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YOU have a full array of excellent conventions to assist you to bid slams and games in uncontested auctions but, of course, the opponents like bidding so you need some tools in competitive auctions and the support double is one.

You have opened. The auction has got competitive. Do you compete at the three level? The traditional answer is that if you have a nine-card fit it is generally right to do so. In competitive auctions the difference between eight- and nine-card fits is nearly as important as that between seven- and eight-card fits. Anything you can do to clarify the degree of fit is worthwhile. It is why many players make $1\heartsuit - (1\heartsuit) - 1\clubsuit$ show five spades and a negative double four. Suppose the auction has started:

$1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\heartsuit - (1\clubsuit)$

You might have some support for partner, good support for partner or not much at all, so can you distinguish between the first two before the opponents use up more of your room. Let's suppose you have:

♠ A 6 5
♥ K 9 5
♦ A Q 8 7 5 3
♣ 4

or

♠ K 7
♥ K 9 5 4
♦ A Q 7 5 3
♣ 5 4

In both cases you have support and in both cases you would like to compete to the two level. Whether you or partner want to go further depends on partner's strength and the degree of fit. If the opponents are about to bounce you in spades, then now is the time to tell partner. The first hand has decent support and a ruffing value. Sure it might end up being a 4-3 fit but it may play well and score highly at pairs. With the second hand you positively want to encourage partner to go to the three level if he has five of his suit and quite possibly if he

has four. You can do this by doubling with three-card support and bidding directly with four-card support. When partner comes to make a decision, he is in possession of useful extra information. Partner will know, if you double, that you have only three, and can view to play in 1NT or $2\heartsuit$ instead of $2\heartsuit$ if that is appropriate.

Here is an example from the point of view of the responder. Partner opens $1\heartsuit$ and you respond $1\heartsuit$. Now the next hand wades in with $2\clubsuit$ and you hold:

♠ 10 8 4
♥ A K 8 7 6
♦ 5 4
♣ J 9 4

How high should you compete? If you play support doubles, then partner will bid $2\heartsuit$ with four-card support and double with three. If instead he passes, then you know you have no fit. If he had six diamonds, he would likely bid $2\heartsuit$, you know that your heart fit is at best 5-2, so you would judge against competing at the three level.

So how strong is one of these doubles? The answer is that it can be any strength. If your hand is truly terrible for an opening bid and flat, say a 3-3-5-2 11- or 12-count, then you might not double. You are not obliged to. But the double could show 13 or 18 points and you will make this clear with your next action. If minimum, you will pass, if you have a good hand you can bid on, secure in the knowledge that partner knows how good the fit is.

It's good to have some rules about when support doubles apply. Like many conventions, the case for them is weakened if you have lots of misunderstandings. It will only pay if you are prepared to discuss some rules with a partner. Remember that both support doubles and redoubles are alertable because they convey a specific message.

Most players who use them will restrict them to the one or two level. Typically they only apply when one of you has opened and

the other has responded one of a major, and now an opponent has bid at the one or two level, so these are support double situations:

$1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\heartsuit - (2\clubsuit) - \text{Double}$

$1\clubsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\clubsuit - (2\heartsuit) - \text{Double}$

and these are not:

$1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\heartsuit - (3\clubsuit) - \text{Double}$

$1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 2\clubsuit - (2\clubsuit) - \text{Double}$

Another advantage that accrues is the 'dog that didn't bark'. When partner does *not* support and does *not* make a support double, you know that he has a maximum of two cards in your suit. This not only has the advantage of telling you how far to compete but also when a double of the opponents is likely to be successful.

Sometimes the opponents will make a take-out double instead of bidding, and now you can add the support redouble to the armoury. The auction goes:

$1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\heartsuit - (\text{Double}) - ?$

Now you can bid naturally if you have no support, including rebidding 1NT, but you have a spare redouble and can use that to show three-card support.

Are support doubles always a good idea? I don't think so, even though I am arguing for them. If you play a strong no trump system then in auctions such as:

$1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\heartsuit - (2\clubsuit) - ?$

you won't have 15-17 balanced or you would have opened 1NT, so using a double to show three-card support is a big plus. If you play a 12-14 1NT then you may well have a strong balanced hand, and need to show that more than whether you have three-card support to help partner. They are a better bet with a strong no-trump type of system. Even when a convention is a good idea you do need to look at what you give up in exchange. Overall, however, they are a significant boost to dealing with competitive auctions and give more certainty in knowing when to double opponents, when to give up and when to compete further. □

Support Doubles Are a Good Convention

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at elena@ebu.co.uk

Support Doubles Are Not a Good Convention

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WHEN I started playing bridge, over forty years ago, low-level doubles generally fell into one of two categories: penalty or take-out. Although other doubles had been devised, their use was not widespread in this country.

Times change, and there are now several different types of double in the armoury of even the least scientific tournament player. One of these is the 'support double': as commonly played, when responder's first bid was 1♥ or 1♠, a double by opener of fourth-hand intervention at the one-level or two-level shows exactly three-card support for partner's major suit.

To my mind, this is a peculiar notion. It's not that I cannot see the potential advantage – I like to think that I am receptive to ideas and would not attempt to deny that there can be an advantage in knowing whether partner has three-card support; indeed, in certain competitive situations, the knowledge can assuredly be beneficial. It's simply that I can think of at least three better uses for the double:

- Old-fashioned penalties (in times gone by, only the most avant-garde would have played it any other way); or
- Take-out, which happens to be my preference; or
- Strong, balanced hand, particularly useful when playing a weak no-trump.

In all three instances, opener is making a positive statement about his hand, as opposed to the vague comment that he has three-card support.

And be in no doubt: if you do not double when you have three-card support, partner will assume that you do not have it. Even if you have opened some disgusting sub-minimum hand, it behoves you to double – it is simply not playable to

agree that you might decide to pass with a bad hand and three-card support.

To employ an analogy, a bid is either forcing or non-forcing: there is no such thing as semi-forcing, and, if a bid is defined as forcing, then you have to bid (pace Kit Woolsey, an American expert who argues that one is at liberty to pass a 'forcing' bid when judged appropriate; it is fair to say that Woolsey's judgement is keener than the average). In the same way, if opener does not double, then he does *not* have three-card support.

My main objection to the support double is that it concentrates on one feature of opener's hand to the exclusion of all others. If, after 1♦ – (Pass) – 1♠ – (2♥), opener has to double with both 3-1-5-4 shape and 3-4-5-1, with anything from 11 to 21 points, I cannot see how responder can possibly make a sensible decision: in the sequence quoted, what is he supposed to do with a 4-3-2-4 distribution and 9 or so points? In particular, what rational basis might he have for deciding when to pass the double?

The answer to my (rhetorical) question is that he has a problem which he will solve by thinking about it – yes, another convention which is liable to produce an 'unauthorised information' situation – and then bidding 2♣. For I can guarantee that, if responder bids 2♣ slowly in the sequence quoted, he only has four spades – with five, he would have little to think about. If 2♣ fails and 2♥ would have been beaten, the familiar alibi ('I did think about passing') will be trotted out.

Support doubles are demonstrably weak when responder has a hand which might be interested in game. Compare these two sequences:



Richard Fleet

THE DEBATE

(a) 1♦ – (Pass) – 1♠ – (2♥) – 2♣

Opener has limited his hand. He has three or four spades with a hand in the minimum range. It is obviously not ideal that responder does not know exactly how many spades opener has, but very often it will not matter. Responder is well placed to decide whether or not to try for game.
(b) 1♦ – (Pass) – 1♠ – (2♥) – Double

Opener has three spades. Nothing more is known about his hand so responder is very much in the dark.

If, against my advice, you and your partner decide to employ support doubles, I suggest that you will need to sort out a number of subsidiary matters. For example:

- Do support doubles apply when the opponents bid 1NT? Does it make a difference if the 1NT bid is conventional (e.g. the other two suits)?
- Do they apply when the opponents bid our suit (e.g. a 2♦ or 2♠ bid after a 1♦ opening and a 1♠ response)? Does the meaning of the intervention make a difference (some players employ these bids to show two-suiters, others prefer to regard them as natural)?
- Do they apply over jump intervention (i.e. a jump to 2♣ following a 1♠ or 1♦ opening and a 1♥ response)?

For what it's worth, a playable rule of thumb is that support doubles apply whenever the intervention is at a level below two of responder's suit. So, assuming a 1♠ response to a 1♦ opening, a double of a 2♦ bid would be support while a double of 2♣ would not. This may not be the most efficient method from a purely theoretical point of view, but it has the great advantage of being easy to remember.

But I would far prefer you not to use support doubles at all! □

