you're out of luck ... different technologies. But if you pick up a video at any store in North America, you don't have to worry that it won't play in your machine — at least not since Betamax lost out to VHS!

That's a comfortable feeling and the majority of bridge players want the same thing. They want to play with their peers without having to know numerous conventions; to use methods that are authentic and up-to-date; to feel safe from criticism and embarrassment at the table.

This is especially true at the entry level. Bringing new players into the game is challenging enough without facing them with countless alerts and director calls. It's the reason the

ACBL has tried to introduce a Classic convention card or, more recently, a "fat-free" card.

As players become more experienced, it's easier to deal with multiple standards. After all, even if the vast majority of computer owners use the Windows operating system, there still seems to be room for the Macintosh or Unix advocates. So, we should be able to

have a basic system that can coexist with a Bridge World Standard or a 2/1 system for more experienced players.

Where To From Here?

Although today's game is filled with experts, each with their opinion of the best methods to use, the most recognized "authority" is the editor of PLAY BRIDGE, Audrey Grant. She wrote the ACBL Series of books, starting in the mid-80's and has trained thousands of teachers. Many of today's players were introduced to the game through the CLUB, DIAMOND, and HEART books.

The methods used in that series were those suggested by teachers and experts in the 80's. The game has changed since then and Audrey has recently embarked on a new basic series that incorporates more of today's "standards" such as a 15-17 1NT range and weak two-bids. Her advisory panel includes many of the world's top players, teachers, and authors.

Being closely allied with Audrey — our silver wedding anniversary isn't too far away — I'm going to present two sets of methods in the upcoming articles in this series: a "Grant Basic" for beginning players and a "Grant Standard" for regular club and tournament players.

The methods recommended will be those that I feel are practical and in line with "standard practice" — popular methods in use today. The focus will be on keeping things simple, natural, and flexible.

Let's see how it goes.