

Lacking a System to Show 3-Suited Competitive Values

Last month I presented a hand from the 2006 USBF team championships where the winner earned the right to represent the USA in the 2007 Bermuda Bowl. That hand was board #11 from our knockout match against the reigning world champion Rose Meltzer team. This month I present board #10, which demonstrates a problem bidding situation for standard bidders.

I was playing with Gail Greenberg against Roger Bates and Alan Sontag when I picked up: ♠A1094 ♥-- ♦Q10963 ♣J752. Everyone was vulnerable and after 2 passes Roger opened the bidding with 1♥ on my right, showing about 10-15 points and 5 hearts. Here I had a hand that I wanted to compete with, but I had no good system bid. I didn't want to overcall when I had support for all 3 unbid suits, and I was too weak to make a takeout double. So I passed, hoping that I would get a chance to describe my hand later in the bidding.

Passing might have been an effective strategy many years ago, but in today's world top players are always trying to deny their opponent's the opportunity to comfortably describe their hand. And that is what happened at the table. Alan Sontag jumped to 2♠ which showed maximum strength for a passed hand with 4-card support and an undefined singleton. Gail passed and Roger now jumped to 4♥. They took away all my bidding space. I guess I could have bid 4♠, which partner could possibly interpret as a 3-suit takeout bid (it was not discussed) since I had not overcalled 1♠. But that would have been a precarious call for two reasons: 1) Partner might not interpret it correctly and we might end up in the wrong suit doubled going for a big penalty, and 2) With my void in hearts the opponents were potentially going to run into a bad trump break and might not even make their contract. So, I passed, disappointed that I never got to describe my offensive values.

This was the entire hand:

Everyone Vulnerable	Dummy (Sontag)				
	♠5	Pass	Pass	1♥	Pass
	♥QJ84	2♠	Pass	4♥	Pass
	♦AJ872	Pass	Pass		
Jeff Hand	♣Q86			Gail Greenberg	
♠A1094				♠J862	
♥---				♥953	
♦Q10963				♦K5	
♣J752	Declarer(Bates)			♣AK109	
	♠KQ73				
	♥AK10762				
	♦4				
	♣43				

Declarer made 10 tricks easily, and scored 620 points. We could have sacrificed in either 4♠ or 5♣, and gone for 200 points. We tied the board, as teammates also bought the contract at 4♥. But it sure would have been nice to have a system bid that would have allowed me to describe my general hand and therefore win some IMPs.

So, I have been pondering this problem. Is there some bid in my current system that is worth giving up in order to show a weak distributional takeout double? Strangely, about 35 years ago I played a bid that handled this situation. Back then I used the 1NT overcall as a weak 3-suit takeout. I had given it up as the 1NT natural overcall is much more valuable, but I sure would have liked to have that bidding tool available on this hand.

Let me discuss the parameters of the weak 3-suited takeout 1NT overcall. It must be a hand that has good capability to want to compete. So I recommend that it: 1) guarantees at least 4 cards in all unbid major suits, 2) Shows either 4441, 5440, 5431, or something very similar, 3) If there is a 3-card suit, it should have some honor strength in it, preferably 3+HCP, and 4) It is a hand too weak for a normal takeout double. You will now be slightly sounder in making takeout doubles than you were previously, as on borderline hands that choose between making takeout doubles or use this convention, I tend to use the convention.

Something else. When I play with my friend Ed Schulte, he likes to make takeout doubles more aggressively and distributional than I usually do. In fact, he says that when he is not vulnerable against vulnerable, that it is his duty to get us into the auction. What I don't like about that style is that it leaves me guessing when the opponents bid too much if I can count on him for defensive values so I can double. I think this convention will solve that problem wonderfully.

But I am of the opinion that this 3-suited hand of mine doesn't come up very frequently, so it is not worth giving up the natural 1NT overcall.

I am only willing to play the weak 3-suited takeout 1NT overcall under one circumstance. That is, when we are not vulnerable vs. vulnerable and we are playing IMPs. At matchpoints I want to stay with the field, and outplay the field with similar methods but superior bidding, play and defense, so therefore I want to restrict using the bid to IMPs. And at IMPs I am unwilling to give up the natural 1NT overcall at any other vulnerability. The main advantage of the weak takeout bid is in finding good sacrifices, and those are much more plentiful at favorable vulnerability. And at favorable vulnerability the loss of the natural 1NT overcall is minimized, in that when

you have that hand it is unlikely at unfavorable vulnerability that the opponents will effectively preempt you if you start with a takeout double.

It is great to have a bidding tool that will allow you to describe the general nature of your hand in one bid, so partner can preempt effectively, NV vs. VUL. Now I can compete quickly and effectively, and shut the opponents out of the bidding, instead of vice-versa.

On this hand, just looking at our two hands, it is easy to see that we would rather reach a contract of 4♠ instead of defending 4♥. But, since we are not at favorable vulnerability, I would not have this convention to help me. Still this hand is a good example of how the convention can be valuable.

In retrospect, I think I should have overcalled 1♠. At least then I would have mentioned my most important suit - the higher ranking major. And on this hand partner would have been able to bid 4♠ when the opponents get to 4♥.