

Preemptive Responses – Onward and upward.

In our last issue, we discussed the ins and outs of preemptive opening bids. We began with hand evaluation, making adjustments for our suit distribution. With a very long suit, we are certain to take more tricks when declaring trump. So in addition to counting High Card Points, we generally add length points for suits longer than four cards. It also stands to reason that a two suited hand should score more tricks than a flatter hand. Of course, it helps to have solid honors in our long suit/s. Recall that when we do not have sufficient values to open a hand at the one level, making a preemptive bid has several benefits:

1. Communicate to partner both the length and strength attributes in preemptive suit, where we would otherwise had to pass the bidding.
2. Consume bidding space to inhibit accurate bidding by opponents - if we have a long suit, other players will likely have offsetting length and strength in a suit of their own.
3. Provide lead direction to our partner should opponents ultimately win the contract.
4. Potentially provide partner the opportunity to raise the preempt suit when opponents enter the auction bidding another suit.

We also discussed the importance of the environmental factors including:

- A. Vulnerability (best is non-vulnerable vs. vulnerable opponents)
- B. Relative seat position (how many players have previously passed)
- C. Prior bids by others (opponent/s, partner)
- D. Table presence (psychological factors)
- E. Fourth seat 2 level opening bid (exceptional, game try)

To begin, we trust that you and your partner are “singing from the same sheet of music!” Hopefully it’s safe to assume your partner:

1. Does not make unsound or erratic opening preempts
2. Knows whether your responses are forcing or non-forcing (with or without interference)
3. Knows how to respond to your query bids

Okay, let’s explore responder’s options after our partner opened preemptively. Generally, we know opener has less than 11 High Card Points. Otherwise, with a long six or more card suit and two or more distribution points, partner would open at the 1 level. We also know our partner will have two or more good honors in the preempt suit with not more than one useful honor in a side suit.

We might assume passing is the only option with less than game-going strength. Game requires 25-26 points based on strength, less with distributional hands. After partner preempts, we count tricks, not pure strength. After partner opens preemptively, responder’s options are:

1. Pass
2. Raise or jump raise partner’s opening suit
3. Bidding 3 Notrump
4. Bid a new suit
5. Bid 2 Notrump, 4+ Notrump, or a conventional bid (Gerber)

The first three options are non-forcing. In fact, opener should *never* make another bid after initiating a preemptive call unless responder queries with a forcing bid. Like opening 1

Notrump, preemptive opening bids fully disclose our hand; the responder is now captain, fully responsible to steer the auction. Continuing the options, number four and five solicit opener for further information. Shortly, we will describe responder's forcing bids and when to use them. Of course, if an opponent makes an intervening call, the opener may pass with minimal values since responder can still make another bid. Going back to normal auctions without intervening competition, most players agree responder non-raise bids are forcing. The acronym ROLF well describes this agreement - Raise (is the) Only Non Forcing (bid). For most of this newsletter, we will assume opener initially began with a weak two bid. Okay, let's dig into the details of responder's options.

1. Pass – with no chance for game, our first impulse is to pass (but see #2 below). Even with a long side suit of our own and shortage in partner's suit, game is unlikely if we have a misfit with partner and are missing most of the primary honors (Aces and Kings). So be careful not make a forcing bid in a new suit simply because you have a misfit. Partner has already signaled a weak hand with a six card suit containing honors. If you bid 2 Notrump or a new suit - both forcing, your chances to make a part score go down as the contract level goes up. Yet if you have a good 7+ card major suit and foresee a good chance to attain game, by all means bid and rebid your lovely suit (non-forcing). Here's some illustrative hands:

a. 2H - ?

Q J T 9 8 Q 2 A T 9 Q 3 2

With two losers in Spades and several losers in the minor suits, pass. If opponents bid 3C or 3D, you can bid 3H next round.

b. 2D - ?

A Q 9 8 7 6 Q 2 2 K J 3 2

Even with a six Spades and a singleton Diamond, pass for now. If opponents bid 2 Hearts, you can belatedly bid 2 Spades. But if you immediately bid 2 Spades and partner rebids 3 Diamonds, your side could easily get set where 2 Diamonds may make 8 tricks.

c. 2S - ?

Q J Q J T A T 9 3 2 K Q 2

Although you have 15 points and good trump support, the hand has too many losers to make either a 3 Notrump or 4 Spade game. Why? The problem here is the hand is mostly secondary honors, i.e., "slow tricks" (Queens and Jacks). So we pass for now, prepared to either compete to 3 Spades or possibly double opponents – after all, we have plenty of defensive tricks.

d. P – (P) - 2H – (P);

?

Q J T 3 2 Q T 3 2 A 2 Q 2

Hmm, in this situation we initially passed. With a great trump fit, should we press forward and invite or bid game? Bidding game is unwise. First, our frisky partner may have preempted holding no more than a five card Heart suit. Certainly partner is allowed some liberties when we are a passed hand, especially when non-vulnerable. Second, our hand contains only one primary honor (4 HCP) and seven points in slow tricks. Third, judging our Spade holding, perhaps partner holds a singleton Spade or a void. Indeed, if opponents bid 2 Spades, **then** raise partner to 3 Hearts. If opponents persist and then bid up to 3 Spades, double for a juicy penalty – your partner's tactical bid has paid handsome dividends. If after

your double partner pulls the contract back to 4 Hearts, after the carnage is over, smile across the table to your beloved spouse!

e. 2S - ?

A J 2 K Q J T Q J T Q J T

With 17 HCP, certainly we must do something, right? No! We have five losers, maybe four if partner holds an extra honor in a side suit. Here's a classic example illustrating the downside of slow tricks when holding secondary honors. Sadly, not all points are created equal.

2. Raise or jump raise partner's opening suit - with less than an opening hand, when should responder raise opener's suit? Well, Bridge is a partnership game so with support in partners preempt suit and few defensive tricks, consider upping opener's preempt. Even lacking High Card Points, generally it is a good rule of thumb to raise partner's preempt suit to the combined trump length (up to game).

a. 2H - ?

Q 2 K 3 2 T 9 8 7 6 5 Q 2

Trump length = $6 + 3 = 9$. Despite our poor values, it's generally wise to raise partner's preempt to 3 Hearts. Raising partner's preempt is definitely non-forcing, opener must pass. Certainly opponents have enough points for game, likely making 4 Spades. Of course raising the preempt might have a slight downside, perhaps pushing opponents to a game that they might not bid on their own.

b. 2D - ?

3 2 2 K 5 4 3 2 A 5 4 3 2

Holy smoke, the opponents certainly have at least a major suit game. So now it's time to turn up the heat by promoting partners preempt. The question is how when and how far? Unless you are playing against very weak opponents reticent to bid game, time is of the essence. Bidding to the level of your sides combined suit length, we bid 5 Diamonds ($6 + 5 = 11$, the 5 level). Prudent bidders may choose 4 Diamonds with adverse vulnerability, procrastinating on the 5 Diamonds until next bidding round. While seemingly reasonable, this less aggressive maneuver may allow opponents to find a fit and bid slam. Ah, that's Bridge – a game of questionable risk and reward.

c. 2H - ?

2 Q T 3 2 4 3 A K T 9 8 7

Bid 4 Hearts straight away! Here's a prime illustration why we count tricks instead of High Card Points. Partner has six Heart tricks and with our great Club suit, we can contribute at least another four tricks for game. While initially bidding 3 Clubs may seem tempting, it allows the opponents to sneak in the auction bidding 3 Spades. And even though your side might have a powerful two-suited fit, the opponents would also have a double-fit in the other suits. Bottom line, never enter a bidding war without most of the strength – especially when they control the master suit (Spades).

3. Bidding 3 Notrump – without a major suit trump fit yet, 3 Notrump is certain, by all means bid it straight away: "the one who *knows*, goes". But before bidding 3 Notrump, a signoff

bid, carefully evaluate your controls (Aces and Kings) and the running suits.

a. 2H - ?

A K 2 3 2 A K Q J 3 2 A Q

With any lead other than Hearts, you can count nine tricks off the top. Except with extreme distribution, it's better to play a Notrump game than try to eke out a minor suit game requiring two additional tricks.

b. 2D - ?

A 3 2 K Q K J T 2 A 4 3 2

This time we can count six tricks in partner's preempt suit. Certainly partner is a solid bidder, promises two honors in the preempt suit. With the anticipated Heart lead, you will take 6 Diamonds, 1 Spade, 1 Heart, and 1 Club to make your game.

c. 3H - ?

J T 9 2 A 3 2 A 4 3 2 A 2

Here we have nice trump support, yet are one trick short in a 4 Heart game. But wait, there is another option! When partner opens at the 3 level showing a seven card suit, we may be able to make a 3 Notrump game with fewer points. Even with a Spade lead, here our secondary Spade honors are solid. After opponents win three rounds of Spades, we should be home free unless we get an unlucky break in Hearts.

4. Bid a new suit – except when we are a passed hand, bidding a new suit is forcing one round. Thus, responder shows a good 5+ card suit and interest in game or slam.

a. 2D - ?

A K Q J 2 K Q T 3 2 -- K J 2

Bid 2 Spades, forcing. Even if opener cannot support Spades and rebids 3 Diamonds, we can rebid 3 Hearts (bidding a new suit is game forcing).

b. 2D - ?

A J T A K Q T 3 2 K 4 3 2

Begin with a forcing 2 Hearts bid. We plan on rebidding 3 Hearts, non-forcing. While game is close, it will be difficult to reach partner's Diamonds unless opener shows a feature. We will cover opener's rebids in the upcoming newsletter.

5. Bid 2 Notrump, 4+ Notrump, or a conventional bid (Gerber) – each of these bids is forcing one round. Responder shows a good hand, querying opener for additional information.

a. 2H - ?

A K 3 2 J 2 Q T 2 A K 3 2

It is unclear whether 4 Hearts or 3 Notrump is the best game contract. Bidding 2 Notrump asks opener to show a "feature." Provided partner holds an Ace or King in a side suit (Diamonds here), playing in 3 Notrump may play better than 4 Hearts.

b. 2S - ?

K 9 3 2 -- A K Q 2 K Q 4 3 2

Wow, here's a beautiful hand begging to bid slam. Yet grand slam is also possible – how

would you find it? Using a slam convention like Blackwood or Gerber, what would you bid after opener shows two Aces? Ah-ha, a Heart Ace would be wasted while the Club Ace is golden. Here again, querying opener by bidding 2 Notrump allows opener to possibly show a delicious feature, bidding 3 Clubs (showing the Club Ace). Answering the affirmative, we can belatedly use our slam convention to disclose the Spade Ace. Note – most players consider it a “no-no” to preempt with two Aces in the side suits, while a trump Ace and one outside suit Ace is fine for two-level preempts.

Finally, let’s discuss situations where opponents interference with preemptive bidding. In our last issue, we learned not to overcall opponents’ preemptive bids without opening values and a good suit. Similarly, we should assume when an opponent overcalls partner’s preempt, the opponent has both a good suit and shortness in the preempt suit. While a thorough discussion of interference would be a newsletter itself, here are some common scenarios. Note - opponent’s overcall is shown in parenthesis.

A. 2D – (2S) - ?

1. K T 2 Q J 3 2 Q 2 Q J 3 2 Pass
2. K 2 Q 3 2 Q J 3 2 K 4 3 2 Bid 3D
3. K Q T 9 A T 9 3 2 -- K Q T 2 Double for penalty

Each hand has 11 HCP but that’s where the similarity ends. On hand #1, we have plenty of slow tricks (secondary honors), great for defense. While 3D might make, opponents might also go down in Spades.

With nice trump support, bid 3 Diamonds on #2; shortness in Spades is also helpful.

On #3, it’s prime time to penalize opponents with a double; all points are working with tasty honors behind the Spade bidder and several tricks in the Clubs and Hearts. One point: don’t double count the Diamond void – here we only count the Spades for natural trick winners (we can’t ruff Diamonds and still win Spade tricks). By the way, be sure to check out our other column in this newsletter, “Rule of 10.” This hand is perfect:

- a. Combined HCP with partner = 20+
- b. Trump misfit
- c. Opponents bid = 8 tricks, plus our 2+ trump tricks = 10+ = Double!

B. 2H – (X) - ?

4. K 3 2 Q J 3 A 5 4 3 2 6 5 Bid 3 Hearts
5. A Q 3 2 -- Q J T 2 J T 9 3 2 Pass
6. 3 Q J T 2 Q 6 5 4 3 2 4 3 Bid 4 Hearts

On hand #4, our bidding level is the sum of our combined Hearts: 6+3 = 9 Hearts, so bid 3 Hearts. Remember, this is only competitive bidding, not inviting game.

Looking at hand #5, don’t worry - it’s fine to pass. Opponents’ double at two level preempts is for “take out” not penalty. Incidentally, Left Hand Opponent probably has a handful of Hearts with few points. If LHO bids 2 Notrump, belatedly Double for penalty and lead your Club Jack. Poor opponents are in for serious trouble!

On #6, be a good partner by immediately bidding 4 Hearts: 6+4=10, i.e. the 4 level. Certainly opponents have a Spade game; a Spade slam is also quite likely so

we want to consume their bidding space. In fact, with favorable vulnerability, consider preemptively raising partner to 5 Hearts!

Finally, let's briefly discuss bidding in the passout seat. When three players have passed, the auction is concluded unless the player in the passout seat makes a call. Opponents never like to have the auction stolen by our preemptive bids and may stretch their hand evaluation to eke out a bid. As we've learned in this lesson, our follow-up decision to pass, double, or rebid partner's suit is based upon our offensive and defensive tricks and our trump fit. In a rare circumstance, we might initially pass and belatedly bid another long suit of our own and misfit with partner. Doing so after we have initially passed is strictly "to play."

At this point you are well on the road to mastering preemptive bidding with your partner. In our third installment we will continue with opener's rebids based on responder's query.

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