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(90) Dealing with Preempts: Responding to 3- or 4-Level Preempts

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Level: Intermediate

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General

High Card Points (HCP) are an effective tool for evaluating a hand that is relatively balanced. But as we begin to have longer and longer suits (and more unbalanced or shapely hands) HCP become less effective tools for evaluating our hands. With distributional hands it is better to try to count tricks (or winners) than it is to try to use HCP. This is especially true when partner has shown one long suit – as when they have opened a Preempt at the 3-level or 4-level.

Raising to Game

When we have a big fit for partner we generally raise as a Law of Total Tricks (LoTT) bid – extending the preempt (we might make it as well.) When we have a smaller fit we want to try to visualize a reasonable hand for partner (given the vulnerability and seat the preempt is made in) and try to count tricks – to see if we think partner will be able to make game (enough tricks) opposite our hand.

Exploring Slam

When partner preempts and we have an excellent hand we will want to explore slam. This will traditionally be a hand with a fit, lots of controls, and a source of tricks. Frequently, these will be hands with 6331, 6421, or 5431 distributions. These shapes provide a trump fit (say in one of the 3- or 4-card suits), controls with shortness, controls (say Aces in a side suit), and a long strong source of tricks.

Example

x

Kxxx

AKJxxx

Ax

This is not many HCP, but lots of tricks opposite ♥AQJ 7th or 8th.



Bidding New Suits

When partner preempts at the 3-level and 4-level we usually do not have much space to explore game or slam – especially in another suit. Bidding a new suit needs to be used for a variety of purposes and having a good understanding of our agreements is important.

It is useful to have some simple agreements:

- If we bid game over a 3-level preempt it is to play.
 - *Example:* 3♠ - 4♥. To play.
- We do not correct a Major to a minor to only play in game.
 - *Example:* 4♠ - 5♣. Cuebid, trying to get to 6♠.
 - *Example:* 4♠ - 6♣. To play.
- Minor suit bids (not game) above 3N are cuebids.
 - *Example:* 3♥ - 4♦. Cuebid, Forcing to 4♥, trying to get to 6♥.
- Other new suit bids are natural and forcing.
 - *Example:* 3♥ - 3♠. Natural and Forcing.
- *Special Example:* There is another auction that you should discuss with your regular partners – that is, 4♥ - 4♠. You can play this auction many different ways - I recommend playing this as natural and to play. The important thing is for you and your partner to have an agreement.

(Advanced) Preempt Keycard

Some partnerships like to use 4♣ as a Keycard Ask after a preemptive opening bid. If slam is not there to be bid this 4♣ Keycard Ask allows the preempting side to stay lower than if we use 4N to ask for Keycards:

- 3♦ / 3♥ / 3♠ - 4♣ Keycard in the preempt suit.
- Over a 3♣ preempt 4♣ needs to remain an extension of the Preempt. So we use 4♦ as the Keycard Ask over a 3♣ Preempt.

Note: Some players use this over 2-Level Preempts as well.

In the case of preempts, we also use a different set of steps instead of 1430 (a Preemptor should not have 3 or 4 Keycards, so we should not need to have those in our answering steps.) Thus, we use “Preempt Keycard Steps.”

Preempt Keycard Steps - 01122

- Step 1 (4♦) – Zero Keycards (we can relay, if there is room, to ask for the Queen.)
- Step 2 (4♥) – 1 Keycard w/o the Queen.
- Step 3 (4♠) – 1 Keycard w/ the Queen.
- Step 4 (4N) – 2 Keycards w/o the Queen.
- Step 5 (5♣) – 2 Keycards w/ the Queen.



Conclusion

When partner preempts the bidding at a very high level (3- or 4-level) we have very little space to find a fit and determine what level we should be playing at. We want to focus on tricks and controls more than HCP when we are trying to visualize whether we should bid game or even slam. Since we are jammed up for bidding space it is important for us to have good (detailed) understandings about the meaning and goal of each of Responder's bids. Having a mix-up at such a high level gives us very little room to recover and will frequently be disastrous. So discuss these auctions with your partner and make sure you are on the same page.