

♠♥♦♣ Learning Points – Competitive Bidding Best Practices

By Steve Moese

January 25, 2011

Bidding Level: Basic

Tuesday Night Lecture Series

Sound competitive bidding brings both pairs to the fine edge of risk. The pair that has shared better information will make better decisions. Interveners want to shift the auction from an unobstructed conversation to a space-shortened guessing game. This eliminates many bidding tools. They also want to provide guidance for defense (opening leads, points of attack). Who can force the other side to make the final decision with less than sufficient information safely?

| | | |
|---|------------------|-----------------|
| Who's Who in Competitive Auctions: | | |
| | Responder | |
| Intruder (Overcaller) | | Advancer |
| | Opener | |

How do we make heads or tails of what seems to be a complex situation? First let's agree that Competitive Auctions are different from Constructive Auctions (no one intervenes). There are 2 kinds of competitive auctions: **We Open -They Intrude** and **They Open-We Intrude**. Not only are the treatments and conventions used in constructive auctions different from competitive auctions, they differ between the 2 kinds of competitive auctions. Constructive auction bidding is outlined on the front or right side of your convention card. Competitive bidding approaches are outlined on the back or left side of your convention card.

| Constructive Auctions | We Open They Intrude Responder | They Open We Intrude Advancer |
|--|---|--|
| Opener: 1 Bids & Rebids 1N Forcing /Majors 2/1 Game Force (or 1 Rd. Force) Jump Shift Treatments Responder: Weak, Constructive, Invitational, Forcing, Slam invitational | Negative Double & Freebids Pass = weak or penalty (Neg. Double) Cue Bid Limit Raise/Jordan 2N Preemptive Raises Weak Jump Shifts Western Cue Bid (1 Ask 2 Show) Support Doubles Unusual Over Unusual Michaels Over Michaels <i>(← Lose: 1N Forcing, Splinter Bids, 2/1 GF, Jacoby 2N, and minor suit Inv+ raises)</i> | Simple Overcalls & Takeout Doubles Pass = weak Cue Bid Inv + or GF New Suit Preemptive Raises Weak Jump Overcall Western Cue Bid (1 Ask 2 Show) Responsive Doubles Maximal Doubles Rosenkranz or Snapdragon Dbls |
| Bidding over NT Stayman, Jacoby Transfers, Texas Transfers, 3-Bids You Define, Gerber, 4N/5N Quantitative Invite | NT Systems ON/OFF Rose (Stole my bid) Double (→2♣) Lebensohl (Fast Denies) Texas Transfers (→ 3♣) <i>(← Lose: Stayman, Jacoby Transfers, Texas Transfers, 3-Bids You Define)</i> | Natural, DONT, Modified Cappelletti, Meckwell, Others Responder 2N Invite ("cue" bid) Preemptive Raises Weak Jump Overcall Penalty Doubles |
| Weak 2's & Preempts Ogust/Feature, New Suit Forces | Negative Double & Freebids Cue Bid Limit Raise Preemptive Raises | (Stronger) Overcalls Strong Jump Overcall Takeout Double Lebensohl Responses |
| Strong 2♣. 2♦ waits then Cheaper Minor 2 nd negative | Dbl = Immediate Negative Pass = GF Values, no good suit. Freebid = GF w/good suit <i>(Lose: 2D waits)</i> | Dbl – lead direction Weak Jump Overcall Weak/Lead Directing Overcalls Pass then Bid = Strong !! |

*= FIR means Forcing 1 Round. GF is Game Forcing. SI is Slam Invitational.

Don't be misled by the convention card – what you fill out is only an outline of your tool kit. The real value comes from working with partner to knit together a **usable, memorable, and seamless** tool kit for each bidding context. This takes time. Don't be impatient.

One important detail: Know what a **balancing auction** is and what it is not. Balancing is the fine art of keeping the auction alive when you judge that any likely negative score your way is better than letting the opponents play where they are. The idea is to force opponents one level higher if they choose to declare, or to force them to pass or double – this is the FINAL DECISION Kit Woolsey reminds us we want opponents to take. The balancing position is the person to make the final pass that would otherwise end the auction. When to balance depends on the level.

Never let opponents play at the 1-level. Balancing with 8-10 HCP and a 5 card suit makes sense when opponents stop at the 2-level after bidding 1 or 2 suits. If they bid 3 suits, do not balance. There is either a misfit or they truly own 3 suits and you are going nowhere. Balancing usually ends at the 3-level. Bidding at the 4 level is usually for sacrifice purposes or to remind opponents they should bid their games. If we are vulnerable, be sure the Losing Trick Count and the Law says we can make our contract. Down 1 doubled Vulnerable is the much feared -200 → normally a bottom board. Balancing deserves detailed study.

| Who | Direct Position | Balancing Position |
|------------------|---|---|
| Bidder | Double = Takeout 3 suits supported Overcall = 8-16 HCP 5+ Cards NT overcall = 15-18 HCP | Double = Takeout for major(s) Overcall = 8-14 HCP 5+ Cards - w/more HCP Dbl 1 st . 1NT/1 bid = 11-14 Maybe no stopper With 15-17 double then bid NT With 18-19 double then Jump NT 2NT / 1 bid = 20-21 HCP Bal (NOT UNUSUAL NOTRUMP) 2NT / 2 bid = 8-10 HCP 44+ in minors |
| Bidder's Partner | Takeout Double Bidding Overcall Responses Systems on over our NT overcall. Penalty Doubles | Pass double for penalty (You hold the cards) Bid show suggested by balancer (never pass 2N after a weak 2 bid, you won't have a source of tricks). Bid own 5+ Card suit (careful) |

Above all, **talk with partner**. Identify what you are both comfortable playing and stay away from complexity. Something effective that is easily remembered and accurately applied is more valuable than a treasure chest of conventions and treatments. Better to save energy for the play of the hand! Some themes to think about:

- Focus on Fit.** An 8 card trump fit or better improves our chance of success. Can you tell the difference between a 3, 4, or 5-card raise from partner? Always support with support - an urgent priority.
- Think Working Points and Useful Shortness.** Working points develop tricks in our long suits. Useful shortness limits the tricks they can take in their suits. Use splinter bids to locate shortness so partner can be part of the decision.
- Sound actions.** Have defense when you overcall. Do not have defense when you preempt. Meet the shape, quick trick and top trick requirements for your bids. Do not stampede yourself into an inaccurate bid. Discipline matters. Have what you promise when you make a <takeout double>. Know what subsequent calls are once you have made a <takeout double>. Do not overbid after making a <takeout double> just to compete. Follow the **Law of Total Tricks**, and the **Losing Trick Count** with a trump fit.
- Know your auction.** Use the right tool kit for **Constructive**, **They Intrude** and **We Intrude** auctions. Know the differences and similarities. Stay in the right context.
- Know when to Balance.** Know what balancing is and get comfortable with it. Hands that are flawed for an initial action can easily bid later. Not every hand should act right away. Know when NOT to balance (misfits, they mention 3 suits, they dance around game and stop short). Never punish partner for balancing.
- Know when to compete, when to invite, and when to force.** Know when partner is competing. If partner has other ways to invite or force, a raise simply competes (obstruct the opponents). Same goes for you...
- Set game forces as low as possible.** Use the space you gain to explore slam. Know how and when to cuebid and how to respond to partner's cuebids.
- Use **fast arrival** to show **minimum** hands. 1♠-P-2N-P-4♣ is weaker than 1♠-P-2N-P-3♣.
- Actively revalue your hand during the auction.** What do you know about their shape and location of their HCP? What possibilities does that suggest for your side? Hand valuation is dynamics throughout the course of the bidding.
- When preempting, be disciplined.** Rule of 2-3-4-(5). Preempts say everything about your hand in one bid. If you have to bid twice then you don't have a preempt. Jump immediately and stay put, unless partner forces you. Avoid distorted preempts. Have your bid. Your partner will thank you.
- Show partner we hold 9+ trumps.** Listen carefully for how many trumps their side has. Estimate total tricks from the Law. If 17 or fewer let them play at the 3 level. If 18 or more, strive to declare. Be pushy when

We improve our chances for a higher score by competing to:

- 1) Find our fit (strain and level)
- 2) Interfere with opponents' constructive bidding – remove bidding space.
- 3) Suggest a defense

vulnerability is in your favor and you have a good fit. When NV, bid to the level of the number of trumps your side holds as long as your values and long suits are working.

- 12) **Stop bidding** when you determine the hand is a **misfit**. **Stop immediately**. Any correction you try to make will only get you in deeper. If partner has bid 2 different suits and not raised your 1st suit, what makes you think s/he has a fit for your 2nd (our 4th) suit? Ugh.....
- 13) **Devalue bad honor holdings**. Don't count HCP unless they are working. Singleton A, K, Q. Doubleton AK, AQ, KQ, KJ, QJ, Qx, Jx. These cards are not pulling full weight in your long suits without further information from partner. Beware AKQ with no small card.
- 14) **HCP in their suit** are not working in your long suits. They detract from HCP partner needs in the remaining suits to make our contract. Since we hold their HCP, they must hold HCP in the other suits, or substantial distribution.
- 15) **Length in their suit** is useful on defense if they play in that suit. Otherwise it is useless. Don't get excited.
- 16) **Ax or Axx(x) is a poor stopper for NT**. This might mean they hold an Ace that controls our long suit. Once our "Stopper" is gone we are at the mercy of their long suit. Since they lead first, guess what will happen... Slow stoppers (QJx) are better because our aces are likely working.
- 17) **Know your doubles**. Know when they are takeout, cooperative, penalty or something else. You don't determine this by the time on your watch or the hand you are playing. What do doubles mean in low level auctions?
- 18) When you choose to deviate from your agreements (and you will) **deviate by one non-critical flaw** not more than one flaw. Avoid wild leaps where the downside is large compared to the possible gain.

Useful Competitive Bidding Conventions

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Takeout Doubles & Overcalls <i>Fit & Working Points</i> <i>Useful Shortness</i></p> | <p>Takeout doubles and overcalls work together so we can intervene constructively. More later. Responsive Doubles occur in specific contexts to help move the auction forward when we have no other bid to use. Maximal overcall doubles occur in competitive auctions where we own the higher ranking of 2 touching suits. They distinguish between competing and inviting. The Trap Pass occurs when partner had a chance to make a takeout double and passes. A later double is PENALTY showing a hand with the wrong Shape/Strength for an initial takeout double.</p> |
| <p>Negative Doubles and Freebids <i>Fit & Working Points</i> <i>Useful Shortness</i></p> | <p>When 2 suits have been bid and it's your turn to respond, the negative double should be part of your arsenal. The Negative Double brings unbid Major(s) or minors into focus lacking wither length or strength to make a freebid. Be sure opener know their responsibility when responder passes. A freebid is a new suit by responder – it forces for 1 round to 3 of opener's suit.</p> |
| <p>Support Cue Bids <i>Working Points</i> <i>Fit Length</i></p> | <p>When they intervene in our auction the support cue bid shows a limit raise or better for partner's suit. Partner can respond to show a stopper in their suit just in case the right strain is NT. When we intervene, Advancer's cue bid is a limit raise or better hand –or– a game force hand with a suit of its own.</p> |
| <p>Weak Jump Shifts Preemptive Raises <i>Obstruction</i></p> | <p>Similar to preempts. Experts advise a more aggressive approach once opponents have begun to exchange information. Be sure to keep your overcalls and takeout doubles away from your weak jump shifts. They NEVER overlap. Think defensive tricks. Think LAW and # of Trumps.</p> |
| <p>Support Doubles <i>Fit</i></p> | <p>Only by opener when 4th seat intervenes through the 2-level. Shows 3 cards support for ♠, ♥, or ♦. A raise is 4-card support. Any other action is 2 or fewer cards in responder's suit. Be sure to discuss how the auction continues – what are responder's weak, invitational, and strong actions? How do you penalize RHO's overcall? What auctions are NOT Support Doubles?</p> |
| <p>Jordan 2N <i>Fit & Working Points</i> <i>Useful Shortness</i></p> | <p>When they make a takeout double, responder can show 3-card and 4-card limit raise or game force support. The Jordan 2N shows 4-card support and Invitational hand or better. Redouble then support shows a limit raise with 3 cards.</p> |
| <p>Splinter Raises <i>Fit & Working Points</i> <i>Useful Shortness</i></p> | <p>An unnecessary jump shift by responder or opener. Requirements vary by context. By their nature they are game forcing and invite slam. What works in a constructive auction might be wrong in a competitive auction.</p> |
| <p>Forcing Pass <i>Working Points</i> <i>Useful Shortness</i> <i>(Fit Known)</i></p> | <p>When we initiate an invitational auction and they interfere at a high level, a direct pass shows 1) No wasted values in their suit, and 2) extra values for the bidding so far. Conversely a Double by the Forcing Passer would show wasted values or length in their trump suit, or a minimum for previous bidding. Partner is FORCED to bid or double. Partner may NOT pass. With a void in their suit, do not make a forcing pass – bid one more on your own. A good partner will get the message.</p> |

A few other treatments and conventions you'll find: Michaels 2-suit cue bids (Direct and Balancing seat); Unusual Notrump (Direct Seat Only); "Systems on" after they Double or overcall our 1NT with 2♣ (Double of 2♣ is

Stayman – Rose [Stole My Bid] Double); Lebensohl; Texas Transfers. There are so many.... Familiarity is your goal - you know how to add what they say to your analysis. Don't go convention-happy on your partner.

Learning Points:

- 1) Know **why** we compete.
- 2) **Avoid too many conventions. Do the work to integrate the right few into our bidding scheme.** The zeal for the latest silver hammer often leads to a poorly built house. We don't work through the consequences of our choice. The consequences – how a convention integrates with our bidding scheme, what it changes and what ambiguities are created – need to be addressed even more than the choice of the convention itself. Too many conventions and multiple partners leads to confusion simply because everybody like to have it their way. Likewise too many conventions and treatments uses mental effort that might more wisely go toward analyzing the play of the hand.
- 3) Remember why and **how our bidding adapts** to the 3 auction types (Constructive, They Intrude, We Intrude).
- 4) Know when we **compete**, when we **invite**, and when we are **force to game**. Use (penalty) doubles properly.
- 5) Get comfortable with **Balancing Auctions** and balance effectively and often ... but don't play at my table.

References:

- 1) Matchpoints by Kit Woolsey
- 2) Competitive Bidding in the 21st Century by Marshall Miles
- 3) The Complete Book on Overcalls in Contract Bridge by Mike Lawrence
- 4) The Complete Book on Takeout Doubles by Mike Lawrence
- 5) Double! New Meaning for an Old Bid by Mike Lawrence
- 6) Demon Defense and Demon Doubling: Defend With Skill And Double For Keeps by August Boehm;
- 7) Preempts from A to Z by Ron Andersen and Sabine Zenkel
- 8) Modern Losing Trick Count Bidding to Win at Bridge by Ron Klinger
- 9) To Bid or Not to Bid the Law of Total Tricks by Larry Cohen
- 10) I Fought the Law of Total Tricks by Mike Lawrence and Anders Wirgren
- 11) Hand Evaluation Points Schmoints Guaranteed to Make You a Better Bidder by Marty Bergen
- 12) "Inside Out Evaluation" by Jeff Rubens