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This Week in Bridge

(291) Passed Hand Bidding Concepts

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Level: 3

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General

When we pass to start the auction on our first call and then later bid, there are many inferences partner can take about our hand. In addition to inferences, we also change the explicit meaning of many bids when made by a passed hand because the previous definition (unpassed hand definition) would be illogical. Let's look at a variety of different passed hand situations.

New Suits by a Passed Responder

Where a new suit by Responder is generally forcing, when we are a passed hand a new suit is no longer forcing (unless it is a conventional bid like a splinter or cuebid of the opponent's suit). That does not, however, mean that we can pass all new suits by Responder after we have opened the bidding, even when we have opened the bidding light.

Example 1

P 1♣
1♥ —

♠ KQxx

♥ xx

♦ Jx

♣ AJxxx

With this hand, we do not pass 1♥; instead we rebid 1♠. Though partner's 1♥ response is no longer forcing, that does not mean that it is a good contract (partner has only promised a 4-card ♥ suit). With close to a full opening bid it is best to rebid 1♠ and try to improve the contract.



2/1 Bids by a Passed Hand

Since a 2-level response to a 1-level opening bid (that is not a jump-shift) is played as a game forcing bid (2/1 game forcing) by most players these days, it shows at least opening bid values. But if we make such a bid as a passed hand, then maintaining the meaning would be illogical. By a passed hand, many partnerships play a 2/1 bid conventionally or as natural (and non-forcing).

Example 2

P 1♠

___?

- 2♣* Drury, 3-card limit raise or better
 - May vary some based on whether we play 2-way Drury
- 2♦*? 2-way Drury, 4+card limit raise or better
 - or 5+card ♦, 9-11 HCP, unbalanced (if not playing 2-way Drury)
- 2♥ 5+card ♥, 9-11 HCP, maximum passed hand

Passed Hand Competitive Bidding

In a competitive bidding auction, we are often forced to go to higher levels (3-level or even the 4-level) early in the bidding. We can feel comfortable bidding at these levels when our hand has a tremendous amount of playing strength. This playing strength can come from HCP or distribution. But when we are a passed hand, we cannot have enough HCP to give our hand significant playing strength. Thus, high level bidding by a passed hand can only be done based on distributional playing strength.

Example 3

P P 1♠ 2♦

3♦

This cuebid stills shows a limit raise or better in support of partner's ♠ suit.

Now, let's look at the types of hands that can make these competitive calls.

Fit – Supporting Partner as a Passed Hand

When we are a passed hand with a fit for partner then we can add support points to our hand and re-evaluate our playing strength. A cuebid still equals a limit raise or better, but we must be careful not to upgrade too much and bid too aggressively as partner has made their bid opposite a passed hand and can be lighter in values than normal (this is true for either an opening bid or overcall by partner).

Having a fit for partner allows us to use the Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) to compete to the appropriate level and feel comfortable doing so even if partner may be lighter than expected in their HCP.



New Suit by a Passed Hand at a High-Level

As a passed hand, when we compete to a high level (3-level or higher) by bidding a new suit, then we are doing so based on distribution other than a large fit for partner. That frequently means a long suit of our own.

Example 4

P P 1♠ 2♦
3♣

Here we have a long ♣ suit (usually a 6+card suit). But since we are a passed hand, we have already denied holding a hand that is appropriate for opening the bidding 3♣. Our failure to preempt our hand with an opening bid of 3♣ seems to rule out most of the hands where it would seem logical to bid 3♣ with only a long strong ♣ suit. (Our possible holdings for a passed hand will be affected by our preempting style. The more aggressively we preempt, the less likely we are to have a long strong ♣ suit.)

One hand that contains a long ♣ suit, where we may have chosen to start with a pass, is a hand with a long ♣ suit (even a reasonably strong one) that also contains a 4-card Major. That is a hand we would likely not open 3♣ with, so it is one that Responder could hold as a passed hand. But in many auctions, Responder would choose to make a negative double with this hand, not bid 3♣. So, this hand is unlikely to be held by a passed hand that now bids 3♣.

Thus, we conclude that most passed hands that are willing to compete to a high level (3-level or higher) do so because the hand has improved based on partner's bidding (because we like our holding in partner's suit). Hands with shortness in partner's suit tend to be conservative. This means that passed hand is unlikely to go to a high level with a poor holding in partner's suit. Some partnerships even require a good holding (or even full 3+card support) in order to bid at the 3-level (or higher) as a passed hand.

Note: The more aggressively your partnership chooses to preempt, the more likely you are to have the agreement that a passed hand must have a fit in order to bid at a high level.

Conclusion

Describing your hand to partner after you have started the auction with a pass should be easier than in other auctions, but you might be surprised how frequently partnerships have mix ups about the meaning of these bids – Are they forcing? Do they show a fit? Since passed hand bidding is something that you and partner are likely to do frequently, it is worthwhile to spend some time talking about a variety of situations and what partner should be able to expect from you for making a high-level bid as a passed hand. As auctions become more and more competitive, it is important for you and partner to be on the same page about the meaning of your bids. Spend some time discussing these situations in detail.