

Modern Maximal Doubles

Let's say you are in a competitive auction. Here's a common enough one:

1S 2H 2S 3H
?

After you open, the opponents overcall, your partner supports you and their partner supports them. Understanding when to pass or compete to 3S is a large part of the subject of *To Bid Or Not To Bid* by Larry Cohen. He suggests applying the Law of Total Tricks and I agree with him. This lesson will not cover that subject. Instead let's consider what reasons we might have to compete to 3S once we have decided to do so.

- We want to invite to 4S (i.e. we were going to bid 3S whether or not RHO bid 3H)
- We think we can make 3S, but don't wish to compete to 4S
- We think the 3H is making and that 3S down one will score better for our side.

For two out of three of these reasons we do not want partner to bid 4S so partner should default to passing 3S because 67% games are better than 33% ones. But it would be really nice if we could tell partner that we wanted to invite game rather than just being competitive. How can we do that?

Opener has literally only 3 possible actions that do not take them past 3S:

- Pass
- X
- 3S

Given that we want to preserve pass to mean "I have no reason to bid more", our competitive actions end up being limited to double or 3S. Why don't we make one of those actions invitational to 4S and the other not. Which should be which? Well, the "slow shows strength" or "Principal of Fast Arrival" mantra suggests that bidding 3S should be weaker than double since they both commit us to 3S and the double is the slower way of getting there.

We do lose the ability to unilaterally penalize the opponent's 3H, but in OBAR (Opponents Bid And Raise) auctions that is a rare hand to hold and when your length is in front of the long hand (i.e. the long suit is on your right) then it becomes even rarer because you rate to lose any finesses in the suit.

This observation was the genesis of the classic "maximal double" convention which was:

- When the opponents compete to the 3 level in the suit one under your suit
 - Double is a game try
 - Bidding 3 of your suit denies game invitational values

Essentially just these three auctions

1S-2H 1H-2D 1D-2C
2S-3H 2H-3D 2D-3C

So what about an auction like

1S 2D 2S 3D
?

Now you have 4 actions that keep you below 3S

- Pass
- X
- 3H
- 3S

With the addition of the 3H bid, the general agreement was that

- 3H showed the game try
- 3S denies the game try
- X is penalty

Note 3H still does not say anything at all about hearts, it's completely artificial and is a game try in spades.

Given those earlier observations about OBAR bids and being in front of or behind the long suit I now play the following agreement instead:

- 3H shows a game without defence
- 3S denies the game try
- X shows a game try with defence

In other words X shows doubt about whether or not we should be declaring or defending. Whereas bidding 3H or 3S shows certainty that we should be declaring, and at the same time either shows or denies doubt about the level at which we should be declaring.

The longer I play this game, the more often I realize that I do not know what the right action is on a given hand. I can see more possibilities and therefore am more frequently interested in including partner in the decision making process whenever I am uncertain. Therefore I find myself making fewer and fewer unilateral bids unless they are clear.

Other auctions to consider are

1S 2C 2S 3C
?

1S P 2S 3H
?

I.e. what if you have 2 available suits to bid or if the opponents haven't confirmed a fit by bidding and raising and the long suit is on your right not your left.