

VULNERABILITY AND ITS EFFECT ON BIDDING TACTICS IN DUPLICATE BRIDGE

This handout discusses how the vulnerability (both ours and our opponents) can affect our bidding. Most of the time there is no effect whatsoever but in some situations, the vulnerability can have a significant influence on our choice of bid.

Before going into detailed discussions, here is a table showing some common results, together with the associated scores when non-vulnerable or vulnerable.

Type of contract	Contract	Result	Non-vulnerable score	Vulnerable score
Making part-score	1NT, 2♣ or 2♦	✓	90	90
	2♥, 2♠, 3♣ or 3♦	✓	110	110
	1NT	+1	120	120
	2♥ or 2♠	+1	140	140
	3♣ or 3♦	+1	130	130
	1NT, 3♣ or 3♦	+2	150	150
	2♥ or 2♠	+2	170	170
Making game	3NT, 5♣ or 5♦	✓	400	600
	4♥ or 4♠	✓	420	620
Going down (at any level)	Any (undoubled)	-1	-50	-100
	Any (undoubled)	-2	-100	-200
	Any (doubled)	-1	-100	-200
	Any (doubled)	-2	-300	-500
	Any (doubled)	-3	-500	-800
	Any (doubled)	-4	-800	-1100

EFFECT OF VULNERABILITY ON THE UNCONTESTED AUCTION

In general, it's best to ignore vulnerability in connection with constructive bidding. For example, if we would raise 1♥ to 3♥ when non-vulnerable, we should do exactly the same when vulnerable. In a pairs competition it's worth bidding game when the probability of success is more than 50%, whatever the vulnerability.

In a teams competition it may be worth bidding game when it's slightly odds against, since the reward for making a game (as opposed to a part score) is higher and not fully offset by the greater cost of going one down. This is especially the case if we are vulnerable. But we shouldn't stretch too far to bid close games even at teams, since it can be costly to go more than one down, especially if we are doubled.

ISSUES RELATING TO THE CONTESTED AUCTION

When the auction is contested, we need to take account of the fact that either side might end up playing the hand. We should also try to compare the likely results obtained from either bidding on, or letting the opponents play in their own contract.

Clearly, if the opponents have bid up to a making contract and we consider that our side could make a higher contract, then it's right to bid on. But what happens if we think that we might go down in a higher contract? Conversely, if the opponents have overbid to an unmakeable contract, should we still sometimes bid higher ourselves? In both of these last situations, vulnerability can be a vital factor.

EFFECT OF VULNERABILITY ON THE CONTESTED AUCTION AT THE PART-SCORE LEVEL

Vulnerability can have a significant effect on competitive auctions in the part score zone. For example, if the opponents can play in 2♥ and make the contract exactly, they will score 110 points. Suppose that we can make 7 or 8 tricks in clubs and are considering bidding 3♣.

If we are non-vulnerable we would lose 50 or 100 points, both better than losing 110. It's possible that the opponents might double, but even we'll still be better off if we can escape for one down, since we would still lose only 100 points. Going 2 down doubled would cost 300 points, however.

It's a different story if we are vulnerable, since even undoubled we would lose 100 or 200 points. In addition, going just one down doubled would cost 200 points.

These situations can often be very difficult to judge, but in borderline situations it's normally best to follow the principle "when in doubt, bid one more". Even if doing so is wrong in theory, bidding on often turns out well in practice, since the opponents could bid higher themselves, or might find it hard to make a penalty double.

Even so, it's often wise to be a little more cautious in the competitive auction when we are vulnerable. For example, with a hand like

♠ A 6
♥ K 10 7 4 3
♦ Q 5 2
♣ 10 8

we might decide to make a 1♥ overcall if we are non-vulnerable, but it's better to pass if we are vulnerable.

EFFECT OF VULNERABILITY ON THE CONTESTED AUCTION AT THE GAME LEVEL

Vulnerability also has a significant effect on competitive auctions in the game zone.

For example, suppose that the opponents have bid to 4♥ and we consider that they're very likely to make their contract. Suppose that our side has bid spades at a lower level, but we see little or no prospects of making 10 tricks in spades. Should we nevertheless bid 4♠? At this level the opponents are quite likely to double, but the resulting penalty won't always exceed the value of the opponents' game. Here we need to consider not only our vulnerability, but also that of our opponents.

There are four possibilities:

1. Both Non-Vulnerable ('Equal Vulnerability')

Suppose, first of all, that both sides are non-vulnerable, in which case the opponents will score 420 points for making 4♥. If we bid (say) 4♠, we could afford to go two down doubled, since this would cost us only 300 points. But going three down doubled and losing 500 would be too expensive (even if the opponents could make one or two overtricks in their 4♥ contract).

We	They	Game for them	Affordable Doubled Penalty	Too costly (by 1 trick) Doubled Penalty
NON-VUL	NON-VUL	420	300 (2 down)	500 (3 down)

2. Both Vulnerable ('Equal Vulnerability')

At the game level, the considerations are exactly the same if both sides are vulnerable. The opponents would score 620 points for making 4♥. If we bid (say) 4♠, we could still afford to go two down doubled, since this would cost us only 500 points. Again, going three down doubled would be too expensive, since the penalty would be 800. Both this situation and the one above are often referred to as 'equal vulnerability'.

We	They	Game for them	Affordable Doubled Penalty	Too costly (by 1 trick) Doubled Penalty
VUL	VUL	620	500 (2 down)	800 (3 down)

3. Opponents Vulnerable, We are Non-Vulnerable ('Favourable Vulnerability')

We can take more risks when only the opponents are vulnerable (known as 'favourable vulnerability'. With their game contract scoring (approximately) 620, we can afford to go 3 down doubled, since this would cost only 500 points. But going 4 down for 800 would be too expensive.

We	They	Game for them	Affordable Doubled Penalty	Too costly (by 1 trick) Doubled Penalty
NON-VUL	VUL	620	500 (3 down)	800 (4 down)

4. We are Vulnerable, Opponents Non-Vulnerable (‘Unfavourable Vulnerability’)

When only our side is vulnerable (‘unfavourable vulnerability’) we need to be quite careful. The opponents’ game contract is now worth only 420 points and even going two down doubled for a 500 penalty would be too expensive. We need to be within one trick of our contract, in which case the opponents could collect no more than 200.

We	They	Game for them	Affordable Doubled Penalty	Too costly (by 1 trick) Doubled Penalty
VUL	NON-VUL	420	200 (1 down)	500 (2 down)

Here is a summary of the four scenarios in order of the best situation for us:

We	They	Game for them	Affordable Doubled Penalty	Too costly (by 1 trick) Doubled Penalty
NON-VUL	VUL	620	500 (3 down)	800 (4 down)
NON-VUL	NON-VUL	420	300 (2 down)	500 (3 down)
VUL	VUL	620	500 (2 down)	800 (3 down)
VUL	NON-VUL	420	200 (1 down)	500 (2 down)

SACRIFICING

Outbidding opponents when we know that we’ll go down is known as ‘sacrificing’. The considerations discussed above are summarised in the following table:

We	They	Relative Vulnerability	Good sacrifice	Poor sacrifice
NON-VUL	VUL	favourable	3 down	4 down
NON-VUL	NON-VUL	equal	2 down	3 down
VUL	VUL	equal	2 down	3 down
VUL	NON-VUL	unfavourable	1 down	2 down

The above table is also relevant when we are considering whether or not to make a risky bid **below** game level. Even if the opponents know that they make game, they might sometimes stop to double us if they think that they could collect a big enough penalty. In practice, this rarely happens at the 1 or 2 level.

At the 3 level (or higher), opponents will generally be more willing to double, but this shouldn’t deter us from making reasonable competitive bids. However we should take careful account of the vulnerability if we’re considering whether to open the bidding with a pre-empt. This is why the requirements for a pre-emptive opening bid at the 3 level (or higher) are highly dependent upon the vulnerability situation (see [The Rule of 2, 3 and 4](#)).