

Bidding Matters



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The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders

5. They are not slaves to their systems (continued)

True or false?

- _____ A three-level preempt promises a seven-card suit.
- _____ A cuebid of the opponent's suit shows a control in that suit.
- _____ A minimum takeout double of a major promises four cards in the other major.

Decades ago, these guidelines were absolutes in just about everyone's system. They still describe ideal hands, but few of today's players would answer an unqualified "true" for any statement. The modern view is that the ideal situations are too few and far between, so we've loosened the rules to cover a wider range of hands.

Today's experts are rethinking the wisdom of even more of those once-sacrosanct bidding tenets. As with other system agreements, basic bidding rules can work against you if they're over-defined or followed blindly. They're most valuable if you treat them as advice, not commands, and keep an open mind about possible exceptions.

Here are some old rules and new approaches you may want to discuss with your partner.

Old: A minimum-strength takeout double promises at least three cards in all unbid suits.

New: No one advocates off-shape doubles that show just point-count. There are, however, some situations where you can successfully use a takeout double with a minimum that has shortness in an unbid suit.

The equal-level conversion (ELC) is an "expert standard" agreement that builds flexibility into takeout-double auctions. It

allows you to safely double a 1♥ or 1♠ opening when you have club shortness. After 1♥ on your right, you can double with:

♠K1093 ♥A3 ♦AQ974 ♣82.

If partner advances with 2♣, you will convert to 2♦, an ELC, which does not show extra values. It tells partner you have minimum strength with club shortness, five or more diamonds and four spades.

Note that the ELC applies just to the clubs-to-diamonds conversion. If you double and then make a new-suit bid in clubs, hearts or spades, you're still showing the "big double" hand with extra values.

There are other situations where a slightly off-shape double can be a good strategy. After 1♦ on your right, you can risk a double with:

♠AJ84 ♥KQ65 ♦754 ♣K7.

If partner bids 2♣, you'll have to pass, and if he has only four clubs, your gamble didn't pay off. The double has a lot going for it, though, because it describes your strength and, most important, it keeps all other contracts in the picture.

If the thought of landing in a 4-2 fit makes you nervous, consider that partner will hold five or more clubs fairly often for his 2♣ advance.

Because he bypassed hearts and spades, your logical hope is that he's relatively short in the majors. That increases the likelihood he has long clubs.

Old: Never make a takeout double with 4-3-3-3 distribution.

New: Even aggressive bidders hate competing with this shape unless they have enough for a 1NT overcall. Many experts, though, believe that if your hand otherwise conforms to what partner expects for a double, the flat pattern is only a minor flaw.

After 1♣ on your right, a double rates to work well with:

♠KQ6 ♥A108 ♦AJ65 ♣743.

It's not a classic, but it fulfills the basic requirements — opening count (including distribution) and three or more cards in all unbid suits. Your high-card strength makes up for the lack of distribution, and you've taken advantage of two of the double's biggest benefits: You've shown your values at a low level and left all further decisions to partner.

The argument for passing is that if the opponents stop low, partner will know you have values and will balance. But will he ever play you for a full 14 points with two honors in his suit? If the auction is:

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
1♣	Pass	1♠	Pass
1NT	Pass	Pass	?

a partner who's grounded in reality will pass with:

♠J54 ♥J9432 ♦K102 ♣82 and you'll score minus 90 instead of plus 110 or plus 140 in hearts.

A 1♣ opening is perfect for a balanced double because partner can bid at the one level. It can be effective over other opening bids, too, as long as you have good high-card strength (14-plus HCP) and honors concentrated in unbid suits. Over a 1♦ opening, a double is reasonable with:

♠AKJ ♥J107 ♦654 ♣KQ103,

and for bolder bidders, even:

♠AK6 ♥Q107 ♦6542 ♣AQ8.