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**PROFESSIONAL
COMPETITIVE BIDDING
TACTICS & DECISIONS**

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FROM THE AUTHORS

As we discussed in the first book on contested auctions entitled *Battle of the Titans*, there has been a clear trend in modern bridge for increasing aggressiveness and being active during the bidding. Nowadays, very few auctions are uncontested, with the active participation of only one pair. In this environment, bidding agreements for contested auctions and defensive bidding have taken on particular importance. Most of the agreements people make are generally loosely defined – players usually let experience and intuition be their guide. This can lead to costly misunderstandings or differences in interpretation.

In this book we present another group of bidding problems in contested auctions chosen from the important championship events. We will show how being active impacts both pairs. Using examples, we will try to show what to do, how to do it, what not to do and why.

We will show the agreements that some of the top pairs in the world have for certain bidding positions. In some situations we propose ideas for how they can be systemically handled.

A thorough reading of this book can give you an approach of how to react to most situations. This should be helpful for you and your partner to develop a particular style for contested auctions. Because of the large number of possible sequences, it's not as easy to categorize them as in uncontested auctions. It is also practically impossible to build a complete set of agreements for every possible situation. The goal should be to create a harmonious approach within the partnership for analyzing situations and choosing bids that keep to a certain path.

FORCING PASSES

Are there universal rules which govern when a pass is forcing in a contested auction?

About 15 years ago it was still thought that there were bidding situations in which a pass would without any doubt at all be an expectation for partner to provide additional information.

Today, after analyzing hundreds of deals we are convinced that even in situations that are seemingly obvious, much depends on the context. We have to take into consideration the vulnerability, the style of the opponents or even the temperament of a particular player. We imagine that we are playing against opponents who are quite content in their passivity and who if they find any excuse to pass, they will. If this kind of opponent decides to step into the auction at the four level when vulnerable, that even if partner had made a game-forcing bid we hold back from making a hasty double.

You have probably noticed that opponents who bid at unfavorable vulnerability are rarely joking. They usually have themselves covered, if not by point strength, then at least by the shape of their hand.

The fact that we have 26 HCP between the two hands on our side doesn't mean much.

Experience with this leads us to a conclusion. In a game of practical bridge we can strongly recommend the following rule – that pass is never forcing when the opponents are at unfavorable vulnerability. Of course, no one would stop us from making a penalty double, but it should be based on trump tricks.

There is a completely different situation when our side is vulnerable and the opponents not. The favorable tactical situation encourages most players to be unusually active. Destructive bidding prevails, high level preempts that force them against a wall without regard for shape or suit quality.

Year by year this trend is becoming stronger. There can be only one answer to this – when the opponents are in a contested auction at favorable vulnerability the idea of a forcing pass has to be used to the limit. This means that a pass is non-forcing only when a forcing pass doesn't make sense, something that will often occur as the bidding unfolds.

FORCING PASSES

What advantages does the concept of the forcing pass provide?

We'll discuss this using concrete examples.

SEQUENCE A

NS vulnerable

W	N	E	S
3♣	dbl.	5♣	?

If pass isn't forcing, then the possibilities are limited to:

1. Double – I want to play 5♣ doubled or I have extras.
2. 5♦/♥/♠ – I'd like to play at the five level.
3. 6♠/♦/♥/♠ – I'd like to play at the six level.
4. Pass – I have nothing to say.

It's important to note that in each of these cases (1-4) South can't have the slightest doubt. He makes the final decision. Experience has taught us that decisions that are made together with partner are more effective and can lead to collecting a lot of points.

What kind of options will there be, if we decide that South's pass is forcing?

1. Double – I'd like to discourage partner from bidding on.
2. Bidding 5♦,♥,♠ directly – I don't have slam aspirations.
3. Pass – I don't know what to do.

a) I don't know if we should double them – if you have a good hand, then my points are outside of the club suit and may be useful.

b) I don't know if we should bid to the five or six level (six or seven).

If partner doubles we will have a dilemma with a) to accept his decision. Similarly, if we decide to bid our own suit at the five level.

With b) when partner doubles, we bid what we have at the five or six level to show our intention to invite to slam. If partner bids his suit that we can easily look for the right slam or grand slam.

Thanks to the forcing pass, there are sequences where we will have more options.

SEQUENCE I

NS vulnerable

W	N	E	S
1♠	2♣	3♣	5♣
?			

3♣ = forcing to game with a fit in the suit opened

1.Pass = I don't know what to do:

a)I don't know if we should double them – if you have a good hand, my points are outside of their suit and could be useful.

b)I don't know, if I want to bid at the five or six level (six or seven level).

c)I have a one-suited hand.

Pass can be also used as the start of the more encouraging sequence:

c)pass and then after a double a bid of 5♠ – is a mild slam try with club shortness.

d)pass and after a double a bid of 5♦ or 5♥ – is a cue bid and a serious slam try.

e)pass and after a double pass – means we didn't know what to do after 5♣.

2.A direct bid:

a)5♣ – a shapely hand with club shortness without slam aspirations.

b)5♦ or 5♥ – shows a two-suited hand and invites slam. Partner can easily evaluate if his points fit with opener's hand.

How does responder bid after opener makes a forcing pass?

a)5♣ is to play.

b)5♦ or 5♥ is a cue bid and a slam try.

Note, that responder denied club shortness (he could have Splintered) and responsibility for a club control now rests to a large degree on opener.

How to manage all this with different vulnerabilities (no one, both)?

What we need are simple rules.

Sequences that are forcing to game set up a forcing pass. For example:

1.2 over one, if you play it forcing to game.

2.A Splinter, if it guarantees at least 12+PC.

There is one sequence which is the most common that should be thoroughly discussed: hearts against spades and spades against hearts.

FORCING PASSES

SEQUENCE A

W	N	E	S
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠
3♦	3♠	4♥	4♠
pass			

Most professional pairs agree that sequences that are invitational to game don't create a forcing pass situation. How this looks after partner accepts the invitation is not so clear.

SEQUENCE B

W	N	E	S
1♥	1♠	2♥	3♠
4♦	4♠	?	

Does a second suit shown at the four level set up a forcing pass?

We're still talking here about equal vulnerability.

Some pairs see this as a forcing pass situation as described above, when either no trump or a cue bid has been bid.

SEQUENCE C

W	N	E	S
1♥	1♠	2♥	3♠
?			

3NT – not with the meaning of to play, but if NS bid 4♠ our passes are forcing.

W	N	E	S
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠
?			

3♠ – “This is not a Splinter or a slam try but a bid which sets up a forcing pass.”

Does the five level change our approach to forcing passes?

SEQUENCE D

W	N	E	S
1♠	2♥	3♥	4♥
4♠	5♥	?	

3♥ = invitational with a spade fit.

Does the five level require different rules for forcing passes?

These days a popular approach is one advocated by Michael Rosenberg. His correspondence with Krzysztof Martens on the subject of forcing passes is below.

Most players, if they played without any agreements as to forcing passes at the four level or higher, would be in a better spot than what there is today. When a pass is undoubtedly forcing, it is never passed out.

The most common result of these agreements on forcing passes is that losses of 4 or 5 imps can occur (or more, if they make overtricks) – with practically no benefits that offset these losses. At least that's how it looks in my experience from playing against the opponents I usually face (including experts).

It's important to have agreements about forcing passes at low levels of bidding to know in which sequences it's OK to pass, so you don't miss a chance to penalize the opponents.

Michael Rosenberg

Michael.

I agree that pairs who have been playing together 20 years or more can survive with zero agreements on forcing passes. Without a common base of experience a partnership needs some kind of rules.

- a) vulnerable against non-vulnerable opponents – pass is forcing*
- b) we're white, they're red – pass is never forcing, except specified positions*
- c) a Splinter bid sets up a forcing pass situation*

W	N	E	S
1♥	1♠	3♠	4♠
?			

pass – has to be forcing

Krzysztof,

Can you imagine bidding 3♠ after 1♥ - 1♠ - and then passing 4♠? This is what I was talking about that there's no need to have special agreements. Pass is forcing – it's not something you have to agree on.

When it comes to “we're red, they're white” I completely disagree. I believe it's one of the greatest causes of losing 4+ imps and I don't see any compensating benefit. That's at least from my experience. Opponents have given me many occasions for a pick up (and teammates lost imps) using the rule that when “we're red, they're white”, pass is forcing. Any advantage from this was rare (at the moment I can't recall a single example).

Michael Rosenberg

To sum up, the forcing pass concept was developed to create cooperation between the partners when faced with a decision. It's hard to agree with Michael's point of view – at championship events since 1980 there have been many deals when a pass was forcing with the intention of “I don't know what to do” and it helped in making the optimal decision.

It's also hard not to agree with Michael that the forcing pass situations at low levels of bidding are important.

Probably not many partnerships have discussed this sequence:

SEQUENCE A

W	N	E	S
1♣	1NT	dbl.	2X
			3X

How high are EW pair passes forcing?

Some pros play them forcing to 2♥.

The next question: is double from either hand penalty or takeout?

Brian Senior: Quite common in the UK is to play that double is T/O, with pass forcing over two of a minor but non-forcing over higher bids. However, once we have attempted to defend a doubled suit contract passes become forcing if the opposition try to run to somewhere else.

SEQUENCE B

W	N	E	S
1♠	2♥	pass	pass
dbl.	pass	pass	3♦
?			

Is opener's pass forcing?

Brian Senior: Surely opener's pass cannot be forcing. E/W may have no fit to make a contract their way but neither have they promised the values to penalise the opposition. West's reopening double did not guarantee extra values, while East's penalty pass only promised heart tricks, not high cards. N/S may well hold the balance of the high-card strength.

The difficulty in applying the concept of a forcing pass is that even if we agree on some rules depending on the vulnerability, strictly following such rules is not a good idea. A player makes a decision from his table presence, his ability to evaluate the opponents and many other subtle facts that determine if the decision will be the right one or not.

*Opatija 2014**European Team Championships.*

	♠ KJ	
None vul.	♥ KQ1096532	
Dealer West	♦ K9	
	♣ 10	
♠ A963		♠ Q10542
♥ 7		♥ J
♦ A7		♦ Q854
♣ AQJ754		♣ 832
	♠ 87	
	♥ A84	
	♦ J10632	
	♣ K96	

W	N	E	S
Kalita	De Wijs	Nowosadzki	Muller
1♣	4♥	pass	pass
dbl.	pass	4♠	5♥
pass	pass	dbl.	pass...

Here, NS clearly bid to sacrifice in 5♥ and Kalita's pass showed a good hand with shortness in the opponents suit. Nowosadzki couldn't count on being able to bid a makeable contract at the five level, and sadly had to double.

W	N	E	S
Verhees		VanProoijen	
1♠	4♥	4♠	5♥
dbl.	pass...		

1♠ - 11-15 PC, 4+♠ (Canape)

This sequence did not set up a forcing pass position. 4♠ by East didn't promise anything other than a fit for opener's suit, based on some shape. Double meant simply, "I can set this."

*Opatija 2014**European Team Championships.*

	♠ A7654	
Both vul.	♥ J965	
Dealer West	♦ 9	
	♣ 1098	
♠ Q3		♠ 8
♥ 432		♥ AKQ1087
♦ 765		♦ AQ842
♣ KQJ72		♣ 4
	♠ KJ1092	
	♥ –	
	♦ KJ103	
	♣ A653	

W Padon	N Jassem	E Birman	S Mazurkiewicz
pass	pass	1♥	1♠
2♥	4♠	5♦	dbl.
5♥	dbl.	pass...	

The Israeli pair made the right decision to bid on to 5♥, even though they seemingly had defensive values, since the shape between the NS hands made it possible to take as many as 11 tricks in spades.

W	N O.Herbst	E	S I.Herbst
pass	pass	1♥	1♠
2♥	4♠	5♦	5♠
pass	pass	6♥	dbl.
pass...			

Here, the actions of the NS pair – 5♠ rather than doubling 5♦ – led the opponents to make an error. The pass of 5♠, in line with general rules as well as basic logic, was forcing, showing values useful for offense and suggesting bidding on. With such values in clubs, it's right to double. It's another matter that if declarer works out the distribution, he can make 5♠.