

Sacrifices and Competitive Bidding

Why bid a contract you probably won't make?

The answer is simple – it may score better. A contract made by your opponents will score them at least 70, whereas going down one non-vulnerable (NV) will only cost you (i.e. score them) 50 – a better result for you.

When the points are fairly equally divided between the two sides, then usually there will be contracts making at the two level on both sides.

Suppose your opponents have hearts and you have spades. The bidding is at 2H their way. Should you bid 2S? Almost certainly. 2H will score them 110. If you make 2S you will score 110. If you miss it by one trick (NV) you will score -50, still better than them scoring 110. In fact 2 down (-100) will still score better.

Matchpoints

At normal club sessions, scoring is by matchpoints. Remember you are being compared to the scores that all the other pairs playing the same hands made.

Matchpoint scoring is simple. For every pair (playing the same cards as you) that your score is better than, you get 2 matchpoints (MPs). For every pair that your score is the same as, you get one point. You get no points for anyone whose score is better than yours.

The important thing is that it's not how much bigger your score is than theirs, just that it is bigger.

Say there were four other pairs playing the same hands as you, and the other pairs all scored +110.

If you scored +120, you would get 8MPs. Similarly if you scored +1100, you would still only get 8MPs. If you scored +110, you would get 0MPs.

Vulnerability and Doubles

Vulnerability affects the scoring, and can affect whether a sacrifice should be made.

If you are Non-Vulnerable (NV), the game bonus is 300, and undertricks cost 50 each.

If you are Vulnerable (Vul), the game bonus is 500, and undertricks cost 100 each.

Doubling a contract is done when you think the opponents won't make their contract. If a contract is doubled, the penalties for undertricks are increased by at least double. Beware though, if you double a contract and they make it, their score is increased, usually to more than anyone else playing the same cards.

The Maths

Contracts at the two level rarely get doubled, so you can afford to go down by one (Vul) or two (NV) tricks. That is why there are few contracts at the two level, and hardly any at the one level (1NT excepted!)

If bidding is at the game level, any contract that is bid without any real chance of being made (a Sacrifice) will be doubled. Let's say the opponents are in 4H and are likely to make it. How many can you afford to go down and still get a good score? Let's make a table, assuming your sacrifice is doubled:

Your Vul.	Their Vul.	4H Scores	Down 1	Down 2	Down 3
N.V.	N.V.	420	-100	-300	-500
N.V.	Vul	620	-100	-300	-500
Vul	N.V.	420	-200	-500	-800
Vul	Vul	620	-200	-500	-800

Green indicates the sacrifice is worth making, red that it is not.

As a general rule, if they are in game, you can afford to go down 2 tricks in the vulnerabilities are the same, 3 tricks if favourable (They Vul, you NV) and only 1 if unfavourable.

Warning: The maths might be quite easy, but judging how many you might go down is not.

When to stop competing

Often the bidding will be competitive – each side bidding ever higher. When should you stop bidding your suit? Part of the answer is when it is no longer cheaper to go down than to let the opponents make their contract. Another part is when they have reached a contract they cannot make.

What level is this? Let's have a look at why sacrifices work and when they don't.

Competitive bidding comes about because a pair of hands will have more trick taking ability if a suit that they have a lot of is trumps.

For no trumps (NT) the trick taking ability is pretty much determined by the point count. 21-22 = 7 tricks, 23-24 = 8 tricks, 25-26 = 9 tricks and so on. This also goes backwards: 19-20 = 6 tricks, 17-18 = 5 tricks etc.

Do you remember that in a suit contract you will generally make one more trick than in NT? (This is why we prefer 4H or 4S to 3NT).

Let's assume you have 21 points and a heart fit. In NT you will make 7 tricks so in a suit contract you can probably make 8 tricks (2H contract). Your opponents have 19 points and (let's say) a spade fit. In NT they will make 6 tricks so in a suit contract they can probably make 7 tricks. So 2S will cost them 50 or 100, whereas 2H by you will cost them 110. The sacrifice is worth it. On top of this, if a lot of their points are in their suit, and you have a shortage (singleton or void) in their suit then some of their points will be useless.

Let's do the same maths with the points split 23-17. You can make 3H (for 140) but they can only make 6 tricks in spades, so 3S will go down 3 tricks for -150/-300. Not worth it.

So why compete above the two level?

Because bridge isn't that simple. There are many things that can affect the trick taking ability of your hand that are not captured in a simple point count.