

The Foundation System

Competitive Bidding

Introduction

In the earlier chapters of this book, the opponents have been silent during the auction, just sitting there and passing quietly while we bid unimpeded to the correct contract. This is **not** the usual situation. The very word *action* implies a contest in which the players at the table compete for the right to name the final contract. In the modern game, competitive auctions are the norm. In an average duplicate session, at least half, and often as many as 80 percent, of the auctions will be competitive.

The methods available to your opponents when they wish to compete after your side has opened the bidding will be described in the remaining chapters of this book: *Overcalls*, *Takeout Doubles*, and *Two-Suited Bidding*. These methods will, of course, also be available to you and your partner when you wish to compete after the opponents have opened the bidding.

Such competition involves the risk of being doubled and losing a penalty greater than the value of the contract which could have been reached in the absence of the competition. This penalty depends upon the vulnerability. When you are doubled not vulnerable, down one (-100) is usually less than the value of an opposing partscore; down two (-300) is less than the value of a non-vulnerable game; and down three (-500) is less than the value of a vulnerable game; down four (-800) is less than the value of a non-vulnerable slam; even down five (-1100) is less than the value of a vulnerable slam, and down six (-1400) is less than the value of a vulnerable slam in a major suit or in notrump. When vulnerable, the picture changes. Down one (-200) is worse than the value of an opposing partscore; down two (-500) is worse than a non-vulnerable game; down three (-800) is worse than any opposing game; down four (-1100) is worse than a non-vulnerable slam; and down five (perish the thought: -1400) is worse than a vulnerable minor suit slam.

There are a number of motives for the opponents to risk such penalties (or for you to do so when the opponents open the bidding). In rough order of priority, these are: (1) The hope that their side can reach a makeable contract, or can push your side to a contract at a high-enough level that they can defeat you; (2) The hope that their interference will disrupt your auction to such an extent that you miss an easy game or slam, or play in the wrong suit; (3) If they defend, the hope that their bidding will help the defense more than it helps declarer during the play of the hand, and in particular that it will help partner find the best opening lead, especially against the ever-popular 3NT contract.

Your primary means of countering defensive interference by the opponents after your side has opened the bidding are the hand-evaluation methods you have already learned based on the Losing Trick Count. This chapter will describe the Negative Double, the Support Double, and the Law of Total Tricks, a vital tool to assist you in deciding when to bid once more, and when to pass or double the opponents.

The Negative Double

The negative double applies when your side has opened the bidding with a natural bid in a suit and Opener's left-hand opponent overcalls with a natural suit bid. After such an overcall, all new suit bids by Responder are natural and forcing one round; raises and notrump bids are natural and non-forcing, with notrump bids guaranteeing a stopper in the opponent's suit (although the stopper is only implied if the notrump bid is at the one-level). When Responder has an unbalanced hand that is not strong enough to make a forcing bid at the next level, he has a problem. He also has a problem if he has a balanced hand lacking a stopper in the opponent's suit and unsuitable for a raise of Opener's suit.

The modern solution to that problem is to double the opponent's bid. This is called a negative double, and shows enough strength for a non-forcing bid at the next level with support for both unbid suits. If one of the unbid suits is a major, the usual agreement is that the double shows a 4-card holding in the unbid major, almost regardless of doubler's holding in the other unbid suit. If both majors are unbid, the doubler is expected to be at least 43 in both majors. Opener will usually bid one of the unbid suits or notrump, or rebid the suit he opened with. Responder is then free to pass or bid naturally. Such bids by Responder are normally not forcing; the only way Responder can force after making a negative double is to cue-bid the opponent's suit, or to jump in a new suit.

Negative doubles apply so long as the opponent's overcall is below some level which has been previously agreed by the partnership. The most commonly agreed level is 3S, and that will be the Foundation System agreement; all doubles above that level are penalty doubles. Al Roth, the legendary inventor of the negative double, claims that he plays negative doubles after overcalls as high as 7H, but that is considered highly eccentric by most experts.

After a 1H overcall of a minor-suit opening, bidding a 4-card spade suit does not need the strength required for a two-level response, so the double in this situation definitely shows both spades and the unbid minor. Bidding 1S here thus shows either a 5+card suit, or a 4-card suit with less than Qxxx in the unbid minor.

Another school of thought uses the negative double of 1H to show a 4-card spade suit so that a 1S bid can be used to guarantee a 5+card suit. This approach is playable, but is not part of the Foundation System.

The Support Double

The support double applies after a minor-suit opening bid and a major-suit response, when the player in the fourth seat (Opener's RHO) makes an intervening bid. A double in this situation is used to guarantee 3-card support for Responder's major, so that a raise of Responder's suit can guarantee 4-card support. If RHO's intervening bid was a double, a redouble can be used for the same purpose (the Support Redouble). Typical support double auctions would be 1C/P/1S/2D/DbI or 1D/P/2H/2S/DbI or 1D/P/1S/DbI/RDbI or 1C/1H/1S/2H/DbI.

As with the Negative Double, there needs to be some prior partnership agreement about how high the intervening bid must be before a double becomes a penalty double and the Support Double no longer applies. Some pairs set that limit as low as 2S, but for consistency the Foundation System will retain the same 3S limit used for the Negative Double.

After a support double, subsequent bidding by both partners is usually natural. As is the case with a Negative Double, the doubler's partner may pass the double when holding a suitable defensive hand, in hopes of collecting a lucrative penalty.

A common misconception is that in a situation where a support double could be made, a support double is absolutely required when holding 3-card support, and a Pass absolutely denies 3-card support, and is just as alertable as the Support Double. I call this agreement the Non-Support Pass, and it is definitely **not** part of the Foundation System, in which a pass in this situation merely shows that you do not care to participate in the auction at this time. The usual reason for non-participation is that you fear further bidding on your part would encourage partner to bid too high. In other situations, with a defensively-oriented hand you may wish to make a trap pass in hopes that the opponents will over-extend themselves and succumb to a lucrative penalty double.

The Law of Total Tricks

A typical competitive auction might go something like this: 1S/2H/2S/3H/? Both sides have found a fit, and need to decide whether to compete further, in hopes of making their contract or incurring a penalty smaller than the score their opponents are likely to make, or, alternatively, to pass or double in hopes of defeating the opponents. Now suppose that the 1S Opener holds Kxxx in diamonds and his partner holds xxx. In a spade contract, Opener will lose two diamonds if the diamond ace is favorably placed, or three diamonds if it is unfavorably placed. If the opponents play in a heart contract, they will lose one diamond if the ace is favorably placed for Opener, but will lose no diamonds if the ace is unfavorably placed for Opener. Note that regardless of the position of the diamond ace, the total number of diamond losers, if the hand is played once in spades and then again in hearts, is three, regardless of the position of the diamond ace. When cards are placed favorably for one side, that side will make more than the expected number of tricks, and the other side will make correspondingly fewer tricks. This same logic applies to the placement of high cards in all four suits. Thus, on average, if both sides have a fit and a hand is played twice, once in Opener's suit and once in the opponents' suit, the total number of tricks won in both contracts ($W1 + W2$) will be a constant, regardless of the placement of high cards among the four players. Obviously, adverse ruffs can play havoc with this concept, but it works remarkably well when both sides have at least an 8-card trump suit with moderately balanced hands.

The Law of Total Tricks extends this concept by suggesting that $W1 + W2$ is equal to the total number of trumps held by both sides ($T1 + T2$). Thus, if Opener's side has 9 spades and the opponents have 8 hearts, a total of 17 tricks should be made in both contracts, so if Opener can make 3S (9 tricks), we should expect the opponents to make 8 tricks and be down one in 3H, so that Opener should bid 3S if the opponents are not vulnerable, or consider doubling 3H in hopes of scoring 200 if they are vulnerable. If Opener's side has only 8 trumps, he should let them play 3H and hope to beat it, and should only bid 3S if he is not vulnerable and reasonably certain that they can make 3H.

Before the Law of Total Tricks can be applied intelligently, you need to have a good estimate of the number of trumps held by both sides. This means that you need good agreement with your partner about when a bid shows 3-card support vs 4-card support. Equally important, but more difficult, is knowing enough about the opponents' methods to estimate how many trumps they hold. In the auction which introduced this topic, Opener has shown 5+spades and Responder has shown 3+card support. If Opener is wavering between passing and bidding 3S, he should tend to bid if he has a 6-card suit and to pass or consider doubling with only a 5-card suit, expecting that if partner has 4-card support, he in turn will tend to bid 3S, but will tend to pass or consider doubling with only 3-card support. This leads to an important corollary of the Law of Total Tricks: It is usually safe to bid to the same level as the total number of trumps your side holds. With 8, the 2-level is safe; with 9, the 3-level is safe; with 10, the 4-level is safe; etc. Safe here means that if you do not make your contract, the penalty is likely to be less than the score the opponents would have made if you had let them play it.

Danger Signs

In a recent Swiss Teams game, I opened 1C with ♠ KJ98 ♥ A104 ♦ 8 ♣ A9863, LHO overcalled 1S, partner bid 2D, and RHO passed. What to bid now? LHO is bidding my second suit, and partner is bidding my singleton; these are both definite danger signs. Partner's bid is not forcing to game, but it is definitely forcing one round. Surely, if he had 4 hearts partner might have made a negative double here, so he probably has 2353 or 1363 shape, and he might even have 1354 and be wondering if I've opened a 3-card club suit. My opening bid vanished after the 1S overcall, so it is tempting to pass 2D before the doubling starts, and this partner would forgive that lack of partnership discipline if my pass avoided a disaster. But discipline won over practicality, and I mustered up a 2H call, expecting that partner would bid 2S to invite me to bid notrump, or else he would bid 3 of either minor, which I would be more than happy to pass. Now LHO bid 2S and I breathed a sigh of relief. My relief was short-lived, however, for partner's next bid was 4H. Fortunately, no one thought to double, and dummy came down with ♠ 5 ♥ K973 ♦ AKJ9653 ♣ 3.

Astute readers of earlier chapters will have surmised that I have a lot of experience playing 43 trump fits, because of my penchant for making a temporizing bid in a 3-card suit in hopes of steering partner into a notrump contract. Here, ever the optimist, I quickly noted after the club lead that 4H is cold on a dummy reversal if the diamonds split 32 and the hearts are 33 or 42 (Win the ace of clubs, lead a diamond to the ace, ruff a diamond, play the ace and king of hearts, and keep leading good diamonds, letting them ruff with the two outstanding trumps). Alas, it was not to be! When I led the first round of diamonds, LHO ruffed, and after two revokes by the opponents I was still down one. The moral of this tale is to be alert for danger signs in the auction. As soon as you are certain that you and partner have an obvious misfit, pass at the first passable opportunity. If the auction indicates that the high cards are poorly placed for your side, choose a conservative call in preference to an aggressive one. Be wary of singleton honors, doubleton AKx and QJs, and a holding of three small cards in partner's suit. Conversely, choose aggressive calls when holding a high honor, especially the queen, in partner's long suit, and when holding 4-card support for partner with a side singleton or void, and/or a good 5+card suit of your own. Reading these positive signs, as well as the danger signs, that crop up in most competitive auctions is the mark of the expert you aspire to be.