

SPUTNIK X and TRAP PASS

I have already offered a post addressing the broad topic of competitive doubles, but there is one sequence in particular that merits special consideration. This arises when your partner opens the bidding and your right hand opponent overcalls. To respond with a Double in this scenario is a very useful bid, but its use needs to be carefully controlled and understood. So, what are you showing when you double; what are you (or might you be) showing when you Pass; what are you showing when you raise partner's suit; what are you showing when you bid the opponent's suit (a UCB); and what are you showing when you bid a suit of your own? All these different actions need to be agreed with partner. After all, partner's opening, followed by an opponent's overcall, comes up all the time.

Imagine that partner opens 1S, your right hand opponent overcalls 2C, and you hold one of the following hands.

a) Kxx / Kxx / xxxx / xxx

b) Qxxx / xx / xxxx / xxx

c) KJxx / xxxx / - / xxxxx

d) KJxx / xx / AQxxx / xx

e) KJx / Axxxx / Kx / xxx

With hand a) you raise 1S to 2S - only three spades and a dull, flat hand. But still you should support - partner won't expect much.

With hand b) you have just two points - but, critically, you have four card support for partner's spades. Again, raise to 2S. Partners like it when you raise.

With hand c) you have an excellent holding in partner's suit and your hand has considerable trick potential. You are worth 3S.

With hand d) you want to explore the spade game. Ask partner how strong she is. Bid 3C - the unassuming cue bid - to find out.

With hand e) you have support for partner and a five card heart suit. Enough to bid naturally at the 2 level - so bid 2H.

So far, so straightforward. But consider now these hands. Again the bidding has gone 1S from partner, followed by a 2C overcall.

f) xx / Qxxx / Jxxx / Jxx

g) x / QJxxx / Axx / xxxx

h) xx / QJxx / Axxx / Axx

i) Axx / QJxx / AKxx / Ax

j) x / AQx / xxxxx / KJ10x

With hand f) you might have a fit with partner, but you don't know that yet and in terms of high cards you have a very poor hand. You must PASS for now.

With hand g) you would like to bid your five card heart suit - but you don't have the values to bid hearts at the 2 level. The answer is to DOUBLE. Then, when you bid hearts later, partner will know you are weak with at least five hearts.

With hand h) you have classic Sputnik Double - enough to bid at the 2 level and promising four cards in the unbid major. So again, DOUBLE is right.

With hand i) you have a much stronger hand - certainly enough to contemplate slam. But there is no rush. You want to begin to convey your hand shape - specifically your four card holding in the other major. Again, DOUBLE is right. You will be able to show your strength with your rebid - probably via an unassuming cue bid (bidding the enemy suit), or perhaps by a straightforward cue, either of which will force at least to game.

With hand j) you have no support for partner, but you are salivating at the prospect of a juicy penalty. You must NOT double - since that asks partner to bid. No indeed; you must PASS. That is the trap pass that features in the title of this post. See more below.

Finally, what is opener to do when her left hand opponent has overcalled and partner has passed? I see novice players routinely bid on in this scenario, either rebidding the suit they've opened, or bidding a second suit. Or if they don't do that, they may Pass. Both these actions - either bidding on or Passing - are WRONG on the overwhelming majority of hands. Unless opener has extreme distribution, she should DOUBLE. This is the case even if she has a minimum opening - say 11 or 12 points. Double, double, double. This is because you have agreed to play Sputnik doubles - and that means that partner - the responder - cannot double for penalties. But you must NOT lose your penalty double. Otherwise the opponents can bid on all sorts of rubbish with impunity.

So, whenever partner has passed and opener is short in the overcaller's suit, she **MUST** double. This is mandatory, it is called a re-opening double, and it does not promise extra values. Then, if partner has a good holding in the overcaller's suit, she can **PASS**, converting the re-opening X into a penalty X. In that way you don't lose your penalty double!

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