

(The Importance of) Bidding Philosophy

I am a firm believer that the success of a partnership in bidding will depend much more on the compatibility of the general bidding philosophy of the partners than in the number and type of conventions upon which they can agree. Except where the body of the system dictates otherwise, I try to utilize the following tenets as much as possible:

Order of bid suits describes shape

The order that I bid suits will always describe the shape of my hand. I bid my four-card suits up the line. If I bid a higher suit, followed by a lower suit, I have described (at least) a 5-4 distribution. If I then rebid the first suit, I have described (at least) a 6-4, and if I rebid the second suit I have described (at least) a 5-5.

Level of bid suits describes strength

If I bid my suits without jumping or reversing, I am describing a minimum opener, a minimum overcaller, or a minimum responder.

Bidding up the line

I bid my four-card suits up the line. Since I am usually playing 5-card majors, my minor suit openings may consist of a 3-card suit. If I am forced to open a 3-card minor suit, any responses or rebids will constitute (at least) a 4-card suit. If my partner opens 1♣ and I am holding two or three four-card suits, I will respond with the lower suit. I will not bypass a four-card diamond suit to bid a four-card major suit ***unless my hand is only worth one bid in the absence of a game-forcing rebid by partner.*** In this way, I can always describe the shape of my hand with ease and with the knowledge that we will not miss a 4-4 fit.

As long as I am bidding suits up the line, I have no fear of missing an 8-card fit in the absence of a competitive auction. But that philosophy must be used ***regardless of the relative strength of the suits in question.***

Similarly, the rebid of a suit promises 5 cards, and denies the existence of a lower-ranking 4-card suit ***unless my partner has already denied that suit.*** For example, the sequence 1♦ - Pass - 1♥ - Pass - 2♦ promises 5 diamonds, and (more importantly) denies both a four-card spade suit (could have rebid 1♠) and a four-card club suit (could have rebid 2♣). This notion of what a bid ***denies*** is absolutely as important as what it promises. I adhere to it without violation.

This bidding philosophy has fallen into some disfavor recently, partly because of the influence of those who play 2/1. It is still the most effective bidding philosophy, especially at matchpoints, especially with a newer partnership, and always when playing Standard American.

Reverses

A reverse is simply the occurrence of a bidding sequence of two previously unbid suits that would intentionally force the bidder's partner to a higher level than if the suits were bid in the opposite order. A reverse promises (at least) a 5-4 distribution (5 of the first bid suit, 4 of the rebid suit), and "extra values". It is always (at least) a one-round force. With two "touching suits", such as diamonds and hearts, this is easy to recognize; the following sequence is clearly a reverse: 1♦ - Pass - ♠ - Pass - 2♥. This implies (at least) 5 diamonds, (at least) 4 hearts, and a hand stronger than a minimum opener (perhaps 17 points).

In the same way, the following sequence constitutes a reverse by responder: 1♦ - Pass - 1♥ - Pass - 2♦ - Pass - 2♠. This would describe (at least) 5 hearts, (at least) 4 spades, and a game-going hand opposite partner's opener.

Notrump responses to one of a suit

Following the principles described above, a 1NT response to partner's opening bid denies sufficient points to bid at the 2-level, and denies a higher-ranking 4-card suit. Such a hand may contain ***any other***

distribution; it may contain a long lower-ranking suit without sufficient high-card points to bid at the 2-level. A 1NT response to an opening bid of 1♠ is possible with either:

♠ xx ♥ Kxxx ♦ xxxx ♣ KJx
♠ xx ♥ Kxx ♦ KJxxxx ♣ xx

In the latter example, after a 1NT response, I am now free to bid my diamond suit without showing additional values. Whether I would do so depends upon other factors, including my partner's rebid and the vulnerability.

Balancing

Balancing is the act of reopening the bidding (especially at low levels of bidding) in the pass-out seat. It is a mechanism utilized when the opponents enter the bidding and partner has declined an opportunity to bid or double. I will balance with a rebid of my suit (when it's self-sufficient), a new suit (when I'm 5-5 or better), a double (when I want my partner to make a descriptive bid; especially when I have four cards in an unbid major suit), or with a NT call when I have a balanced hand outside of the suit I have already shown (particularly when I do not have four cards in at least one of the unbid major suits).

Negative double

When my partner opens the bidding and the opponents have entered the bidding, I often find that the bid I wanted to make is not available to me. For example, on the sequence: 1♦ - 1♠ - ? I am holding:

♠ xx ♥ Kxxx ♦ xx ♣ KJxx

I was prepared to respond 1♥, but I do not have sufficient values to bid at the two-level (my partner will expect at least 5 hearts and at least 10 HCP). When I encounter this situation, I automatically start thinking about the three additional calls that the opponent's overcall has provided me. These three calls are: negative double, cue bid, and pass. Each has an altered meaning that it would have in a non-competitive sequence.

A pass in this situation **does not necessarily deny points**. Although I would pass without points, I would also pass with points if I did not have a fit for partner, did not have 4 cards in the unbid suits (at least in all unbid major suits), and was in possession of one of more natural trump tricks (particularly with length) in the opponents' suit.

I will rely upon my partner to balance (see above) to keep the bidding open (if practical) if the hand should get passed back to the opener. If my holding was defensive in nature and partner balances with a double, I can convert that to a penalty double by passing. I will not pass a balancing double unless I am intentionally converting for penalties. If I am holding a weak hand I will support my partner with as few as 2 trumps, bid my best (previously unbid) four-card suit, or (in a dire emergency) will bid a (previously unbid) major suit with 3 cards.

When is a double a negative double?

My double is a negative double when all of the following exist:

- (1) my partner has already bid,
- (2) the opponents have entered the bidding,
- (3) I have not previously shown a suit (or suits) of my own.

In short, a double is a negative double when it is not a penalty double, or another conventional double.

In the following, the first is a negative double, but the second is a penalty double:

1♦ - 1♠ - Dbl - Pass - 2♦ - 2♠ - Dbl

What does a negative double show?

At the one-level, my negative doubles will promise a four-card (or longer) suit in at least one unbid major and I will tend to have four cards in either of the unbid suits. I will be holding 6-10 HCP. At the two-level I will promise four cards (or more) in any unbid major with the same 6-10 points. I will also make a negative double when holding four cards or more in **both** unbid suits and up to 12 points. I will have a

tendency to be quicker to make a negative double than bidding a new suit when the opponents are vulnerable...

How do I respond to a negative double?

If my partner makes a negative double and I am holding 4 cards in a "promised" major, I will bid that major at the appropriate level (assuming my partner has about 7-8 points). I will invite with about 15 HCP and a fit; I will jump to game with about 17 points and a fit. If the opponents bid between my partner's negative double and my response, I will double (responsive double) when I want my partner to choose between playing one of the two unbid suits and defending a doubled contract. I will have no preference between the two unbid suits. **If not playing responsive doubles**, such a double would be a penalty double and denies a fit for partner's indicated suits.

Cue bids

Any time the opponents have overcalled, they have given us the opportunity to make a cue bid. A cue bid is simply any bid of an opponent's (natural) suit ***Below the game level, a cue bid has a radically different meaning than on a slam sequence.*** Cue bids are totally artificial and can have a number of different meanings, especially at the three-level.

Low level cue bid meanings

When the opponents overcall a major suit opening, many players treat an immediate cue bid as a limit raise. If not playing that convention, a cue bid is an unmistakable request for partner to further clarify the shape of the hand. (Somewhat in order of preference) I would show an additional (sixth) card in my opening suit, a second four-card suit (if headed by honors), or a balanced distribution. My notrump response would not promise stoppers in the opponents' suit, but would simply deny either of the previous distributions.

Higher level cue bid meanings

A cue bid at the 3-level is usually used to discuss a stopper in the opponents' suit. Traditionally, the bid was used to ***show*** a stopper. Today, it is much more frequently used to ***ask*** about a stopper in the opponents' suit (Western cue bid); if partner does have such a stopper, this is an invitation to 3NT.

Competing with single-suited hands, three-suited hands, and two-suited hands

With a weak single-suited hand, I simply overcall. A simple overcall (in the absence of further bidding by the overcaller) implies no interest in any other suit. It can be used to compete or to sacrifice, to indicate a lead, or to dictate some other defensive strategy.

With a three-suited hand of nominal strength, I may make a takeout double to solicit some preference from my partner in competing or defending.

With a stronger single-suited hand, I will double first to solicit a response from my partner, and then (ignoring that response) bid my own suit, thus describing the strength of the hand and the independence of the suit.

All of this is pretty standard.

A two-suited hand is one that consists of two suits, each of which is (at least) 5 cards in length. Bidding two-suited hands might be the most misunderstood sequences in all of standard bidding.

But with two-suited hands, my bidding will be radically different. To begin with, I will ***never*** start with a double, regardless of the strength of the hand. If I double first, my partner will either expect a self-sufficient suit or will bid with confidence that I have support for any chosen suit. This leads to disastrous results.

With two-suited hands my first preference is to make a bid that unmistakably promises two suits and (if possible) a bid that absolutely names the two suits. Examples of such bids are Michaels (either majors or minors), or Unusual NT. However, if such a bid is not available, or if it leaves partner with "undesirable"

options, I have a tendency to overcall the higher-ranking of the two suits and, on my next turn to call, to bid the lower-ranking suit at the highest level that I can stand, taking into consideration vulnerability.