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This Week in Bridge

(279) Balancing Seat & Reopening Doubles

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Level: 2

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General

When our left-hand opponent (LHO) has bid and both partner and right-hand opponent (RHO) pass, we are the final line of defense for competing in the auction. The position is called the *balancing seat* and is a time when we stretch to compete in the bidding. Traditionally, we “borrow a King” from partner’s hand, bidding as if we have three more HCP than we actually do. It is particularly important for us to compete in the bidding when we are short in the opponent’s suit - in this situation we may choose to balance back into the auction with a takeout double. These situations arise in a variety of difficult situations. We may balance with a takeout double after an opponent opens the bidding or even after we have opened the bidding. If we open the bidding, or LHO overcalls, and the auction is passed back around to us, then we often make a *reopening double* when we are short in the opponent’s suit. Let’s look at using a balancing double in more details.

Balancing Seat Doubles

With a 3-suited hand that is short in the opponent’s suit, we can balance with takeout double with fewer HCP than we need to make a takeout double in the direct seat. This is often done with as little as 9 HCP, so that when we “borrow” three points from partner, we have a full opening hand.

We should be careful that we have enough defense to defeat the contract if the opponent jumps to game (as considered previously). We should also consider if we have enough defense so that if partner passes our takeout double, having made a trap pass, we will feel confident in beating the contract.

Example 1

♠ AT63

♥ 8

♦ A9843

♣ Q75

1♥ P P X

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Here we have 10 HCP, shortness in the opponent's suit, and at least 3-card support for all the unbid suits. We have a perfect takeout double in the balancing seat. We also use a double in the balancing seat to show hands that, after we "borrow three points from partner" are too strong to take simple actions. With these hands we double and bid our suit or double and bid Notrump.

Reopening Doubles

Opener can balance in an auction by reopening the bidding when LHO makes an overcall and that is passed back around the Opener. A double is the most common reopening bid when the Opener has shortness in the opponent's suit.

Example 2

1♠ 2♦ P P
 —?

In this auction, Opener should strive to compete in the bidding.

- With shortness in the opponent's suit and not a tremendous amount of distribution, Opener should balance with a takeout double. This is to protect the situations where partner has made a "trap pass" with extreme length in the opponent's suit and is hoping to defend.
- Common distributions to reopen with a double are:
 - 5-4-1-3
 - 5-3-1-4
 - 5-4-0-4
 - 6-4-0-3
 - 6-3-0-4
- With more distribution, even with minimum values, opener should strive to bid another suit – showing unwillingness to sell out to a 2♦ final contract or to defend 2♦ doubled if partner has a trap pass.

Conclusion

The double is one of the most valuable calls in a competitive auction. It is naturally a flexible action that can be used with a variety of different shapes and strengths. But when we are in the balancing seat, we use this call even more aggressively, not requiring as many HCP as we do in direct seat actions. When in the pass-out seat, we try to use a double whenever reasonable because this allows partner to give us some input about where it is best to play, and it protects partner when they have chosen to trap pass. This has the added benefit of keeping partner happy and makes sure that your side collects a great score when partner has the perfect hand.

