

Balance of Power

You might have heard of the term “Balance of Power (BOP)” and if you asked what it meant you might have heard the same reply that I have heard from a number of “experts”: It means your side holds the majority of the HCP's. Duh! OK? So what does that mean in term of my position as a bidder at the bridge table? Let's see if we can de-mystify this very important concept. We call it a concept because, for the bridge player, BOP is far more than just understanding that your side has more HCP than the opponents – it is a call to ATTENTION. In the military a call to Attention not only requires the an individual to assume a certain physical position but also to focus their cognitive powers toward something important. And hardly anything is more important at the bridge table than trying to sift through the meaning of all the low level Doubles, DOUBLES that can be used to gain partners attention.

We are all aware of a number of low level Doubles used to exhort a response from one's partner. So let's try to categorize the purposes of low-level of Doubles:

(1) Penalty Doubles – These are not usually low-level but are issued in order to punish the opponents for overbidding. Since it is possible that a low-level bid can be a rash maneuver on the opponents part we need to be able to distinguish low-level penalty X's from other doubles. True penalty X's exhort partner to PASS.

(2) Please Bid Doubles (PBD) – The primary PBD's is the one we all likely to have learned first, thus the one we are all assuredly familiar with; the Take-Out double. Our second most familiar, the Negative Double also falls into this category.

(3) Information Doubles – The negative X really sits somewhere on the cusp between the later class and this one. It tells Partner about our holding (we have the unbid suits) and it also suggests Partner bid because we are surely not trying to penalize the opponents at the same time we are passing information.

An astute reader will likely say “garbage! You haven't clarified anything I can already pickout TOD's and Negative Doubles; but all those other X's could be interpreted either way (a) a low-level penalty or an information double.

BOP to the rescue! At one time certain Doubles were labeled “action doubles” meaning the Partner of the Doubler is expected to take some action. Well, Pass is an action; remember the Rule of 9. You use it to decide whether to Pass or 'bid something' after Partner makes a TOD. The Balancing Double is an action double. We could blather on all day with this less than definitive exposition; but its time to get down to business and we do that by categorizing the situations and defining a concept – the BOP Double. How can we identify a BOP double? BOP doubles say some combination of three things:

- a. BOP Doubles usually occur after both Partners have made at least 1 call. We have are few examples.
- b. We don't have a fit, I don't have a long suit of my own, in essence I have a pretty balanced hand
- c. BOP Doubles frequently are doubles of suits first bid by opponent on Doubler's left. It can also be a Double of a known 4-4 fit.

Length-Bidder on left.

If the suit being doubled originated on Doubler's left, the X can never be saying I have a trump-stack – i.e. I want to penalize! Why? The length bidder plays after the doubler, thus has the advantage. The Double must therefore be a BOP Double indicating that fact. Example, Bidding goes: 1♠ – P – 1NT – 2♦; P – P – X. The Doubler might be holding something like: ♠T9 ♥AQ32 ♦QT3 ♣K832.

The X is certainly not based on the ♦QT3 holding – indeed, not at the 2-level! Especially since those two ♦ honors sit in front of the ♦ bidder. The Doubler's side has 22+ HCP and he is the only

person who knows that their side has the BOP. This is a BOP Double and Partner needs to know their side has BOP. It could be that the 2♦ contract is doomed. If Opener has a balanced hand like ♠AKJ87 ♥J74 ♦92 ♣AJ7 he could easily PASS and expect a + score; but with ♠AKJ876 ♥J74 ♦9 ♣AJ7 he should bid 2♠. Going to the next level was not a necessity – and the +110 score is better than either +50 or +100 for setting 2♦.

Another example, Bidding goes: 1♦ – X – P – 1♠; 2♦ – P – P – ?. Here your 1♠ bid was aimed at showing the suit and promised 0HCP – you were forced to bid; you and you alone know whether your side has the BOP and, if you do, you need to convey that fact to Partner. Holding as little as: ♠K862 ♥32 ♦AT9 ♣QT72 you have the maximum for your bid; you would have jumped if you had more – It's a BOP double telling partner to choose a suit you can't rebid yours. One more example.

You hold ♠T9 ♥AQ32 ♦JT3 ♣9832 and Partner opens 1NT. If RHO PASSes you, with 7HCP, will too! Now LHO bids 2♠. Partner, having already advertised his hand, can't do much more than PASS. And when RHO PASSes as well, you are now in the "Balancing seat". You know your side has the BOP, at least 22HCP; you Double to tell Partner that fact. It's a BOP double, a "Partner do something intelligent" double. The something might be Pass for penalty. This brings us to our first rule in identifying BOP.

RULE: A Double by Partner sitting behind the potential Declarer should be considered a BOP Double. Pay Attention and consider your action. Some folks call this a "Balancing Double". Before Passing determine if your side has enough BOP.

Condition (a) isn't hard n' fast! Here's an example of BOP-ing on first bid: 1♠ – X – 2♠ – X. The first X is obviously a TOD, showing 12+ HCP; If you hold 9+ HCP, your side has the BOP, albeit only a slight advantage which is shown in the 2nd Double – a BOP Double. You might recognize that 2nd Double as a form of the "Responsive Double¹", which indeed it would be at this level. But... if the Double is going to force Partner to bid at level higher the Responsive Double is more effective if it is also indicates BOP. But...

at higher levels the emphasis shifts from distribution showing to a display of hidden power; i.e. it tends more toward a pure BOP. Examples:

Hand 1	Hand 2
2♠ – X – 4♠ -- ?.	3♦ – 3♥ - 5♦ – ?
♠97 ♥A82 ♦KJT3 ♣K872	♠AQ54 ♥T2 ♦T83 ♣KJ32

In both cases here a Double would certainly not be based on Trump strength or holding. In both cases if the Double stands, the Doubler would have Declarer on his left. These are definitely BOP Doubles intended to be penalty doubles – with no action necessary.

Even the Opener can occasionally BOP

Hand 3	Hand 4
1♦ – 1♥ – 1♠ -- 3♥; ?	1♥ - 1♠ – 1N – 2♠; ?
♠76 ♥A82 ♦AQT93 ♣KJ	♠A ♥AK954 ♦T83 ♣AK32

In both cases we want to BOP-Double them. We have good defensive cards and extra values. Again these are penalty oriented BOPs and expected to be effective since the Declarer is on Doublers left. Note you have 5 almost sure tricks, Partner didn't support your suit – probably has 2 or less – and could trump your 3rd ♥.

RULE: A Double by Partner sitting behind the potential Declarer should be considered a

1 In this case Partner should expect 4-4 distribution in the Minor suits

BOP Double.