

When to ‘protect’ – and when not to

HUW Jones writes: *A good player says that after a 1♥ opening on his right he would pass with, say, ♠ KJxx, ♥ Jxxx, ♦ Ax, ♣ KJx, because he would expect his partner to make a protective bid, even on minimal values, if the opener's partner passes in response to the opening bid. Do you agree? Would the answer be the same at pairs and teams?*

Dear Huw,

Thank you for your query. The answer revolves around the strategies used in the ‘protective’ position, and the extent to which these principles have an impact on bidding in the ‘direct’ seat. *In its simplest form, ‘protective bidding’ is the name given to the action taken by the fourth player after an opening bid is followed by two passes.*

Holding the hand you have given, I would indeed pass after my right-hand opponent opens 1♥. However, there is good reason not to worry about our lack of positive action when holding such a hand, as it has become unusual for the overcalling side to allow the opener to play in his opening bid at the one level. Successful defensive bidders will strain to either push their opponents to a higher level, or try and stop them declaring the hand. However, for this to be a successful strategy, a player bidding in the protective position should consider three factors:

- The degree to which he is happy to defend the present contract.
 - The type of hand partner is likely to have for his lack of action.
 - The likelihood of improving his side’s score by bidding.
- a) Whether or not the fourth player has reasonable values, he should not bid simply because the opponents have subsided at the one level, especially if this would entail a distortion of his hand type. Thus, overcalling should still be reserved for hands with at least five cards in their longest suit. However, take-out doubles and 1NT overcalls can be made on more shaded values. A 1NT overcall typically shows 11-14 points, while a take-out double could be made with as little as Hand A.

Hand A	Hand B
♠ K 8 3 2	♠ A 7
♥ 5	♥ K Q 10 6 5
♦ K 7 5 2	♦ Q 4 2
♣ K 6 4 3	♣ Q 8 5

The hands with which one should be more wary of making a protective action, though, are those with particularly defensive holdings in the opener’s suit. Thus, holding a hand like Hand B, players should be keener to defend against 1♥ than to declare 1NT.

b) This idea of looking at one’s holding in the opener’s suit will help us to deduce why partner failed to act in the direct seat. If the protective bidder is looking at length in the opponent’s suit, it is fair to assume that partner is relatively short. Thus, the reason for his inactivity is likely to be due to either a lack of high-card values or a good five card suit. Either way, the chances that it is better to defend than declare will have increased, so the protector need not strain to bid, and should keep his actions relatively sound.

In the cases where the protective bidder is short in the opponents’ suit, defensive prospects will be worse, unless partner has a defensive holding in the opener’s suit. (If the protective bidder also has relatively few high cards, there will be a reasonable chance that partner is hoping to penalise the opening side). There will also be a greater probability that the reason that partner failed to act was not a lack of high cards, but an unattractive distribution, such as the example hand that you provided. Thus, it is now in our interests to make an effort to ‘protect’ partner and make a bid even if we hold shaded values. Essentially, the fourth player should make the same call that he would in the direct position, but *should be prepared to act with hands up to a king weaker than normal* – this is an important point for the protector’s partner to accommodate at his next turn too.

c) The chances that one’s score will be improved by a protective action incorpor-



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ates the ideas in a) and b), plus the form of scoring. Playing pairs, it should be noted that it is the *frequency* of gain that is most important, whilst playing teams it is the *size* of gain. Thus, it is generally more common to see more aggressive protective actions at pairs than teams, though it is still important not to give your opponents an easy ride at teams. When considering action at pairs, though, it is also very important to pay attention to the vulnerability. When the opponents are vulnerable, defending becomes a more attractive proposition, especially if there is a good chance of defeating a contract by two tricks (the ‘magic’ 200, out-scoring any part-score). Conversely, non-vulnerable opponents need to be pushed higher to gain significant reward, since defeating a contract by two tricks still scores less than making just 2♥ or 2♠.

SUMMARY

DIRECT SEAT

- Be aggressive with shortage in the opener’s suit.
- Don’t be afraid to pass with length in the opener’s suit – expect partner to ‘protect’ with shortage.

PROTECTIVE SEAT

- Look at your holding in the opener’s suit, as well as general strength and vulnerability.
- Consider the likelihood of improving your score by bidding.
- Take sound actions with length in the opponents’ suit.
- Be prepared to act with shaded values when holding shortage in the opponent’s suit. □