

Protective bidding involves keeping the bidding open when an opponent's opening bid is Passed round to you in fourth seat. At duplicate pairs it can be a source of many extra matchpoints. Many players do not protect often enough, either because they don't think their hand is strong enough and/or because they think their partner will carry the bidding too high. Here is a recent board from Shoreham, 8th October. You are sitting South with this hand :

♠Q9  
♥KJ94  
♦J73  
♣AK87

You are playing Acol with weak twos in the major suits. Your partner, North, deals and Passes. East opens 1NT (12-14) and this passed round to your partner, who overcalls Two Spades. What do you bid ?

Consider the three hands below. Which one do you think your partner holds ?

AJ8652	AJ8652	A8652
62	62	62
AK65	Q652	AQ65
8	8	84

If partner has the first hand, you will have a decent chance of making Four Spades. If partner has either of the other hands, you will be better off playing in Two Spades.

Think back to the bidding. Your partner Passed originally so he does not have a hand of opening bid strength ... so that rules out hand (i). As you are playing weak two bids in the majors, partner definitely does not have hand (ii) – he'd have opened Two Spades with that. So, partner's hand is something like hand (iii), about 8-10 points with five cards in spades. Of course, partner *might* have 11 points, and a friendly lie of the cards *might* allow you to make ten tricks. On balance, it's more likely that eight or nine tricks will be the limit and so you should Pass.

In fact partner did hold hand (iii) and made nine tricks, scoring a second top on the board. Notice that partner's original Pass helped you make your decision. But what if East had dealt and opened 1NT ? What would you bid now if partner overcalls Two Spades in fourth seat ? This time it is possible for partner to have a hand of opening bid strength but there is no guarantee of this. A response of Two No Trumps or perhaps a raise to Three Spades is enough. You need to give your partner some slack when he makes a protective overcall.

A Double in the protective position might be made with a hand too weak for a direct take-out Double (ie after an opening bid by your right-hand opponent). Which of the following hands might Double after an opening bid of One Heart is Passed round to them ?

A1094	A1043	KQ93	A943
7	7	7	7
QJ65	KJ765	A1065	K965
AQ72	KQ7	J1072	J1072

The answer is : all of them. Hands (i) and (ii) are of opening bid strength, short in hearts and have support for the unbid suits. Note that a Double is a better choice on hand (ii) than an overcall of Two Diamonds. Hand (iii) should also Double. It might not do so in the direct position with just ten points but it's definitely worth a Double in fourth seat. Hand (iv) is clearly too weak to Double directly but it's worth a protective Double. Your partner is certain to have some points and your side might even hold the balance of them. It is your job, with a shortage in the opponents' suit, to keep the bidding open. It is your partner's job to respond conservatively and aim for a plus score.