

The Last Guess

From Matchpoints by Kit Woolsey, © 1982 by Develyn Press, pp 210-218
 Excerpted under Fair Use for promotional and non-profit teaching purposes only

It is apparent that if you can put your opponents in a position where they must guess what to do, then you have a good chance of getting a favorable result, for they may guess wrong. Conversely, if you are the one who has to make the guess, then your prospects on the board are not too good. It follows that it is to your advantage to maneuver competitive auctions so it is the opponents and not your side who have to make that last guess.

Let's look at a couple of similar examples which illustrate this point:

N/S Vul, South holds: ♠ AKJ986 ♥ A8 ♦ 76 ♣ KJ4

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
---	---	1♠	2♦
2♠	3♦	4♠	?

West is thinking about taking a 5♦ save. How do you feel sitting South? Pretty good! You know exactly what to do if West bids 5♦. It certainly isn't right to bid 5♠. In fact, the 4♠ call was somewhat of a stretch. You have put the opponents in the position of having to make the last guess on the hand; namely, whether or not to sacrifice. You don't particularly care which way they go since you have no idea whether or not 4♠ will make, but you know that if they guess wrong you are headed for a very good board. The key is that if they bid 5♦ you don't have any guess - it is quite clear to double. Consequently, E-W have to make the last guess on this hand.

Contrast with the following hand:

N/S Vul, South holds: ♠ AQJ1072 ♥ AQ2 ♦ 3 ♣ Q72

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
---	---	1♠	Pass
3♠*	4♦	4♠	5♦
Pass	Pass	?	

* Limit Raise

E- W certainly seem to have taken a good sacrifice. 4♠ figures to be cold, and it is extremely unlikely that 5♦ can be set more than three tricks. The question is, should South bid 5♠. If he does, E- W will have no problem passing. They won't consider taking a 6♦ sacrifice, for fear that either it will go for too much or that N-S can't make 5♠.

E-W will be happy to have pushed N-S to the five-level. Consequently, South must make the last guess on this hand, and it is a difficult one. If South guesses wrong he will wind up with a very poor result, while a right guess will probably only be a normal result.

South might have alleviated his problem by bidding 4♥ rather than 4♠ to give his partner the picture, but there would still be a problem. South is not in a comfortable position. He must make the last guess on the hand, and he must guess right to avoid a bad score. East probably has no idea what South's right action is and doesn't really care what South does. He is just hoping that South guesses wrong.

Your goal in a competitive auction should be to maneuver the bidding so that the opponents have to make that last guess. Naturally this will not always be possible, particularly if the opponents are trying to do the same thing. You know that you have achieved this goal when you have bid the limit to which your side will compete, and you don't know what the right action for the opponents is. Since you have bid the limit of the hand you do not have a guess if they bid on, except perhaps whether or not to double. If it is clear to you either that the opponents should defend or that they should bid on it will usually be clear to them also, so they won't really have a guess, but if you don't know what their correct action is the chances are that they have a really close decision and may well guess wrong.

Both Vul. South holds: ♠ 93 ♥ AK10762 ♦ Q103 ♣ A7

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
---	---	1♥	1♠
2♥	Pass	?	

South could conceivably pass, bid 3♥ or bid 4♥. If he passes there is no question in his mind that it is correct for E-W to compete. If he bids 4♥, E-W will certainly do well to defend, probably doubled. However, if South bids 3♥, he doesn't really have any idea what the correct E-W action is. In addition, South has no intention of bidding higher. Consequently, the 3♥ bid gives E-W the last guess, and the guess won't be easy. It is not surprising that this is consistent with total trick analysis.

E-W Vul. South holds: ♠ 7 ♥ Q105 ♦ AJ92 ♣ Q10976

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
3♥	3♠	?	

If South bids 4♥, he knows that it must be right for E-W to bid 4♠. **This contract figures to make.** If South bids 6♥ he can be pretty sure that E-W should double; South has enough **defense so that 6♠ will probably go down.** However, if South bids 5♥, he has no idea what the correct E-W action is. 5♠ might make or it might not, and South really doesn't care. He has taken a good advance sacrifice at the highest level his side will reach, and now E-W have to make the last guess.

N-S Vul. South holds: ♠ AQJ965 ♥ 2 ♦ A4 ♣ AQ93

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
---	---	1♠	3♥
4♠	5♥	?	

There doesn't figure to be a grand slam, for North would have bid 4♥ rather than 4♠ if he had the necessary cards to make a grand. A small slam, on the other hand, could be cold, reasonable, or hopeless depending on what North has, and there is no way to find out. If **South meekly bids 5♠**, this will undoubtedly end the auction, and South will have made the last guess. If N-S have a small slam, E-W must have a good save. Therefore, South should bid 6♠. Now the last guess is thrust back on E-W. They must guess whether or not South can make his slam. South doesn't know what action he is rooting for, but the problem is back in the opponents' court where it belongs.

E-W Vul. South holds: ♠ Q83 ♥ 1094 ♦ A5 ♣ KJ873

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
---	---	---	1♦
2♠*	Double**	?	

* preemptive
 ** negative

South cannot tell if E-W have a game. This will depend somewhat on whether or not E-W have a four-four heart fit, how the spades split, **and the lie of the club suit.** A 4♠ call by South simply doesn't give the opponents any problem. They will just double for lack of anything else to do as they can't very well be going to the five-level with South holding this many high cards, and they will probably be right. A pass by South won't give E-W a problem either. It is extremely unlikely that West will pass the negative double, so he will just bid his hand.

A 3♠ call, however, is just right. South does not plan to compete to 4♠, so he has no further problems. He does not know what the best action for the opponents is, so E-W must now make the last guess.

This last hand presents an interesting paradox. Suppose South bids 3♠ as recommended, and West does, in fact, bid 4♥. Should South save? We have already determined that the answer is no. If South does take the sacrifice, he will be thrusting the last guess back upon himself. However, if 4♥ makes then 4♠ would certainly be a good save, as it can hardly be going down four tricks. So if South is not going to save, he is betting that the opponents have done the wrong thing, and 4♥ will not make.

Well, if South thinks 4♥ is going down, then is there any reason that South shouldn't back up his judgment with a double? The answer in this case, which will surprise a lot of players, is no, there is no reason, and South's correct action is to double 4♥! This seems strange. South wasn't exactly bidding 3♠ to make, although on a good day it might, and the hand certainly seems to belong to E-W on high cards. Yet, it is recommended that South double 4♥.

Let's look at the matchpoint cost analysis. If South doubles 4♥ and is wrong he only costs ½ matchpoint to other tables which are in 4♥ (doubled or not), and costs nothing to any other result since 4♠ clearly can't go for 700. In other words, there is no possible score between -620 and -790. Conversely, if 4♥ is going down, then South gains one-half matchpoint from other tables in 4♥ by doubling. So far, this isn't quite enough justification for the double. South might think that 4♥ is slightly more likely to make than not and still not save for fear that not enough tables will bid 4♥ to make the sacrifice payoff even if it is right. *There is, however, a third possibility.* The hand just might belong to N-S for a spade partial. If this is the case, the double can gain a full matchpoint if it is right against other pairs who buy the hand for 3♠ making.

The full hand illustrates how this might be:

	♠ AK10975	
	♥ 63	
	♦ 872	
	♣ 54	
♠ 62		♠ J4
♥ AQ87		♥ KJ52
♦ KJ1064		♦ Q93
♣ A2		♣ Q1096
	♠ Q83	
	♥ 1094	
	♦ A5	
	♣ KJ873	

Everybody's actions are quite reasonable. West was pushing slightly for his 4♥ call; had South passed he probably would have bid only 3♥. It is not a bad bid, however, and it may give N-S the last guess as to whether or not to save. North has a good hand for South, and with a winning club guess 3♠ is a make while 4♥ is clearly down one, so there is likely to be a big swing on doubling 4♥.

Does this mean that every time we give the opponents the last guess and they bid on we should double them? No, that would be ridiculous. For example, on the earlier hand on which we took the premature 5♥ save we would not double if E-W bid 5♠, even if we felt that we had a good save available in 6♥ and we did not think that 5♠ was a favorite to make, for there would be no reason to double. If 5♠ were going down we would get a good board anyway, because not everybody will push the opponents to the five-level, while if 5♠ were making the double would needlessly cost one-half matchpoint against other tables who bought the hand for a spade contract at the four or five level.

This type of double should only be made when the opponents have outbid us by bidding a game, and there is some chance that our contract would have made. On the hand where the opponents bid 4♥ over 3♠, had they bid 4♦ instead a double would not be recommended. There are several possible scores between -130 and -710, so the double could cost a lot if wrong. Over the 4♥ bid, however, the double may gain a lot if right and lose little if wrong once we decide not to sacrifice.

The general idea in these "who knows who can make what" auctions is to bid the limit of your hand quickly to make the opponents guess, and if they outbid you make them pay for guessing wrong if you might have made what you bid. This is particularly true when your last bid is one under an enemy game contract, and they then bid the game.

In this type of situation a preemptor who has been raised is allowed to violate his usual oath of silence and join in with a double or a bid if his hand is exceptionally offensively or defensively oriented for his preempt.

A bid which is one level under the opponents' potential game is called a "one-under" bid, and allows these unusual competitive actions. For example, on the previous hand North might well have doubled 4♥ himself after South bid 3♠. If the partnership style is extremely light weak jump overcalls at favorable vulnerability, for he has extra defense with his ace-king of spades.

E-W Vul. South holds: ♠ 483 ♥ AQJ10763 ♦ A4 ♣ K84

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
Pass	Pass	4♥	4♠
Pass	Pass	?	

South's 4♥ bid is not a classic preempt, but it is a reasonable tactic opposite a passed hand and certainly makes E-W guess. Once West guesses to bid 4♠, however, South must assume that West has guessed wrong and double him. There is too great a danger that 4♥ will make even though South couldn't know if it would when he bid it, and 4♠ must be doubled to guard against this possibility. Note that North couldn't double on a scattered nine-count, for South might have a normal 4♥ opening bid for all North knows.

Sometimes the 4♠ contract will make, but South can't just sit there and pass, nor does he have any reason to believe that 4♠ will make and take a 5♥ save. If you are going to adopt tactics such as opening 4♥ in third seat on this type of hand (winning tactics, in my opinion), then you must be prepared to assume that the opponents have guessed wrong if they bid and double them. The general principle is: Make them guess, and then make them pay!

It is not always necessary to bid immediately to the highest level you are willing to reach. Sometimes you may be able to buy the contract one level lower, even though you will go higher if necessary. Keep in mind that this approach gives the opponents a chance to exchange information which may help them when they have to make the final guess. Also, make sure that you have already decided it is correct to compete further if you take the slow approach. If you

are not sure, it is best to make your decision now one way or the other and then stick with it; otherwise, you will be the one who is making the last guess.

E-W Vul. South holds: ♠ KQ10632 ♥ 84 ♦ AJ7 ♣ K7

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
---	---	1♠	2♥
2♠*	Pass	?	

A 3♠ call by South certainly couldn't be criticized, and if E-W go to the three-level South will certainly compete to 3♠, since he has six spades. However, a good case can be made for passing. South knows that it is correct for West to bid on, but West may not know that. There is a reasonable chance that West will be afraid to compete to the three-level vulnerable, and N-S will then buy the hand for 2♠. In my opinion, this possibility outweighs the danger of allowing E-W to exchange further information.

E-W Vul. South holds: ♠ A765 ♥ 86 ♦ 753 ♣ Q654

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
3♠	Double	?	

E-W probably have a slam somewhere, and South is fully prepared to take a save against it. But there is no rush in taking that save, for the slam hasn't been bid yet. A simple 4♠ bid by South may be sufficient to deprive E-W of the bidding room they need to assess their combined values, and they may make the mistake of doubling 4♠ or of stopping at the five-level. If E-W bid their slam, South will, of course, take the save.

This is not inconsistent bidding, for South has already made up his mind as to what he will do. Consequently South will not be making the last guess if E-W bid a slam, for South already knows what his right action is.

The only danger in this approach is that E-W may exchange enough information to bid a grand, but this is unlikely and the possible gain from bidding only 4 is well worth the risk. Suppose, on the same auction, South had held: ♠ K976 ♥ 9 ♦ A9874 ♣ 864. Now it is not at all clear whether or not E-W have a slam, for N-S might have two aces or North may have a diamond ruff coming. South will certainly want to take a 5♠ save over 5♥, which E-W will undoubtedly bid if South bids only 4♠. Consequently, South should leap to 5♠ immediately and let E-W guess whether or not they have a slam.

Obviously if E-W then bid the slam South should not save; he must assume that his opponents have guessed wrong rather than risking making the wrong last guess himself.

None Vul. South holds: ♠ Q963 ♥ 32 ♦ A75 ♣ QJ63

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
2♠	3♥	?	

This is not the sort of hand with which to fool around. If South bids 3♠ the opponents almost certainly will bid 4♥, right or wrong. South simply must decide right now whether 4♠ will be a good save against 4♥. If he thinks so he should bid it now to make West guess if he has a possible 5♥ call, while if South doesn't think 4♠ will be a good save (either because 4♥ might go down or because 4♠ will go for too much) he should merely bid 3♠ and then bow out of the auction. Both actions are reasonable. The one thing South must not do is bid 3♠ (or pass) now and then take a 4♠ sacrifice if and when E-W bid 4♥. This allows E-W to exchange maximum information and puts the last guess back on South. Since South isn't sure what the right guess is over 4♥, he should make his decision early in the auction and stick with it. In this way, he has put the last guess back in the hands of the opponents, where it belongs.

The time to wait and see if the opponents get to their best contract before saving is when there is a good chance that they will not. On this hand there is little practical chance that the opponents will fail to bid 4♥, so South should make an immediate decision and act on it.

