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This Week in Bridge

(299) Passing with a Good Hand

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Level: 2

Robert S. Todd

robert@advinbridge.com

General

Though the modern style is to open the bidding more aggressively than players did years ago (most partnerships open almost all 12-point hands and some even weaker ones), there are still times in the auction where it is best to pass even if we hold 12 or more points. Learning when it is best to pass with these “good” hands is a bit of an art form, but more than anything else, getting this right requires discipline. The key is not to be committed to an auction before it is our turn to bid. If we are planning to open the bidding before our RHO bids, we need not necessarily follow the same planned action if they bid in front of us. In this case, pass may now be our best action. Let’s take a look at some situations where it may be best to pass with a good hand.

The Classic “Trap Pass”

When the takeout double was invented, we lost the ability to make a penalty double at a low level. This was reasonable trade off to gain a much more frequently used and more effective tool for competing in the bidding. However, we now need to figure out what to do with a hand that would previously have made a penalty double.

Example 1

We hold the following hand:

♠ AQTxx

♥ x

♦ KQx

♣ Jxxx

We are planning to open the hand 1♠, but before we can, our RHO (who was the dealer) opens the bidding 1♣ in front of us! It is best for us to now pass. This is a *Trap Pass*! We lie in wait to see what the opponents do next.

With hands like this, 12-14 HCP and length in the opponent’s suit that is bid on our right, it is tempting to bid 1NT. But remember that a 1NT overcall shows 15-18 points. Being light on HCP and having significant length in the opponent’s suits

make our hands much more suited for defense in these situations. It is best to pass and lie in wait to see what happens.

The Wrong Shortness

After our RHO opens the bidding, with values we usually enter the auction with an overcall or takeout double. We may be forced to pass when we have 12-14 points is when we hold the proper shape for a takeout double, but our RHO does not open the suit we expect (they do not open our shortness).

Example 2

♠ Kx
♥ Axxx
♦ Jxx
♣ KQxx

When we first pick up this hand, we plan to open the bidding 1♠. If our RHO opens the bidding with 1♠, we can still easily describe our hand by making a takeout double – showing opening values, shortness in ♠, and at least 3-card support for all the unbid suits. But if our RHO opens the bidding 1♣ (or even 1♦ or 1♥) then we have the values to take some action, but not the proper shape for doing so. In this case, it is best to pass, even though we have opening bid values.

Overcalling a 4-card Suit

When we have opening bid values, but the wrong shortness, pass is a reasonable action (the most common one). However, consider a hand with the same shape and HCP as above, but with a concentration of honors in the ♥ suit.

Example 3

♠ Kx
♥ AKJx
♦ xxx
♣ KTxx

If our RHO opens the bidding 1♠, we happily make a takeout double. If our RHO opens the bidding with 1♣, we do not have the proper shape for a takeout double, nor do we have enough values to overcall 1NT. This means pass is an option, but with a good 4-card ♥ suit we may choose to overcall this suit at the 1-level. The quality of the 4-card suit is important – we do not overcall bad 4-card suits, even if we have a good hand. When we overcall a 4-card suit we have one fewer trump than partner expects. It is important not be light on trump and light on HCP. When we overcall a good 4-card suit it is best to have some extra values, usually 12-14 HCP.

A Good Hand with Bad Suit

Another time we may choose to pass with 12-14 HCP is when our opponents have opened the bidding and we have a decent hand with a long suit, but our long suit is of horrible quality.

Example 4

Our RHO opens the bidding with 1♣ and we hold the following hand:

♠ Txxxx

♥ AK

♦ KQJ

♣ Qxx

An overcall of 1♠ does not seem like a good idea with such a horrible suit. Pass is often the best action in this situation. When we have good values and a poor suit, that means that our values are located in our short suits. Values in our short suits often make the hand better for defense. Pass becomes a more attractive action.

Conclusion

The most important thing for both you and partner to keep in mind during the auction is that a pass in first seat usually denies 12 points, but when someone has opened the bidding before you then a pass does not deny holding 12 points. We frequently pass with 12-14 points and length in the opponent's suit. With 15+ points it is also possible to pass with extreme length in the opponent's suit, but this is less common because we have the option of overcalling 1NT. This means that we will pass with some good hands, but that is ok, because these are good hands that are interested in defending because they have length in the opponent's suit. Work on your discipline and use your judgement about when to act with minimum opening bids and length in the opponent's suit.