

The bidding has gone like this:

North	East	South	West
1♥	Pass	Pass	?

As West if you have a normal bid (Suit Overcall, 1NT or double) then go ahead with that. If not, you may be able to make a “Protecting bid” which is one that is made with slightly fewer points than normal.

Let's look at what we know. North has at least an opening hand and South has a hand so poor that they are unable to respond. Our partner, East, has a hand that is unable to make an overcall. This doesn't mean that they must be short of points. East could have a hand without a five card suit or could be prevented from bidding 1NT because they don't have a stop in hearts. Perhaps they can't double because they have a short spade suit. If we pass then North will play in 1♥ - if they are going to play the hand that will be one of the easiest contracts to make.

At this point I also need to mention one other possibility. You will give North another chance to bid. If they have a very strong hand then any bid by you will give them the chance to show another suit, bid no-trumps or force their partner to bid by doubling. Their hand is unlikely to be really strong or they would have used one of our strong opening bids (2♣ or 2NT). So it is likely that this is just a part score battle. We don't want to give in easily.

In these circumstances you can make a protective bid. We are protecting any possibility that we can make a contract ourselves. An easy way to describe this is that we “borrow a king from partner”. Not by swapping cards (of course!) but by assuming we have three points more than we do have. The possible bids are:

1NT	Same rules as for a 1NT overcall (balanced, stop in opponents suit). 11-14 points (Normally 15-18 points)
Double	Same rules as for a takeout double - shortage in suit bid by the opposition and if doubling a major four of the other major. Tolerance for any suit bid by partner. 9+ points (Normally 12+ points). Don't protect over 1NT from opener.
Suit Overcall	At the one level: 7+ points with a 5 card suit. It doesn't need the usual suit quality. Overcalling with a good 4 card suit is sometimes OK but it does need suit quality! At the two level: 9+ points. Must be a 5 card suit but it doesn't need the usual suit quality. Overcalls may be slightly weaker than the above if a 6+ card suit is held.

Of course you have to agree with partner that you may do this sometimes. Your partner will not know whether you are bidding as normal or with a slightly weaker hand. It is best for them to assume you are weaker than normal so, if you aren't, you need to show this through your bidding e.g. raising to game, jump bids etc.

Don't protect if you suspect opponents are not in their best contract, particularly if it's a minor. There are some pairs who always underbid, never protect against them! And if South thinks before passing, he was probably thinking of bidding on (watch out for people who think for no reason).

Other warning signs that might make you pass when you have minimum points are:

- Length in opener's suit (4+) - if partner was short in that suit they would double so if they didn't they must have hearts too so declarer plus dummy will be short in that suit
- Shortness in an unbid major - you may allow the opposition to find a better fit in that suit