

THE COMPETITIVE AUCTION:

When to bid, When to pass

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What do you think went wrong here? East holds this hand at all vulnerable:

♠ A87 ♥ Q1072 ♦ AK3 ♣ Q74

West	North	East	South
Pass	1♥	1NT	Double
Pass	Pass	Pass	

East overcalls 1NT and gets doubled for penalties. 1NT doubled drifts three off for -800. Meanwhile, it turns out that because of all of East's goodies, North-South can't make a game. East says, "I had to bid, partner. I had 15 points and a good heart stopper." North-South look the other way as they jot down the score.

Where did East go wrong? Today's lesson will cover the factors that might have influenced East to make a better decision next time, and help you avoid going wrong in similar spots.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Basing your actions on what partner has done so far is usually a good thing to do. When partner has made a bid, it would be crazy to ignore it. Yet many players frequently fail to take into account when partner PASSES.

Which of the below situations would be a better takeout double by East? With both sides vulnerable, East holds:

♠ Q3 ♥ AK82 ♦ Q953 ♣ Q32

1. North deals and opens 1♠. Should East double or pass?
2. West deals and passes and North opens 1♠. Should East double or pass? And why?

The first scenario is a perfectly fine double. We have a decent hand, and partner hasn't taken a call yet, so game is certainly possible. If we pass, we might get shut out of the auction.

The second one is a dubious double. When partner has already passed, two things change:

1. The chances of our side having a game on are significantly reduced;
2. The chances of running into trouble or being penalised are significantly increased.

Another example: South holds, with both sides vulnerable

♠ AQ3 ♥ K82 ♦ Q1063 ♣ A32

1. East is the dealer...

West	North	East	South
		1♠	1NT

2. West is the dealer...

West	North	East	South
1♣	Pass	1♠	1NT

The first 1NT bid is fine. You have a good balanced hand and can show it conveniently. The second 1NT bid is much less sound. Partner couldn't find a bid over 1♣, both opponents are talking, game is unlikely, and it is easy for the opponents to penalise you.

To sum up this key idea:

First principle:

When partner has passed already, be more cautious and lean towards PASS.

LENGTH IN THE OPPONENT'S SUIT IS A BAD OMEN

Which hand would you rather hold to overcall 2♦ after a 1♠ opening on your right?

1. ♠ QJ65 ♥ Q8 ♦ AK984 ♣ 72
2. ♠ 72 ♥ Q8 ♦ AK984 ♣ QJ65

Your instincts should be telling you the **second** hand is better to overcall with.

When you have **length in the suit that the opponents have opened**, this has a few effects on the likely layout of the hand:

- Your opponents are less likely to have a fit, which means **your side is also less likely to have a fit**. In bridge, when one side has a fit, so does the other... and vice versa!
- Your left-hand opponent is more likely to have length in your suit – meaning you may be headed for trouble if you overcall (you might get doubled).
- If your main suit (diamonds) proves problematic, you have no fall-back plan. You can't play in your second suit because that is the opponent's suit.

This is a typical 'danger' layout for the first hand. North-South have no fit, partner is weak and 2♦ doubled goes down three for -800:

North Deals	♠ A K 10 9 3							
Both Vul	♥ K J 7 3							
	♦ 2							
	♣ A 10 9							
	♠ 8 7 2	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> </table>	N	W	S	E		
N								
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	♥ 10 9 5 2			♠ Q J 6 5				
	♦ 6 3			♥ Q 8				
	♣ K J 8 5			♦ A K 9 8 4				
				♣ 7 2				
				♠ 4				
				♥ A 6 4				
				♦ Q J 10 7 5				
				♣ Q 6 4 3				
<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>					
	1 ♠	2 ♦	Pass					
Pass	Dbl	Pass	Pass					
Pass								

Second principle:

With a marginal decision of whether to bid or not, length in the opponent's suit should incline you towards PASSING.

VULNERABILITY: MORE TO GAIN, MORE TO LOSE

Here's another typical 'bid or pass' decision. East holds this hand and hears North open 1♥:

♠ A5 ♥ 643 ♦ KQ976 ♣ K65

West	North	East	South
Pass	1♥	?	

With both sides vulnerable, this hand is quite poor to overcall with, despite the opening values and five-card suit. Let's think about the reasons NOT to bid:

1. The diamond suit is weak.
2. The hand is balanced.
3. Partner is a passed hand.
4. We are vulnerable.

With that all said, if we were to change the vulnerability to nil vulnerable, it becomes a much closer affair. And if the vulnerability were favourable (only the opponents vulnerable), overcalling 2♦ becomes quite reasonable in order to compete for the hand.

The opponents will be much keener to pass your overcall (planning to pass partner's double and look for a penalty) when you are vulnerable. This means the danger factor is much higher when you are vulnerable. It might be obvious, but it's worth saying:

Third principle:

Be aggressive at nil vulnerable. Be more conservative when you are vulnerable.

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OPENING VALUES DO NOT MEAN YOU SHOULD OPEN YOUR MOUTH

This next tip covers a situation where I frequently see players make mistakes. East holds this hand:

♠ 65 ♥ KJ98 ♦ K76 ♣ AQ94

West	North	East	South
	1♣	Double	1♥
1♠	Pass	?	

What should East do now?

The answer is that East should not have this problem. A takeout double shows support for the unbid suits, and West is bidding assuming East has support for spades. East should not have doubled 1♣. There is no way to recover now: if East bids 1NT, this will show 19-20 high card points (a hand too strong to overcall 1NT).

When you have twelve or more points, and no one has bid before you, it is a cardinal rule that you must open the bidding. For some reason, there is a common belief that this still applies even after the opponents open the bidding! Far from it.

What should East have done over 1♣? The answer is either PASS (the ‘normal’ action) or, if you feel you simply must act, consider bidding 1♥ with the chunky four-card suit.

Fourth principle:

- a) When the opponents open your longest suit, you should often PASS rather than get involved in the auction.
- b) With a hand unsuitable for a takeout double, consider whether overcalling a four-card suit is worthwhile.

Another example from a recent congress:

Board 4		♠ K6	
Dealer W		♥ K863	
Vul Both		♦ A53	
		♣ A653	
♠ QJ98	♠ 542		
♥ AJ72	♥ Q54		
♦ K84	♦ T97		
♣ 97	♣ KJ82		
		♠ AT73	
		♥ T9	
		♦ QJ62	
		♣ QT4	

I made a dubious bid, opening 1♦ with the West hand. If North had made the normal pass, my partner would have responded 1NT and played there – likely going three off for -300!

North actually doubled. East responded 1NT, and South quite reasonably bid 2♠, expecting their partner to have spade support. 2♠ went one down. Out of 13 tables, North-South were one of only two tables to record a minus score.

KEY IDEAS

The most common mistakes players make in this area of the game are:

- Overcalling too aggressively with OK points, but a bad suit/balanced hand.
- Not factoring partner’s silence into their decision. Doubling too aggressively for takeout, or overcalling 1NT with 15-16 scattered points, after partner has passed.
- Failing to heed the warning bells of length in the opponent’s suit.
- Making a takeout double with an unsuitable hand because they have 12+ points, and not considering alternative options (such as passing, or overcalling a four-card suit).
- Not realising the heightened dangers of being vulnerable.

Should I bid or should I pass? Things to consider:

POSITIVE FACTORS FOR ACTION	NEGATIVE FACTORS FOR ACTION
Partner has not made a call yet	Partner is a passed hand
You are short in the opponents' suit	The opponents open one of your long suits
You are not vulnerable	You are vulnerable
Good suit quality	"Holes" in your suit/poor suit quality

Revision Quiz 1

1. In the following auction, with all vulnerable, what is East's best bid on each hand?

W	N	E	S
Pass	1♦	?	

- a) ♠ Q8 ♥ J93 ♦ AK53 ♣ A1075 b) ♠ 5 ♥ KQJ9 ♦ AJ2 ♣ QJ732

Answers:

1. a) **Pass**. Definitely not double. There is no need to 'show your points' opposite a passed hand, and the doubleton spade (and length in diamonds) should worry you.
- b) **Pass or 1♥**. Don't go bidding 2♣ on this type of hand. Your clubs are very poor and the danger factors are all there - bad suit, two-level action, partner has passed, both sides are vulnerable... and of course, double is not worthy of consideration (short spades)!

Revision Quiz 2

2. In the auction below, with North the dealer and neither side vulnerable, which of these hands should East bid with and which should East pass with?

W	N	E	S
	1♥	?	

- a) ♠ 82 ♥ QJ32 ♦ AQ953 ♣ Q3 b) ♠ AJ6 ♥ 63 ♦ QJ932 ♣ KQ10

Answers:

2. a) **Pass**. Bad hand, bad suit, and length in hearts. Too much danger, not much upside. We might be happy to open the bidding 1♦, but overcalling at the 2-level is too much.
- b) **Double**. Why describe this hand as 'diamonds' when you have a bit of everything? A takeout double, getting all the suits in, is much more flexible and less dangerous. Overcalling 2♦ is the most likely action to lead to disaster.