

Defence to Pre-empts

Part I: Weak Twos

There are many fancy gadgets available. Ignore them. Most of them are anyway silly, but what is important when defending against pre-emptive bids is the *right kind of thinking*. Which requires attention to the Four Noble Truths:-

First Noble Truth: **Be Sensible.**

The most under-used defence to Weak Twos is: **Pass**. Especially at teams, when your aim is always the *surest* plus score, not the biggest. If you are fixed, stay fixed. Don't shade your overcalls or doubles: only compete over a Weak Two with a fair expectation of achieving a superior contract. Don't make thin doubles for penalties – if two spades is going down, you are getting a fair result on the board already, so don't try to steal more than is your due. A good Partner will know that you are **Sensible**, and will be aware that you might be quite strong even though you passed.

Second Noble Truth: **Be Practical**

You enter the auction under uncertainty, with little bidding room left. So just forget about finding the ideal contract. Adopt a **practical** attitude. Again, a good Partner will be aware that your bids are **Practical** bids, and will conduct the auction accordingly.

Third Noble Truth: **Be Caring**

Look after Partner. She is under pressure too. After a pre-empt your partnership has to guess the best contract, so whenever you see that you are better placed to decide/guess the final contract, take the strain off Partner, and bid it. Don't pass the buck. Discipline on this matter is important. If you always take the strain when you can, then on the occasions that you don't, Partner now knows that you are in no position to decide. And that is valuable information.

Fourth Noble Truth: **Be Cautious**

If in doubt, err on the side of caution. Pre-emptive openings announce likely bad breaks.

With this in mind, I offer you standard tournament defence to Weak Twos:

Standard Defence to Weak Twos.

In summary:

Overcalls are **natural**, whether in a suit or NT.

Jump Overcalls are **strong**.

Cue-bids of the enemy suit show a **big two-suiter**. And it needs to be a big one, for you will often be asking Partner to enter the auction at the four-level. If not higher¹. So use these sparingly. You are asking Partner to go to game on a fit and scattered values.

Doubles are **take-out**. This means that they are *primarily* for take-out, but Responder is allowed to Pass for penalties if he judges that that's where the safest money lies.

And in more detail:

[1] Simple Overcalls

Natural, invitational, non-forcing, at least a five-card suit. And usually a six-card suit if you overcall in a minor. Required strength depends on the level of the bid. If RHO opens 2♥, then

♠ A Q J 8 6
♥ A 3
♦ J 10 2
♣ 9 4 3

is minimum for a 2♠ overcall. With a weaker suit or point-count, Pass. And

♠ A K
♥ 10 5 2
♦ A Q J 10 5 4
♣ J 8

is minimum for a 3♦ overcall. Since you are entering the auction at a higher level, you need corresponding strength. With a weaker suit or point-count, Pass. Discipline on the strength of overcalls is important: since they are invitational to game, Partner needs to be able to trust them.

[2] Jump Overcalls

These are *strong*, since there is no point in pre-empting a pre-empter. Again they are natural, non-forcing, single-suited, and this time *strongly* invitational. The minimum standard for a jump to 3♠ over 2♥ is something like:-

♠ A K J 8 7 5
♥ 7 4 3
♦ A Q 10
♣ K 7

And again, discipline is vital. You want partner to bid game on a fit with a few scattered values. So he has to be able to trust that your bid is up to strength. With a weaker suit or point-count, bid a simple 2♠.

[3] Responding to Overcalls

¹ RHO opens 2♥, you bid 3♥, announcing a big two-suited hand. LHO now knows that it is important to increase the defensive barrage to make you guess at an uncomfortably high level. And so will raise to 4♥ on bugger all. Which means that partner has to come in with 5♣ at least, if he has no fit for spades.

Responding to overcalls is best dealt with by a purely *practical* decision. When partner overcalls a Weak Two, his hand is only limited within quite a wide range. You don't know whether he is strong or weak, and there is no bidding space left to find out (unless you happen to be very strong, in which case there isn't a problem in the first place). So *assume* that he is in the middle of the range – something like 14 points and a six-card suit – and base your bidding on that assumption. And don't forget that partner *knows* you are making this assumption. As always, the most neglected bid here is **Pass**. But if you do decide to bid on, then bid naturally:

Raises below game are invitational, not forcing. Since Partner *knows* your assumption about his hand, he will know when to bid on and when to pass.

New suits are natural, five-card at least, and forcing if bid below game level.

2NT, on the rare occasions when it is still available, is invitational to 3NT and promises a stop.

3NT is to play

A **cue-bid in the enemy suit** asks Partner for more information, and usually has 3NT in mind. And it neither promises nor denies a stop in opponents' suit. Partner's first responsibility is to assume that this is a try for 3NT, and cooperate in the investigation.

So he should bid 3NT with a sure stop in the enemy suit and nothing else of interest to say. If he cannot stop the enemy suit, but *can* stop another, he should bid that suit at the 3-level, if the bid is available. This cue-bid-indicating-a-stop cannot be mistaken for a second suit. He overcalled, *therefore* he is single suited.

[4] 2NT Overcall

Think of this as exactly like a 1NT overcall of a suit. Around 16-18 points, balanced, with a sure stop in the opponents' suit. Responses are simple: use exactly your structure of responses to an *opening* 2NT, with appropriate allowance for the difference in point-count.

[5] 3NT Overcall

Just like a 3NT overcall of a one-bid. Strong, good stop in enemy suit, and probably based on a long, semi-solid minor. So that often, the 3NT overcall has fewer points than a 2NT overcall. It's *playing strength* which counts with this bid. You hope to be able to run off nine tricks before defence can get to theirs.

[6] Double

Is for take-out. It does not limit the hand. Partner may pass for penalties if he judges that that's where the certain money is. Otherwise he *must* respond. When doubling, remember that shape is *much* more important than point-count. With a nice 4-4-4-1 you could double 2♥ on as little² as

♠ A K 6 4
♥ 7
♦ K 8 5 3
♣ Q J 8 4

² If the enemy use 2♦ as a Weak Two – more fool them – then you can shade the requirements for a double substantially. Two reasons. You are not doubling them into game. 2♦, doubled, just made, is not a disaster. And since partner is likely to hold the majors, he can respond at the 2-level on weak hands.

But with less than perfect distribution, you need a greater point-count. Given, say, a low doubleton in hearts, you would need to be at least a king better, something like:

♠ K J 4
♥ 7 5
♦ A Q 10 4
♣ K Q 8 4

[7] Responding to a take-out double

This is where you need some conventional machinery. Since the doubler may only hold a minimum opening hand, and since you *must* respond unless going for penalties, the range for a simple suit response is huge: from zero up to about ten points – or the equivalent in distribution. For instance, if Partner doubles 2♠, you have to bid 3♥ on either of these:-

♠ 4 3 2	♠ A 4 2
♥ 9 8 3 2	♥ K Q J 6
♦ 9 8 4	♦ 8 6 4
♣ 7 6 5	♣ 4 3 2

Standard tournament practice is to resolve the problem by using **Lebensohl Responses** to a take-out double of a Weak Two.

Here's the basic³ idea. 2NT is the least-used natural response to a double, so it is given instead a purely conventional role as a relay, demanding that Partner bid 3♣. So with a weak hand facing a double, you bid 2NT (indicating roughly 0-6 points). Partner responds 3♣ as commanded, and you bid your suit at the 3-level.

That leaves all 3-level suit responses to the double as natural, invitational, roughly 7-11 points. (Because with any more than that you would **take the strain off partner** and bid game).

[8] Passing for Penalties

Passing a take-out double for penalties carries the message that opponents have hit your suit with such a vengeance that they are certainly going down, and that game your way is unlikely. So only pass on weakish hands with good trumps. If you are in fourth seat, so that your trumps are *under* declarer's, they need to be pretty solid – say K Q J x x as a minimum – but if you will be sat *over* declarer you can pass with a broken trump holding such as K J x x.

If in doubt, contemplate the likely effect of an opening trump lead. If partner is on lead, and you have passed for penalties, partner will lead a trump if he has one, to cut down ruffing potential. So the question is: would I welcome a trump lead, or is it likely to help declarer? If you would not be happy with a trump lead, don't pass for penalties.

If you hold long but weak trumps, say five to the nine, then (i) since declarer has six, it is quite likely that you have no trump tricks, and the penalty pass will serve only to help declarer play the hand. (ii) partner will be very short, and so will have good shape for his double. Hence a contract your way is more likely to succeed, and you can chance bidding a 3-card suit to find a fit.

[9] The Positional Factor – Competing in Third and Fourth Seat

³ The full set of responses, for anyone who wants to learn them, is rather more sophisticated. See separate sheet.

Most of the above assumes that you are competing in second seat. If you are placed in third seat, then partner is already limited to less than an opening hand. So be more cautious. The hand sitting over you may well be the best hand at the table.

If you are competing in fourth seat, after two passes, be less cautious. You can be more aggressive now, because you are protecting partner's pass. Partner may have a decent hand which she was unable to show over the pre-empt. (Remember: Partner is **Sensible**). This is especially so when doubling. If partner could not bid despite fair values, then the odds are that he has the wrong distribution to compete. Whereupon a double from you will be exactly what he wants to hear.

And don't forget the reverse point: that when you pass over a Weak Two and Partner competes, he has probably already taken your hand into account. So don't get too excited.

Part II: Weak Threes

Just to remind you of The Four Noble Truths:

Be Sensible: If you're fixed, stay fixed

Be Practical

Be Caring: Take the strain off Partner

Be Cautious: When in doubt, discretion is the better part of valour

Respect for the Four Noble Truths is even more important when opponents pre-empt at the three-level. There is no bidding space left, so you cannot *explore* game-contracts. One of you has to take the plunge. Here's the basic mechanics:

Overcalls (including 3NT) are **natural**.

Doubles are **optional**

Cue-bids of the enemy suit show a **two-suiter**

Bidding: When deciding whether or not to compete, **assume** that Partner has about 6-7 points.

Responding: When responding to partner's intervention, **discount** your first 6 or 7 points. Partner has already allowed for them

And this time it will be a good thing if you work out the further details for yourself.