

The Battle between Hearts and Spades by Maritha Pottenger

Much of the competition at the duplicate table ends up being between the heart suit and the spade suit. Spades, the “boss suit,” has a huge advantage, because you can outbid the opponents at the same level. That is why I recommend being most aggressive about opening and overcalling when you have the spade suit. Likewise, I do NOT open marginal hands (in any seat) when they are very short in the spade suit. I recently passed, in 2nd seat: K Q109x Axxxx Kxx. If I had opened, opponents could bid and make 2S. We could not make anything at 3 level.

People often get carried away with shapely hands. It is important to remember two defensive principles:

- 1) Do not bid three spades unless you are willing to defend against the opponents playing in four hearts.
- 2) Do not bid four hearts unless you are willing to defend against the opponents playing in four spades.

I have been known to pass the opponents in 3S, even though I thought we had a shot at making 4H, because I had zero, or almost zero, defense against 4S. (In some cases, I then bid 5H over the opponents' 4S call for obvious reasons.) Similarly, when your side is bidding hearts, don't go to the 4 level “because we are non-vulnerable” or for other reasons, unless you believe that you can defeat the opponents in 4S. There is nothing worse than **pushing** the opponents into a game they were not going to bid by themselves, and seeing them score it up.

It is also vital to use matchpoint doubles sensibly. When you and your partner are competing in hearts with the opponents bidding spades and you have defense against three spades, DOUBLE the opponents in three spades. This is essential to protect your partner against going on and bidding 4H. Particularly when you have 4 trumps, partner will almost certainly be singleton or void and is likely to bid on, UNLESS you warn him/her off by doubling. Be a good partner; protect your other half from him/herself.

Be aware of the difference between competitive auctions; auctions involving preempts; and freely bid games. If you and your partner freely and voluntarily bid to game in 4H, and the opponents sacrifice in 4S, the principles of the forcing pass apply: immediate double shows two quick losers in spades and/or strong desire to defend. A pass is forcing, promising no more than one quick loser in spades and giving partner the option to double for penalties or bid on to 5H. A pass, followed pulling partner's double to 5H is a mild slam try. Where preempts are in the picture, there is no such concept as “freely bid games.” Either partner may have jumped to game simply to extend the preempt and to make life difficult for the opponents. In truly competitive auctions, the bids usually go up one-by-one (often with hesitations and sighs or frowns to punctuate them). At all levels, doubling the opponents is one of your best tools for stopping partner from bidding too much.

When you have very distributional, two-suited hands, try to let partner in on the secret, so s/he knows whether to bid one more or double. With, for example, AKJxx x xx KQJxx, if LHO overcalls my 1S opening with 2H, and partner bid 2S, and RHO bids 3H, I am bidding 4C, to show partner “where I live” (where my values are), so partner know which action to take if the opponents compete to 5H. If partner's 2S raise was based on Qxx QJx KQ10x xxx, partner will happily double 5H (partly to protect me from bidding 5S). If partner's 2S raise was based on 109xx xx Axx Axxx, partner will bid on to 5S, expecting to make it.