

Judging competitive auctions – when to compete to the three level

When the strength in the pack is likely to be evenly distributed and your partnership has a trump fit, you should look to compete for the contract with a one-level, two-level or three-level suit bid.

If neither side has a trump fit, beware of competing in notrumps above the one level. In notrumps you will usually be limited to seven tricks because of the opponents' strength. You usually do not compete in notrumps above 1NT.

In competitive auctions where both partnerships have a trump fit, you look to win the auction in a trump suit at the two level. If your opponents have bid to the three level, you should often let them win the auction and try to defeat their contract. A principle often applied in competitive auctions is – 'play at two, defend at three'.

Example: North opens 1♥ and you are east with ♠AJ962 ♥74 ♦AK5 ♣Q42. After you overcall 1♠, south bids 2♥, partner west responds 2♠ and north bids 3♥. What should you do?

The best idea is to pass and defend. The strength in the pack looks to be evenly distributed so choose to defend at the three level. Do not bid 3♠ which is likely to fail when your opponents' contract may fail.

If your opponents have a trump fit in a suit that is higher ranking than your partnership's trump suit, you should often outbid their two-level contract as a sacrifice bid. Be sure you are not vulnerable before making a three-level sacrifice bid. Sacrifice bids are often made with weak hands. You hope to lose fewer points in your three-level contract than you will lose if your opponents make their two-level contract.

Example: Partner north opens 1♥, east doubles and you are south with ♠962 ♥974 ♦AQ54 ♣942. After you respond 2♥, west bids 2♠, partner north passes and east passes. You are not vulnerable. Should you bid 3♥ or pass?

Bid 3♥. If your contract fails by two tricks your opponents will score 100 points, while if your opponents make 2♠ they will score 110 points.

Often your sacrifice bid will push your opponents to a higher contract. You then try to defeat their three-level contract.

When playing against aggressive opponents you may choose to make a sacrifice bid at the three level even when vulnerable as you expect they will bid over you for no reason other than just to win the auction!

There are a few situations where you compete to the three level even if your opponents bid to the three level. Here are two essential times to bid 'three over three'. When you bid 'three over three' you are always bidding to make.

1. The most important situation is when you are sure your partnership has a minimum of nine trumps. The extra trump often produces an extra trick. Your opponents will also have fewer cards in your suit and they may be able to make nine tricks in their contract as they can trump the high cards in your long suit.

Example: You are south with ♠AJ9642 ♥97 ♦AQ5 ♣J2. After you open 1♠, west bids 2♥, partner north bids 2♠ and east bids 3♥. You are vulnerable. Should you bid 3♠ or pass?

Bid 3♠. Partner's 2♠ response showed three cards in support of spades so your partnership will have nine trumps.

2. You should bid 'three over three' when your partnership has two suits in which you have eight or more cards. When you have two possible trump suits you have a 'double fit' and you will often make at least one more trick than expected by your point count strength. With a larger number of cards in your double fit and unbalanced hands you can often make even more tricks.

Example: Partner north opens 1♦, east doubles and you are south with ♠AJ96 ♥972 ♦K954 ♣42. After you respond 1♠, west bids 2♥, partner north bids 2♠ and east bids 3♥. You are vulnerable. Should you bid 3♠ or pass?

Bid 3♠. With a second fit in diamonds, your partnership has a double fit so bid 'three over three'.