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Partscore fights: When to push and when to quit

In duplicate games scored by match-points, you compare your results to those of all the other pairs in your direction — pairs playing the same cards you are. Ideally, you want to get the biggest plus score possible. There are, of course, deals where your side is destined to go minus. In those cases, you try to give up the lowest minus score possible.

Sometimes, this means playing the contract and going down, but it takes good judgment to know when to do that. A common competitive situation occurs in partscore battles where you must decide whether to bid on or let your opponents win the auction.

Rather than base your decision on point count or on how daring you feel at the moment, it's better to follow guidelines that work more often than not. We discussed one guideline last month: *Don't let your opponents play at the two level when they have a fit.* Fine, but what about the three level? How do you decide when to bid more and when to sell out? Consider the following situation. East deals. No one is vulnerable.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
		1♠	2♥
2♠	3♥	?	

It's important to have partnership agreements about raises in competition. What does West's 2♠ show? What does North's 3♥ show? These agreements are suggested for newer players:

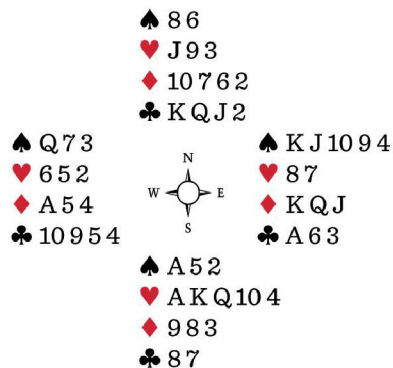
➡ A raise of opener's or overcaller's suit to the two level shows at least three-card support and about 6 to 10 total points. West's 2♠ can be made on as few as 6 points up to a mediocre 10 points.

➡ When RHO raises his partner's suit, a non-jump raise to three of opener's or overcaller's suit is competitive, showing a fit and about 8 to a bad 11 total points.

In the previous auction, what call would you make as East holding:

♠K J 10 9 4 ♥8 7 ♦K Q J ♣A 6 3?

When your opponents are winning the auction, a bid of three of your agreed suit is competitive, *not a game try*. The full deal:



Many East players would compete to 3♠ thinking, “I opened the bidding, and I’m not going to let the opponents win this auction.” If you consider that the high-card points could be evenly split between North–South and East–West, you might have a different view.

South's *two-level* overcall showed a hand worth opening, too, so we can't be sure that this deal belongs to East-West. Some might bid 3♠ because they're not vulnerable.

In spades, East has five losers and none can be avoided, so 3♠ is down one, as is 3♥ because South also has five unavoidable losers (South's third spade can be ruffed in dummy). East's 3♠ was not a good decision but North's 3♥ was. Why? Bidding 3♥ prevented East-West from playing 2♠ and scoring plus 110. Now they have to settle for scoring only plus 50 (for 3♥ down one). East's 3♠ turned plus 50 into minus 50.

East didn't follow the second guideline for competitive bidding: *Once your opponents have competed to the three level, bid more only with extra distribution — usually a ninth trump.* When deciding whether to bid three of your suit over three of the opponents' suit, count your trumps and keep competing until you have bid for as many tricks as your side has trumps. This concept is based on the law of total tricks. Although not foolproof, it will get you on the winning side of more competitive auctions. Once you reach your "law" level, it's probably time to quit. On this deal, with everyone making their best bid, 3♥ down one is the optimum result for both pairs.

Note that even if East–West double 3♥ and beat it a trick, the score of plus 100 still does not beat the plus 110 they were headed for in 2♠.