



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

Partner and I have graduated into the open game at our club. We often encounter conventions we are unfamiliar with and don't know how to contend with them. Many of our locals play Bergen raises. The convention comes up often enough that I need to know more about it and what to do when the opponents use Bergen raises.

Jill

Hi, Jill,

Bergen raises were invented by Marty Bergen during his highly successful partnership with Larry Cohen in the early 1980s. The basis for this convention is the Law of Total Tricks, a hand evaluation concept that states that when a partnership holds nine or more trumps, they should compete to at least the three level, regardless of strength.

As originally written, Bergen responses were as follows:

1M (shorthand for 1♥ or 1♠)

3♣ = 7–10 support points with four-card or longer support.

3♦ = 11–12 support points (limit raise) with four-card or longer support.

3 of the same major = 0–6 with four-card or longer support.

A byproduct of this agreement is that any time the auction goes: 1M–(Pass)–2M, you know responder holds exactly three trumps.

For newer players, the idea of preemptively raising partner to the three

level with zero high-card points and four trumps is difficult to swallow. The premise is that you might make nine tricks, or you might go down less than the value of the contract the opponents can make, or you might stampede them into the wrong contract. Nothing is perfect, but the concept has merit.

It's a good idea to be ready with a partnership agreement when you face this convention.

(1M) – (Pass) – (3M) – Double

The 3M raise is weak, so my suggestion is that the double in this auction is a standard takeout double, i.e., support for the unbid suits with at least a full opening bid. When the opponents bid hearts, double looks something like:

♠ A J x ♥ x ♦ K Q x x x ♣ A x x x.

To dispel any myths, a takeout double of hearts does not guarantee four spades! You try to have four, you prefer to have four, but sometimes you just don't.

Because your double of the opponents' major suit could force your side to the four level, you try to have a little bit of extra strength, or perfect shape.

(1M) – Pass – (3♣) – Double

Here's another auction where double is takeout, with appropriate values and shape.

If the major suit was spades, double would suggest something like:

♠ x x ♥ A Q x x ♦ A x x ♣ K 10 x x.

Keep in mind that this Bergen auction is the equivalent of a standard

auction that goes (1M)–Pass–(2M)–Double.

The next auction presents a different problem:

(1M)–Pass–(3♦)–Double.

Because left-hand opponent has announced an opening bid, and RHO has invited game, suggesting 11–12 points, double should be lead-directing. It is not a takeout double. A typical lead-directing double is:

♠ x x x ♥ x x x ♦ A K J x x ♣ x x.

Some partnerships invert the meaning of 3♣ and 3♦. For simplicity, if you double any preemptive or constructive raise, your double is takeout. If you double an artificial limit raise, it is lead directing.

Now that we understand a little more about Bergen raises and how to defend them, despite their merits, I prefer not to play them. My preference, playing 2/1 game force, is to use jumps to the three level in lower-ranking suits as natural and constructive ... a good six-card or longer suit with around 9 to 11 HCP. Lacking this option, it is very difficult to bid hands like the following after a major suit opening:

♠ x x ♥ x x ♦ A Q J x x x ♣ Q J x

or

♠ x x ♥ x x ♦ J x ♣ A K J x x x x.

Neither hand is worthy of a game force, but surely has potential that needs to be expressed. In each case, I would jump to three of my strong minor.