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This Week in Bridge

(17) High Level Doubles - Forcing Pass

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Level: 2

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General

When we are in a game forcing auction and the opponents interfere (usually to sacrifice) it is clear that we are not going to go quietly and just let them steal the contract. If the opponents bid over us, then we will either double them and defend or bid on to our game. *Forcing Pass* is an agreement used to help us work together with partner to make a good decision about which to do.

Forcing Pass

A forcing pass is a pass by us in the direct seat after which we know that partner will be forced to bid and not pass the hand out. Partner will either bid or double the opponents' contract - our pass is forcing, thus the name "Forcing Pass."

Traditional Forcing Pass Auctions - High Level

Now that we have this new tool of forcing pass, we need to discuss how to make use of it. Let's focus on the most common use of forcing pass - when the opponents sacrifice over our game bid.

Example

1♠ P 2NT* 5♥
—?

While we consider this example in detail, let's first talk for a moment about our options in the direct seat, the meaning of each of our calls, and most importantly, our overall philosophy towards this auction.

We will have the approach that this is our hand and that if we think we can make our contract one level higher (Ex. 5♠) then we will do best to bid this. We won't construct our agreements to focus on rare times when we will get super rich doubling the opponents. Thus, the primary question we are trying to answer is "Can we make our contract at the next level?" Should we bid on?

Here is how we cast our vote in the direct seat:

- Bid – We know (strongly believe) we will make our contract at the next level.
- X – We are concerned that we will go down if we bid to the next level. We do NOT need a trump stack (lots of defense) to double; it is more about whether we can make our contract at the next level. It is common to double with “two small” in the opponents’ suit because those are two quick losers.
- Pass (“Forcing Pass”) – No strong feeling either way, our hand has many convertible values. It is common to make a forcing pass with a singleton in the opponents’ suit.

Another way to think about these direct seat calls is:

- Bid – A vote for “Offense” (No choice for partner.)
- X – A vote for “Defense” (Partner can still overrule.)
- Pass – “I’m flexible, Offense or Defense.” (Leaving it up to partner.)

Partner’s Choice (Non-Direct Seat)

If we bid in the direct seat, then defense is not an option. Partner’s only decision is then to bid slam or not -- usually partner will pass.

If we double in the direct seat (vote for defense) then partner will be warned that we are worried about going down if we bid to the next level. We can be worried based on several reasons, commonly a poor holding in the opponents’ suit or just a very poor hand. Partner will usually respect this double and pass, leaving our double in. We choose to defend not to get to rich, but because we are worried about going down if we bid to the next level. If partner has an extremely offensively-oriented hand (often very distributional), then they can overrule our vote for defense and bid. This will frequently happen if partner is void in the opponents’ suit.

If we pass (“forcing pass”) the auction around to partner, we are asking them to make the decision – our hand is flexible. Partner will bid if they think their hand is more offensive and they will double if they think their hand is more defensive. Partner will be able to make a good decision by knowing we are flexible (have some offense) and looking at their hand and the auction that is in front of them.

Using Forcing Pass for Slam Try - “Pass and Pull”

(Advanced Topic)

Many times when the opponents interfere they will leave us room above their bid, but below the next level of our suit. In this case, we can make use of this space to make a slam try.

Example

1♥ P 2NT* 4♠

5♣ is a slam try (as 5♦ would be; 5♥ would just be competitive.)

But when the opponents' bid does not leave us any space to make a slam try then things become more difficult.

Example

1♠ P 2NT* 5♥

If we have an extremely offensively-oriented hand (strong as well), we can make a slam try by starting with a forcing pass. This presumably says, “Partner, I’m willing to leave it up to you.” This will now allow us to find out more information about partner’s hand as they make a decision.

- If partner bids (ex. 5♠) then they have a good offensively-oriented hand and this should combine with ours to make slam likely to make – so we should bid a slam (ex. 6♠.)
- If partner doubles then they have decided on defense. But with our hand, we now surprise partner (who is expecting their double to end the auction) by bidding again (ex. 5♠.) Partner should interpret this “pass and pull” of their double as a try for slam. (No, we did not just change our mind!) Now, partner knows we have a strong offensively-oriented hand (ex. 5♠?) and partner can now decide whether to pass OR bid a slam (ex 6♠.)

Conclusion

In the modern game the opponents rarely leave us alone – they always seem to be bidding in our auctions. It is important to have good agreements to make cooperative decisions with partner. Forcing passes (and the associated other calls) are valuable tools for helping us make good decisions in these difficult auctions.

