

4 December

Double as a response?

Rakesh Kumar

When partner makes a bid, you can't double as a response, can you? Well, you can if the opponents enter the auction – now there are various ways in which a double can be used to convey useful information. Everyone is familiar with negative doubles in auctions such as these:

West	North	East	South
1C	1S	Dbl	P

East's double promises 4 or more hearts, but doesn't necessarily promise anything in diamonds.

West	North	East	South
1C	1D	Dbl	P

East's double promises at least 4 cards in both majors, because over 1D he could bid 1H/1S with 4+ cards in either suit.

West	North	East	South
1S	2H	Dbl	P

East's double promises at least 4 cards in both minor suits.

What about this auction?

West	North	East	South
1C	P	1H	2D
Dbl			

This is an example of a support double: West promises 3-card support for partner's hearts – with 4-card support she would simply raise to 2H.

Suppose partner hasn't made an opening bid or response but instead has overcalled:

West	North	East	South
1H	1S	2H	Dbl

This is an example of a responsive double. South promises both minors and denies support for partner's spades – if he had support he would raise rather than looking for a contract in a minor suit.

West	North	East	South
1D	2C	2D	Dbl

This time South promises both major suits. He doesn't necessarily deny support for clubs, but because partner may have overcalled with a 4-card major and 5+ clubs he is looking for a fit in the higher-scoring denomination.

A deal featuring this last auction turned up on Wednesday 3 December:

BD: 17 ♠JT		Dlr: N	
♥A9		Vul: None	
♦AQ7542			
♣J87			
♠AQ54		♠K763	
♥KJT8		♥743	
♦T6		♦	
♣K63		♠AQT954	
	♠982		
	♥Q652		
	♦KJ983		
	♣2		
	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠	N	
		T	
N	3		12
S	3	13	9
E	6	4	6
W	6	4	6

After North's 1D opening promising 3+ cards, East might consider a takeout double with 4-3 in the majors, but with a good 6-card club suit it makes much more sense to overcall 2C. South, who also has 4-3 in the majors, might similarly consider a negative double, but raising diamonds is perfectly reasonable. Now West, who has the best hand at the table, has an easy responsive double. When East rebids spades, getting to game is fairly straightforward and declarer makes 12 tricks without much difficulty.



13 December

A very strong distributional hand

Rakesh Kumar

At our Christmas Party on Saturday 13 December, the dealing computer offered all of the East-West players a Christmas gift. However, most didn't accept it ...

With neither side vulnerable, you hear RHO open 1S. You are looking at this:

♠
♥AKQ952
♦5
♣AQJ753

Yes, it really is an 0-6-1-6 hand with only 2 losers!! Do you have an agreement with partner about how to show a 2-suited hand in competition? Several conventions allow you to do so – the most popular is a Michaels cue bid, in which a bid of their suit over 1-of-a-minor promises at least 5/5 in both major suits, while over 1-of-a-major it promises at least 5/5 in the other major and an unspecified minor suit.

Can you use such a bid to show a strong hand? Indeed you can. Although many choose to use Michaels cue bids only to create a bit of mayhem, a useful alternative is to play them as weak (say 6-9 hcp) or strong (say 16+ hcp) but not intermediate. If you agree to do that, the cue bid followed by another bid guarantees a strong hand. That approach (discussed in *100 Bridge Tips for Club Players*) would have worked well on this deal:

BD: 17 ♠KQT53 Dlr: N
♥
♦AK964
♣K64
Vul: None

♠A976	♠
♥JT6	♥AKQ952
♦QT832	♦5
♣T	♣AQJ753

♠J842
♥8743
♦J7
♣982

	♣	♦	♥	♠	N
					T
N				3	15
S				2	7 16
E	4	6	3		2
W	5	6	3		

After 1S by North and 2S by East, South should pre-emptively raise to 3S. West is then likely to pass. With a void in hearts, North will happily continue to 4S. Now if East backs in with 5C, she has told partner everything that's worth knowing i.e. that she has a strong hand with hearts and clubs, as well as a likely void in spades.

What West needs at this point is a bit of courage. With good 3-card support for hearts and a singleton club, plus the ♠A, he might be worth as many as 3 tricks. If partner thinks competing to the 5-level is reasonable with whatever she holds, West should jump to 6H!

On a spade lead, the diamond loser vanishes, but slam is in fact cold even on a diamond lead, because ♣K comes down with 2 ruffs and trumps can be drawn in 4 rounds.

On the day, only one pair (Helena Dawson – Richard Douglas, the East-West winners) bid to 6H. Well done!



19 December

Bidding notrump after partner overcalls

Rakesh Kumar

You are vulnerable, the opponents are not. Your LHO deals and opens 1C. Partner overcalls 1D and RHO passes. What are you going to bid with this hand?

♠AQT
♥K9
♦J82
♣T8642

You have a reasonably good raise of partner's diamond suit, with potentially useful shortage in hearts. A bid of 2D would clearly be inadequate, so one possibility is that you could bid 2C as a cue raise, to show a better hand with a fit.

But do you really want to be playing in a contract in diamonds? Your hand is actually much more suited to playing in notrumps, with very useful holdings in both majors and the diamonds as a potential source of tricks. Yes, your club stopper isn't going to be effective until the opponents have taken a few tricks (if that is indeed their suit) but it will be a stopper eventually.

In response to an overcall, a bid of 1NT typically promises 8-11 hcp, while 2NT promises 12-14 hcp. That's because a 1-level overcall might have been made on as few as 8 hcp, so you don't want to get your side into too much trouble too quickly. However, on this deal from the last session of 2025, there was no trouble awaiting:

15 January

Maximising the penalty

Rakesh Kumar

On this deal from Monday 12 January, both sides are vulnerable and your LHO opens 1H. Partner overcalls 1S and RHO bids 2D. If not vulnerable you might have made a pre-emptive raise to 3S but as LHO has an opening hand and RHO has 10+ hcp, this doesn't seem to be a good time to get into the auction, so you pass.

LHO now rebids 2H, promising a 6+ suit; RHO invites game with a raise to 3H and LHO accepts. Partner leads $\spadesuit 8$ and this is what you see:

(dummy)	
$\spadesuit K3$	
$\heartsuit 54$	
$\diamondsuit KQ764$	
$\clubsuit QJ43$	(you)
$\spadesuit T974$	
$\heartsuit T3$	
$\diamondsuit A95$	
$\clubsuit T875$	

What do you know and what are you thinking about?

Firstly, if partner has a 5- or 6-card spade suit, even if he has $\spadesuit A$, declarer has only one loser in that suit. Secondly, it's likely that partner has 3 hearts, with hearts $6=3=2=2$ around the table. Thirdly, partner's lead suggests he has a singleton or a doubleton diamond. It's quite possible that partner led RHO's suit because he had holdings in the other suits that he did not wish to lead away from. If that's the case, partner's shape is either $5=3=2=3$, $6=3=2=2$ or $6=3=1=3$. Thus in two out of 3 likely cases partner will have a a doubleton diamond.

That's a lot to extract from the auction and the opening lead, but it answers the questions you should be asking yourself: (1) should I win $\diamondsuit A$ and return a diamond, hoping to give partner a ruff, or should I win $\diamondsuit A$ and switch (2) if I switch, should it be to a spade, a trump or a club?

Once you figure out that partner has probably made a safe lead rather than an attacking singleton lead, you should switch. As it's clear that any winners partner might have in the major suits will not run away, you should return a club.

In fact that's the only way to maximise the penalty – on a club switch at trick 2, declarer goes 2 down. On any other return he will make 9 tricks, because this was the full deal, now in its correct orientation:

BD: 4	♠AQJ82	Dlr: W	
	♥KJ9	Vul: ALL	
	♦83		
	♣K96		
♠65		♠K3	
♥AQ8762		♥54	
♦JT2		♦KQ764	
♣A2		♣QJ43	
	♠T974		
	♥T3		
	♦A95		
	♣T875		
	♣♦♥♠	N	
		T	
N	2		14
S	2	11	11
E	3 2		4
W	1 3 2		

Declarer was unlucky to have both missing heart honours sitting over her. However, without the club switch, she will lose only 2 hearts and a spade in addition to the diamond ace, because partner cannot attack clubs from his side. On the day this deal turned up, only one declarer in hearts was held to 8 tricks.



23 January

A fragile trump suit

Rakesh Kumar

This week I played in the Summer Festival of Bridge in Canberra – 339 boards over 6 days in 2 separate events. I thought this little part-score was both interesting and instructive.

You are sitting West, vulnerable against opponents who are not vulnerable. South passes as the dealer and so do you. North opens 1♥, partner doubles for takeout and South makes a weak jump raise to 3♥, promising 4-card support. With good spades and a shapely 7-loser hand, you choose to bid 3♠ despite having relatively few high card points. Everyone passes and North leads ♣Q.

♠AQ73	♠T652
♥Q4	♥K7
♦JT7632	♦AQ5
♣8	♣AT96

Of course you are going to win the first trick with the ace. You can see a loser in hearts and a possible loser in diamonds if the finesse fails. The problem is the spade suit – you are in danger of being forced in clubs and losing control. Missing the king, jack, nine and eight of spades, how will you handle the fragile trump suit to minimise the number of tricks you might lose?

It may surprise you, but the correct way to play the spade suit is *not* to take a first-round finesse. Instead you should play a small spade to the ace and see what happens. If both opponents follow with small cards, you should cross to dummy and lead a small spade towards the queen. This caters for a doubleton king on your right (you will then be able to draw the jack with your queen) or a doubleton jack on your left (if South ducks with Kxx the jack will come down) as well as doubleton king-jack on your left (the jack will come down on the first round so you will have only one loser if trumps break 3-2).

Note that you can't do anything about KJx on your left – you will always lose 2 tricks in the trump suit. And if trumps break 4-1 with KJxx in either hand then life will be awkward – indeed if North has this holding you may lose 3 trump tricks.

However, this time around if you play the suit correctly, you will be rewarded. The complete deal (from the South-West Pacific Teams, match 9) is on the next page.

BD: 19	♠KJ	Dlr: S		
	♥A9862	Vul: EW		
	♦9			
	♣QJ542			
♠AQ73		♠T652		
♥Q4		♥K7		
♦JT7632		♦AQ5		
♣8		♣AT96		
	♠984			
	♥JT53			
	♦K84			
	♣K73			
	♣♦♥♠	N		
		T		
N	2	1		11
S	2	1		9 13
E	4	3	1	7
W	4	3	1	

When you play the ace on the first round of trumps, North follows with ♠J. When you subsequently lead towards hand again, South plays ♠8 so you put up the queen – if North beats this with the king then ♠10 will draw the last trump. Nine tricks are therefore easy and even though the diamond finesse fails, you may make 10 tricks depending on what the defence does thereafter.

If you really want to immerse yourself in how to play card combinations when missing a particular number of cards and specific honours, check out [this link](#). You will find this spade suit dealt with as example #73 for 4 missing high card points.



30 January

A tricky 4-3 fit

Rakesh Kumar

One of the key goals of the auction in bridge is to find an 8-card fit, preferably in a major, to be able to play in a suit contract. Sometimes, however, there is no such fit to be found ... on this deal from Wednesday 28 January, the best contract was in a 7-card fit, always a challenging proposition. These were the East-West hands:

♠QT98	♠A65
♥65	♥AT2
♦AKQ4	♦JT9
♣653	♣KQ98

East dealt and opened 1C. South passed and West of course bid 1S. North now overcalled 2H. What will you do as East?

You really shouldn't consider bidding 2NT with only one stopper in hearts and no convincing stopper in diamonds. You do have support for spades and if partner has a 5-card suit you will probably be fine. However, if you raise to 2S and partner has enough high card points for game but only a 4-card suit, you might find yourself in difficulties. How can you show that you have exactly 3-card and not 4-card support?

The answer is to double. Different varieties of competitive double were discussed in a column on this website at the beginning of December – a double in this auction is known as a support double, which has a very specific and useful meaning.

When South passes, partner has little choice but to bid 2S and accept that he will be playing in a 4-3 fit. North leads ♥K.

Before looking at how best to play this contract, here are few remarks overheard at various tables on the Wednesday evening ... of course all with a smile!

South (about to make his opening lead): We're playing 2H are we?

North: We are, but I don't know what you are playing

East (putting dummy down): I have a good hand, partner.

West: Yes, no aces, no ruffing values. A great hand!

East (as he passes partner's bid): Well, it's all your fault if we go down, partner ...

West: It's always my fault!!

Ah yes ... partnership harmony, the ultimate goal.

Back to that deal. As declarer, you win ♥A in dummy, cash ♠A and play a small spade towards hand. At this point it makes sense to insert ♠10, hoping that the jack is on your right and this card forces out the king. To your surprise, the ten holds!

What will you do now? Well, you know that South began with ♠KJxx so clearly North must hold almost all the remaining high cards. Not unexpectedly, the full deal was:

BD: 22	♠43	Dlr: E		
	♥KQJ74	Vul: EW		
	♦63			
	♣AT74			
♠QT98		♠A65		
♥65		♥AT2		
♦AKQ4		♦JT9		
♣653		♣KQ98		
	♠KJ72			
	♥983			
	♦8752			
	♣J2			
	♣♦♥♠	N		
		T		
N	1		10	
S	1		11	14
E	2	3	2	5
W	2	3	2	

To attempt to win two tricks in clubs, you lead a small club towards dummy now. North rises with the ace, cashes ♥Q and tries to cash a third heart, but you ruff. Now you play on diamonds. It turns out that South has to follow to all 4 of these and to ♣K, so you make 9 tricks, for the par result on the board.

Note how important it was that East could indicate to partner that she only had 3-card support for spades. That enabled the partnership to stay low. On the day, some East-West pairs reached 4S, which is doomed.



8 February

Showing a strong hand after a takeout double

Rakesh Kumar

The well-loved Gold Coast Congress, which had long been popular among tournament bridge players from all over the world, is no more. From 2027 a replacement event, the Brisbane Gold Congress, will be held in the last week of January/first week of February.


This year, as a stopgap, a weekend online congress was organised on 7 and 8 February, with 54-board pairs events on both days but Matchpoint Swiss Pairs on the Saturday and IMP Swiss Pairs on the Sunday. There were around 75 tables in the Open section and 30 in the Under 500 section in each event.

On the Saturday, a deal turned up that illustrated an idea discussed as tip #53 in *100 Bridge Tips for Club Players*, namely the use of a cue bid of the opponent's suit to show a strong hand in response to a takeout double:

BD: 48	♠K97	Dlr: W
	♥K873	Vul: EW
	♦3	
	♣A7654	
♠6		♠JT532
♥A95		♥T6
♦AQJ87642		♦KT95
♣2		♣T3
	♠AQ84	
	♥QJ42	
	♦	
	♣KQJ98	
	♣♦♥♠	N
		T
N	6 6 3	10
S	6 6 3	11 4
E	4	15
W	4	

West as dealer opened 1D and North doubled for takeout. Yes, North has only 10 hcp, but he has a singleton diamond and 4-3 in the major suits. Moreover, his points consist of an ace and two kings, so the hand is actually better than average in terms of playing strength.

After North's takeout double, South's hand becomes huge! At our table, South cue bid 2D, showing a good hand and – because a double of 1D doesn't guarantee 4 cards in both majors – asking North to bid a 4-card major suit. However, West now backed in with a jump to 4D! Would you dare to rebid 4H as North?

With some trepidation, I did ... and partner launched into Roman Keycard Blackwood, discovered I had two keycards and promptly bid 6H. One reason for doing so was that it was almost a certainty that one of the missing keycards was A which West must hold, but that card was irrelevant given South's void.

You could argue that 6C might have been a safer contract, but after ruffing the diamond lead, 6H was an easy make when trumps broke 3-2. What an exciting deal!



18 February

Responding with a weak hand – again!

Rakesh Kumar

In the middle of last year, I wrote a column for our website about responding to partner's 1-of-a-minor opening with a weak hand i.e. a hand with fewer than 6 hcp. In that column, I suggested that you should certainly respond if either:

- (i) you have a sure trick i.e. an ace or a king-queen, or
- (ii) you have a 5+ major suit and 0-1 cards in partner's minor suit.

A hand that met the latter condition turned up on Monday 16 February:

BD: 10	♠AJ8	Dir: E		
	♥643	Vul: ALL		
	♦653			
	♣AQ82			
♠QT763	♠542			
♥T92	♥AK75			
♦QJ98	♦AK			
♣3	♣9654			
	♠K9			
	♥QJ8			
	♦T742			
	♣KJT7			
	♣♦♥♠	N		
		T		
N	2	2	11	
S	2	2	5	14
E	1	2		10
W	1	2		

It seems that no one in the field hesitated to respond 1S to East's opening of 1C. After that, of course East rebid 1NT. What should West do now?

This question actually has a very straightforward answer, based on the simple fact that a weak hand is generally worth quite a bit more playing in its long suit, because an extra trick or two will be available via ruffs. Therefore West *must* bid 2S – and because it is a weak rebid, East must now not hang partner but should simply pass.

On this deal, West can indeed make 2S, but almost the entire East-West field played in 1NT, going down. Hopefully that won't happen next time!



26 February

Ignoring sound advice

Rakesh Kumar

Sometimes, the opening lead can generate a top/bottom swing at Pairs, or swing a large number of IMPs in a Teams event. You hold:

♠AJ
♥6
♦Q76
♣JT97542

Partner passes and your RHO as dealer opens 1NT promising 15-17 hcp. LHO bids 2D, a transfer to hearts, then over the 2H rebid jumps to 4H. RHO now bids 4NT Roman Keycard Blackwood and LHO responds 5S, promising 2 keycards with the queen. RHO bids 6H and all pass.

Upon inquiry you are told that the jump to 4H showed slam interest and RHO had promised Kx or better support by making the 4NT inquiry. No peeking – just look at your hand above and decide what you are going to lead.

This was the full deal, from Wednesday 25 February, now in its correct orientation:

BD: 24	♠973	Dlr: W
	♥A5	Vul: None
	♦AKT84	
	♣KQ6	
♠KT84		♠AJ
♥T93		♥6
♦J953		♦Q76
♣83		♣JT97542
	♠Q652	
	♥KQJ8742	
	♦2	
	♣A	
	♣♦♥♠	N
		T
N	2 4 3 5	16
S	2 4 3 5	4 8
E	1	12
W	1	

The usual advice is that one shouldn't lead an unsupported ace against a slam when the strong hand is on one's right, because that could give declarer a "free" trick with the king of the suit.

Lance Robey was having none of that – he led ace and another spade, to take 6H down two without breathing hard! At every other table, a spade was not led, so after drawing trumps and unblocking ♣A, declarer could discard two spades on ♣KQ and a third on a top diamond, making 12 tricks.

Ignoring even the soundest of sound advice can be profitable sometimes ...

