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(36) Competitive Bidding: Preempts

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Level: Intermediate/Advanced

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Introduction – “General Ideas”

Preempting the bidding is a matter of partnership style and partnership agreement. There is no *right* or *wrong* answer to your preempting style (within reason, of course.) The most important thing is for you and your partner to be on the same page about what you expect from a preemptive opening bid. Having said that, preempts have evolved a lot over the years!

Philosophy – “Why Do We Preempt?”

The Old Reason

When preemptive opening bids (“Weak-Two Bids”) were first adopted they were used to describe offensively-oriented hands that were light on HCP. By showing a long strong suit (with two of the top three honors) we allow partner to bid a game when they can visualize tricks (9 or 10) instead of counting HCP. This allowed us to bid game on far fewer than the traditional 24 or 25 combined HCP.

Modern Reason – “Better Answer!”

Once players starting using preemptive opening bids on a regular basis they quickly realized that many of their good results came NOT from when they bid to their “thin games”, but from when the opponents had difficulty bidding to their correct contracts. Players began to understand that preemptive bids function better as destructive bids than as constructive bids. Taking away the opponents’ bidding space makes it more difficult for them to communicate and thus more difficult for them to reach the correct contract. Forcing the opponents to consistently guess what to do is “winning bridge!”

Therefore, since preempts are such an effective destructive bidding tool, we should strive to make them as often as possible. That means that we should loosen our requirements for them so that we can make this effective bid as often as possible...



Thinking - “What Should We Consider When Deciding to Preempt?”

If our goal is to preempt the bidding by opening a weak-two as often as possible then we need to figure out what we need to take into account in order to help us make good decisions about when to do this.

Note: Not getting into trouble when preempting the bidding is an art form. It takes practice and judgment in order to be aggressive enough to frequently cause difficulty for the opponents yet not get into too much trouble for our side.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is an important part of preempts because it helps us determine how many tricks we can go down and still likely get a good board. The idea is that when we have a long suit, the opponents will frequently be able to make something as declarer because they also have a long suit – this is an “offensively oriented board.”

- If it is a partscore deal, then neither side will be able to make a big score on the board. We need to be -50, -100, or maybe -150 in order to get a decent result. If we are -200 or more it will be a horrible score (-200 is called the “Death Score”), so we need to try to avoid that result and not go down many tricks especially if we are vulnerable.
- If it is a game deal, then the opponents will be able to make a game if they declare the hand. In that case, the number of tricks we can go down (assuming we are doubled) will be determined by the relative vulnerabilities. For example, if the opponents can make +620 declaring in 4♥ then we will be ok with -100, -300, or -500. But -800 will be too much and get us a bad result.
- (*Advanced Discussion*) If it is a slam deal, then the opponents might be able to make a very large score declaring. In this case, we probably think that the number of tricks we can go down is enormous. But unfortunately, a large number of players will fail to bid the slam (this is just the case in a normal duplicate game) so it is important that we not go down more than the opponents’ game. So if the opponents can make +480 declaring in a heart game then we should try to go down -100 or -300, but not -500. We want to avoid -500 because even though it would be better than the -980 we would get if the opponents bid their slam it will usually not be a good result when many opponents miss their slam and score -480.



4 Types of Vulnerability

Many players think there are only two types of vulnerability: Nonvulnerable or Vulnerable (NV: White or V: Red). But from our discussion above you can see that not only is our vulnerability important but so is the opponents' vulnerability. Thus, there are 4-types of vulnerability.

- *White vs. Red (Favorable)* –
 - This is the most aggressive vulnerability!
 - If it is a game deal, we can afford to go down 3 tricks doubled (-500) and still do better than if the opponents bid and make a game (-600.)
 - We preempt as often as we possibly can when we are blessed with this vulnerability.
- *All White* –
 - This is the second most aggressive vulnerability!
 - If it is a game deal, then we can afford to go down 2 tricks doubled (-300) which is better than the opponent's game (-400).
 - If it is a partscore deal, we are still safe going down a trick or two (only 1-trick if doubled.)
 - We still preempt the bidding aggressively all white.
- *All Red* –
 - This is the third most aggressive vulnerability but is more conservative.
 - If it is a game deal, it is similar to all white above.
 - If it is a partscore deal, we are more at risk than before. Down two or down one doubled will result in the -200 "Death Score" and be a horrible result for us.
 - We are mildly aggressive, but somewhat more conservative.
- *Red vs. White (Unfavorable)* –
 - This is the most conservative vulnerability.
 - If it is a game deal and we are doubled, we can only afford to go down one trick (-200) and still do better than the opponents' game (-400). If we go down two tricks doubled, or more, (-500) then we will get a poor result.
 - If it is a partscore deal, it is similar to the all red above.
 - This is the most conservative vulnerability and we only preempt with hands with good playing strength.

Position – What Seat are you in?

The position (or seat) that we are in is another important factor to consider when deciding whether to preempt or not. Let's try to understand how our thinking should change in different seats around the table.



- *First Seat (Dealer)* – This is the seat that we preempt in most aggressively. If our goal is to make life difficult on a player with a very good hand, then the odds are 2 to 1 in favor of one of the opponents being the person with the good hand instead of our partner.
- *Second Seat* – This is our most conservative seat. One of our opponents has already passed (the dealer) and thus the player with a good hand is either our LHO or our partner.
- *Third Seat* – This is the most varied seat. When our partner is a passed hand we are free to make more tactical bids. In this case, we can open at the 2-level with a slightly weaker or a slightly stronger hand than we would in the first or second seat.
- *Fourth Seat* - In the 4th seat we do not preempt. If we have a weak hand, we will just pass the hand out. A 2-level opening in the 4th seat is “To Play.” It is usually a 6-card suit with 11-14 HCP and no game interest opposite a passed hand partner.

Opponents – Whom Are You Playing Against?

Another thing to consider in making a decision about a preempt is whom we are playing against. When we are playing against players that we are weaker than, then it pays to “mix things up.” In this case, we should try to put more pressure on them and take more risk by making “frisky” preempts. If we are up against players who are weaker than us, then we can monitor our risk and be more conservative.

Scoring Type – Matchpoints vs. IMPs

It is very important to consider the type of event we are playing in as well. When we play in a team event (IMPs) we are generally a bit more conservative about our preempts. The idea is that we do not want to lose the entire match on just one bad board, so we have to be careful not to get doubled and go down a very large number of tricks or “go for our life”. In contrast, when we are playing pairs, then the worst that we can do is get a zero on a board – we cannot ruin our entire day. This allows us to be free to take more risk and try to generate more good results for ourselves. Having said that, when we’re playing pairs we do have to consider one other important factor: – 200, “The Death Score.” In teams if we are -200 and our teammates are +140 then we only lose a couple of IMPs, no big deal. But in a Pairs event if we are -200 and all the players are just in a part score, then we are getting a zero. We might as well have been -1400 on the board – it will be the same disastrous score.



Suit – “What Does a Good Preempt Suit Look Like?”

A good preempt suit is one that has minimal danger of getting us into trouble when partner does not have a fit. One of the best tests for determining if this is a good suit to preempt is to ask ourselves how well the suit will play if partner has a singleton in our suit. The traditionally accepted idea of 2 of the top 3 honors is NOT the best kind of suit to have in order to survive these kinds of misfit auctions. The most important cards to have are the interior spot cards: J, 10, 9... These intermediate cards give your suit strength and solidity even when partner doesn't have help for you.

- AKxxxx opposite x
 - This will usually result in 2 losers when the suit breaks the expected 4-2.
- QJ109xx opposite x
 - This will result in the same 2 losers when the suit breaks the expected 4-2.

Notice that in the first example we used 7 HCP to accomplish these 4 tricks and in the second example we only used 3 HCP. We would much rather have the second holding.

Let's list a few other examples of good suits:

- AJ109xx
- KJ109xx
- KQ109xx
- Q1098xx
- J1098xx

These suits all are going to play pretty well and we will usually not get into too much trouble if we preempt with these kinds of suits.

Evens vs. Odds

One of the big dangers in preempting is losing tricks to cards that wouldn't be able to take tricks if the opponents were playing on offense. If the opponents set our preempt many tricks, but they took all their tricks with big cards, then we are ok – they could have made a game or a slam on their own. But if the opponents take tricks with small trump cards or good spot cards, these are tricks that they won defending that they would not have won if they were playing offense. If this happens we can be in big trouble and go down a very large number.

There are a couple of classic examples of this that I feel I must mention here. These hands are called “Even – Odd Hands” as you will see.

- (Your Hand) AQ10864 vs. (LHO Hand) KJ9753
- (Your Hand) KJ9753 vs. (LHO Hand) AQ10864



If our opponent holds these cards behind our cards they will take lots of tricks - win 5-6 trump tricks – and this can be a disaster. We can't predict when this is going to happen, but it is something to be worried about and be on the lookout for...

Hand – “Preempt More or Less?”

When we are deciding what to preempt we want to consider the quality of our suit but we also want to consider the overall quality of our hand. Some factors to consider:

- HCP,
- Location of our honors,
- Suit Quality and spot cards,
- Shape of our hand.

The overall shape of our hand is one of the things that is not considered enough by many bridge players. We all know that 4333 hands are a horrible shape for declaring. But most of us don't consider that 5332, 6322, and 7222 hands are also “horribly balanced hands”. These hands do not take as many tricks as their cousins. Compare the following:

- 5332 vs. 5431
- 6322 vs. 6421
- 7222 vs. 7321 vs. 7420

Note: These distributions are not suit specific (5431 does not have to be 4-card hearts.)

The shapelier hands in this list will often take at least one trick more than the more balanced ones. When we are dealt a *good suit* with one of these shapelier distributions we should consider “preempting one level more.” That is,

- Open a weak-two with 5431 shape,
- Open a 3-level preempt with 64 hands,
- Open a 4-level preempt with 74 hands.

In addition to this, when we have 7222 shape we should often “preempt one less.” 7222 is one of the worst shapes in all of bridge (almost everyone overbids with these hands.) It is often right to open at the 2-level, not at the 3-level, with this distribution.