

## Pre-empting

*It's generally wise to pre-empt as often as you can, at the highest level you can, whether you're first to call or after they've opened the bidding, AND just as wise to accept, that despite that long suit and the appropriate high card points range, there will be times when you can't and you won't.*

In many ways it's like POKER where you might **raise** the stakes more in hope than expectation. Only thing is, in POKER you never quite KNOW if they're bluffing or not – in BRIDGE YOU DO KNOW. No doubt about it - they are attempting a steal on this board: e.g. "STOP! 3♠!" translates: "Here is an announcement: I have a bad hand, c. 5-9pts. In fact, so far as I know, I have not the remotest chance of making 9 tricks."

Of course it's a gleeful gamble too: "STOP! 3♥!" etc. Pre-emptors know they are turning the screw. In truth we all enjoy moments like these; it is, after all, that bit different – no mundane 1♣ etc. here.

Technically it's a bid based on the belief that highly distributional hands play well in trump contracts; so, long suit, weak hand, tall bid.

6 card suits 5-10 pts. are opened at the 2 level . 7 card suits 5-10 pts are opened at the 3 level. 8 card suits are opened at the 4 level.

Jump-overcalls are now often weak, similar to pre-emptive opening bids. In a recent BBO teams event an expert player opened 5♦ holding a nine card suit headed by the QJ and no other honour cards. Often high level bids like these just totally flummox their opponents - honest bluffs though they surely are!

Most of the time they'll get away with this tactic, or worse, cause the intended confusion that leads to their opponents missing a game or over-reaching and scoring a zero on the deal.

One reason for their success is the apparent inability of their opponents to punish them with a penalty double - particularly when those opponents are vulnerable and could go -500,-800,-1100 ! Another reason is the failure of partnerships to agree in advance a suitable strategy following these and other weak bids.

There are several separate issues to be addressed here: let's take pre-empting itself – below are some useful guidelines:

- (1) When you pre-empt make sure you comply with the Rule of 500, i.e. you expect to be 'doubled and down' but not more than 3 tricks non-vulnerable, and no more than 2 tricks when vulnerable, both of which would cost 500 – hence the Rule.

**More, you hope to do so when you believe your opponents have a vulnerable Game on, worth 600+.** There is no point in pre-empting non-vulnerable, getting doubled and losing 500, when your non vulnerable opponents' game was only worth a mere 400+ . Observing vulnerability is key to sound pre-empting ensuring some measure of safety in an otherwise dangerous ploy.

- a. Here are some sound pre-empts and lastly one to avoid :

♠QJ108632 ♥985 ♦A ♣65 Open 3♠ Non Vul. You know you will make at least 6 tricks.

♠AQJ8542 ♥985 ♦6 ♣98 3♠ Vul. or N/V. Again you have reasonable hopes of making 7 tricks. What you know for sure is this: the whole room will be in it and you had better be there too! **Remember you are very unlikely to get doubled when you hold the master cards in your suit.**

- b. Not so with the collection below:

♠Q976532 ♥Q42 ♦A ♣83 No Vul. 3♠ opening bid this time where on a bad day you could be doubled and lose 2, 3 or even 4 Spades, 3 Hearts and 2 Clubs, winding

up -800,-1100,-1400 . Most pre-emptors believe they won't be doubled for penalties. This one was. See page 5.

- (2) When opponents pre-empt, your partnership must have at least a basic agreement on the appropriate action to take. The following modification of the Fishbein convention is certainly worth considering. Even if your partnership agrees to employ some of its features you will have useful weaponry in your bidding arsenal – especially when you hold good hands. Using this method you will religiously double vulnerable opponents for penalties when you hold, not just a good hand, but one with high cards, i.e. tricks, in the pre-emptor's suit. This is similar to the action we take over an opponent's 1NT opening bid – **our double is always for penalties**. By the same token, if your side is vulnerable and opponents are not, bid 3NT with the above hand type. Likewise when your pre-empting opponent is non-vulnerable and you are, holding a good hand with shortage in their suit, you should double for take-out. In both cases above, you want to score your 600+ by bidding and making a vulnerable game when it's on, rather than setting them for a paltry 300/ 500. Keep doing the sums!

When a double is not appropriate, Fishbein uses the next-suit-up after a 3 level pre-empt as a take-out bid, asking partner to bid his best suit. Notice the n-s-u bidder does not promise a long holding of 5+ cards in that suit; what he does promise is shortage in the pre-empt suit and a willingness to play elsewhere. It is, in effect, a Take-out Double but made using the next-suit-up bid.

- (3) A still more powerful bid available to you is the Cue-bid. Here you bid the pre-empt suit at the 4 level forcing your partner to bid to Game in his best suit; usually the bid is made over a minor suit pre-empt to indicate a strong hand with both majors. Invariably it suggests no more than one loser in the pre-empt suit, perhaps a singleton, even an Ace there.

**So 3♣ - 4♣, 3♦ - 4♦, 3♥ - 4♥, 3♠ - 4♠ are all forcing. Partnerships can discuss and hopefully adopt at least some parts of the FISHBEIN CONVENTION set out next page.**

*One thing you do not want to do is to hand the initiative back to your opponents. Know your system therefore and take **the agreed bidding action without undue delay**. Your Pass will show no interest in doubling or bidding NT or making a Fishbein take-out suit bid or a Cue-bid. This convention allows you (a) to penalise vulnerable opponents; (b) to show competitive hands by doubling non-vulnerable pre-empts when you're vulnerable or bidding the next-suit-up, both for T/O; (c) to bid 3NT to play; (d) **to make a cue-bid in the pre-empt suit which is forcing to Game.***

The convention at work when opponents are vulnerable:

Over their 3♣ vulnerable pre-empt, X is for penalties. Bid 3♦ with Club shortage and interest in the other 3 suits; bid 3♥ with a good hand and min. 5 Hearts, or 3♠ with a good hand and min. 5 Spades – both invitational bids that can be passed by partner.

Over their 3♦ vulnerable pre-empt, X is for penalties. Bid 3♥ with Diamond shortage and interest in the other 3 suits; bid 3♠ with a good hand and min. 5 Spades. Likewise bid 4♣/4♥ showing length and a desire to compete there - invitational.

Over their 3♥ vulnerable pre-empt, X is for penalties. Bid 3♠ with Heart shortage and interest in the other 3 suits; bid 4♣ or 4♦ with a good hand and min. 5 card suit; bid 4NT showing values for game in both minor suits; bid 4♠ either expecting to make it or as a profitable sacrifice.

Over their vulnerable 3♠ pre-empt, X is for penalties. Bid 4♣ with Spade shortage and interest in the other 3 suits; bid 4♦ or 4♥ with a good hand and min. 5 card suit; bid 4NT showing values for game in both minors.

**When non-vulnerable opponents pre-empt**, do the sums. Bid 3NT when vulnerable holding honour tricks in their suit; at equal vulnerability double is penalties. Otherwise use next-suit-up for T/O.

Then there are times when you can't and you won't – particularly if you know your opponents might double for penalties. Suit quality makes a huge difference in reducing the risk factor that goes with pre-empting. The Spade suit below will make you stop and stare and hopefully PASS.

	N ♠4	
	♥J73	
	♦J10754	
	♣J1076	
W	♠AJ108	♠K East
	♥K95	♥A1086
	♦K92	♦Q863
	♣AQ4	♣K952
	♠Q976532	
	♥Q42	
	♦A	
	♣83	

South opened 3♠.

West doubled for penalties when N/S were Vulnerable, or both sides were Non Vulnerable.

He expects to beat the contract by at least 3 tricks, scoring 800+ when N/S were Vulnerable, or 500+ when both were Non Vulnerable.

When N/S were not vulnerable and E/W were, West bid 3NT,

where he hopes to make 600 or 630 rather than collect a 500 penalty.

#### WHAT IF PARTNER PRE-EMPTS AND YOU HAVE A GOOD HAND?

Really this is another time when you appreciate the self-discipline you expect from a reliable partner.

His pre-empt has virtually guaranteed the ability to take six tricks in a non-vulnerable deal, seven when vulnerable; now you add your hand's contribution – always giving priority to the pre-empt suit as trumps when feasible – and bid whatever contract you think can be made. If you entertain hopes of slam, there is nothing to prevent your making enquiries re. Aces and Kings. RKCB, KICKBACK (and cue-bids if employed) all now set your pre-empting partner's suit as trumps. Should you feel you have a game or slam in a different suit then simply bid game or investigate for slam there yourself – a bid in a new suit below game level is non-forcing. When partner has pre-empted you may expect no further bid from him and his lowly 5+pts.

The prime purpose of pre-empting is hopefully to disturb our opponents bidding systems forcing them to make judgements at higher levels than they would otherwise choose. You have seen how it is possible to counter this action by doubling or using aspects of the Fishbein convention. Don't forget that Weak Two bids are pre-empts also and doubling these can likewise be very profitable.

Watch out for vulnerable 2♥ and 2♠ openers when you have their suit. Your double in these situations should always be for penalties.

There is one situation you should weigh up carefully however: doubling a major Weak Two or a minor three level pre-empt will result in a game score against you should you let them make it. Sometimes it takes courage to double..... and, just as important, the good grace to congratulate opponents who succeed in their contract!

ALL THE TOP BRIDGE AUTHORS KEEP REMINDING US THAT THE RED CARD IS IN THE BOX AND WE JUST DON'T USE IT OFTEN ENOUGH.

PRE-EMPTING IS A CALCULATED RISK BASED ON THE EXPECTED LOSSES WHEN DOUBLED. BUT..... NO DOUBLE – NO TROUBLE!

### QUICK SUMMARY

1. Keep to Rule of 500. Remember suit solidity.
2. Think at least twice when vulnerable.
3. Double vulnerable pre-empts for penalties.  
Likewise double pre-empts for penalties when neither side is vulnerable. In both cases you will need a good hand and trump tricks.
4. Without their suit but holding a good hand with no long suit, bid next-suit-up for T/O. Fishbein.
5. Overcall. This is invitational and partner may pass.
6. Bid Game. Again not forcing. Partner usually passes.
7. Cue-bid opponents pre-empt suit. This is the only forcing bid available and asks partner to bid Game in his best suit. It invariably denotes very strong holdings and max. one loser in pre-empt suit.
8. Remember pre-empts are commonplace at any point in the auction. Same rules apply regarding your doubles so consult vulnerability: if they're vulnerable your double is for penalties and the same too when neither side is vulnerable.
9. Don't forget to double for penalties when they open vulnerable with Weak Twos and you have honours in their trump suit.
10. Do the sums. In POKER your venture wins or costs you £s or pence; in BRIDGE it's all about points and points win prizes.