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This Week in Bridge

(39) Is it Forcing? - Freebids

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Level: 2

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General

One of the early problems in bridge bidding was how to keep the Opener from passing when Responder had a good hand. In those days, if partner opened we had to leap to game on our first bid to make sure that we did not get passed. One of the biggest breakthroughs in modern bidding was the idea of a "Forcing Bid." Now, with these forcing bids, we have a tool for making partner keep the auction alive. The problem in modern bidding is for us to determine which bids are forcing and which bids can be passed.

Many of us once learned a rule that "*a new suit is forcing by an unpassed hand.*" This was actually a simplification of modern bidding agreements. What most of our teachers (or textbooks) should have taught us was "*a new suit is usually forcing by an unpassed hand when there is no competition.*" The purpose of this document is to help us clarify when a new suit is forcing and when it can be passed.

Freebids

A new suit in competition is called a *Freebid* when Responder (or Advancer) bids a new suit on their own without being forced to bid. As a general rule, these auctions fall into two categories:

- *Positive Freebids* – when new suits are strong and forcing.
- *Negative Freebids* – when new suits are competitive and non-forcing.

Positive Freebids

Positive Freebid auctions are the traditional ones that most of us are quite familiar with. These are auctions where bidding a new suit is forcing and generally shows a strong hand with a long suit. In these auctions, we make a *negative double* with hands that want to compete in the bidding but for some reason do not qualify to make a positive freebid.



These positive freebid auctions most commonly take place when partner opens the bidding with 1-suit, RHO makes an overcall, and we bid a new suit without jumping. The values shown by our freebid depend on the level we respond at:

- 1-level: 4+card suit, 6+ pts, Forcing 1-round
- 2-level: 5+ card suit, 10+ pts, Forcing 1-round
- 3-level: 5+card suit, 12+ pts, Game-forcing

Examples

- | | | | |
|------|------|----|---|
| • 1♣ | (1♦) | 1♥ | 4+♥, 6+ pts, 1F (Forcing 1-Round) |
| • 1♣ | (1♦) | 1♠ | 4+♠, 6+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (1♥) | 1♠ | 5+♠, 6+ pts, 1F (exception that this shows 5+cards) |
| • 1♣ | (1♥) | 2♦ | 5+♦, 10+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (1♠) | 2♦ | 5+♦, 10+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (1♠) | 2♥ | 5+♥, 10+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (1♠) | 2♦ | 5+♦, 10+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (2♦) | 2♥ | 5+♥, 10+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (2♦) | 2♠ | 5+♠, 10+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (2♥) | 2♠ | 5+♠, 10+ pts, 1F |
| • 1♣ | (2♥) | 3♦ | 5+♦, 12+ pts, GF |
| • 1♣ | (2♠) | 3♦ | 5+♦, 12+ pts, GF |
| • 1♣ | (2♠) | 3♥ | 5+♥, 12+ pts, GF |
| • 1♣ | (3♦) | 3♥ | 5+♥, 12+ pts, GF |
| • 1♣ | (3♦) | 3♠ | 5+♠, 12+ pts, GF |
| • 1♣ | (3♥) | 3♠ | 5+♠, 12+ pts, GF |

Negative Doubles

I would like to take a moment to clarify a common misconception about Negative Doubles. A negative double is a bid that is extremely flexible, not specific. Many players wrongly are taught that it “promises” the unbid suits. It is true that we will often have the unbid suits when we make a negative double, but we will also make a negative double with many other types of hands where we cannot find another call. The best way to think about negative doubles is:

- Partner has enough values to take some action, but no other bid looks attractive.
- Partner is looking for a fit (or better fit) and wants to compete in the bidding.



Negative Freebids

Negative Freebid auctions are rarer than the previously discussed positive freebid auctions. These negative freebids are new suits bid by Responder or Advancer that are non-forcing and competitive. They are used in auctions where double or redouble shows a strong hand, 10+ pts. Thus, in these auctions, bidding shows fewer points and a long suit, usually 5-9 pts and 5+card suit. We use these bids in auctions where the opponents have shown some strength and both sides will be battling to win the auction as cheaply as possible.

The two most common negative freebid auctions are when RHO overcalls 1NT or makes a takeout double.

Vs. Notrump Overcalls

When partner opens the bidding with a suit at the 1-level and RHO overcalls 1NT, then we double with almost any hand that has 10+ pts. That means that if we bid at the two-level, partner will know that we have fewer than 10 pts. Therefore, a new suit by the Responder shows a long suit (usually 6+cards) and 5-9 pts. This limited bid is non-forcing and is an example of a negative freebid.

Example

1♥ (1NT) 2♦ 6+♦, 5-9 pts, non-forcing

Vs. Takeout Doubles

Negative freebids over the opponent's takeout double are slightly more complicated. When partner opens the bidding with a suit at the 1-level and RHO makes a takeout double, we will *redouble* with most hands that have 10+ pts. When we bid a new suit we usually do not have 10+ pts. But it does not make much sense for us to make a non-forcing bid at the 1-level (we are unlikely to buy the contract there.) We will treat our 1-level bids as forcing (just as if the opponents had not interfered.) If we bid a new suit at the 2-level, it is a negative freebid and is non-forcing.

Examples

- 1♠ (X) 2♥ *Negative Freebid, 6+♥, 5-9 pts, Non-forcing*
- 1♠ (X) 2♦ *Negative Freebid, 6+♦, 5-9 pts, Non-forcing*
- 1♠ (X) 2♣ *Negative Freebid, 6+♣, 5-9 pts, Non-forcing*
- 1♥ (X) 2♦ *Negative Freebid, 6+♦, 5-9 pts, Non-forcing*
- 1♥ (X) 2♣ *Negative Freebid, 6+♣, 5-9 pts, Non-forcing*
- 1♥ (X) 1♠ *Positive Freebid, 4+♠, 6+ pts, 1-rd forcing*
- 1♦ (X) 2♣ *Negative Freebid, 6+♣, 5-9 pts, Non-forcing*
- 1♦ (X) 1♠ *Positive Freebid, 4+♠, 6+ pts, 1-rd forcing*
- 1♦ (X) 1♥ *Positive Freebid, 4+♥, 6+ pts, 1-rd forcing*

Note: New Suit Forcing at 1-level over the opponent's takeout double (NSF at 1L/TO X.)



Advancer's Negative Freebid

There are other auctions where we play negative freebids and strength showing doubles. One example is a common competitive auction where we are the Advancer and partner has made a simple overcall.

Examples

- (1♣) 1♠ (P) 2♦ *Positive Freebid, 5+♦, 10+ pts, 1-rd forcing*
- (1♣) 1♠ (1NT) 2♦ *Negative Freebid, 5+♦, 5-9+ pts, Non-forcing*

In the second example, we would double (penalty-oriented and cooperative) with 10+ pts. Thus, bidding is natural and non-forcing (negative freebid.)

Redoubles

When we are in a negative freebid situation but we want to make a positive freebid showing 10+ pts and a 5+ card suit, we can't just bid our new suit. The way that we show this hand is in a two-step process. We start with a redouble to show 10+ pts and then we bid our 5+ card suit to show our length. This is the way we show a strong hand with a long suit.

Example

1♠	X	XX	P
P	2♣	2♦	

Note: Redoubles generally show 10+ pts and a hand without a large fit for partner's suit.

Conclusion

In a competitive auction where you and partner have both shown values, one of the most important things is for both of you to know what bids are forcing and how forcing each bid is. Without this knowledge you and partner will be left guessing about how best to describe your hand. So make sure that you and partner are on the same page about "Is it forcing?" and "How forcing is it?"