

The Exciting World of Bridge – Lesson 8

Preemptive Opening Bids

With Less Bid More!

So far we've mostly spoken about how we open our good hands at the one level. This allows the partnership to have as much room as possible to search for the best contract. Back in the good old days, opening bids at the two-level were used as strong two-bids, showing a hand too strong to open at the one level. We've discussed how we will open ALL of these strong hands with a bid of 2♣ - more on that in an upcoming session.

Opening bids in a suit at the three level or higher were always commonly used to show hands with a long suit, too weak to open at the one level. These are preemptive opening bids, the main purpose being to make life difficult for the opponents. This tactic was proven so successful that virtually the entire bridge world stopped playing strong 2's (except 2♣) and decided to use the two-level for preemptive openings as well.

Requirements for a Preempt

First and foremost, deciding whether or not to preempt should be the very last item on our opening bid checklist. You never want to preempt with a hand that you should be making a normal opening bid with. So assuming you have gone through your checklist, the basic decision is easy. Do I have a GOOD six card or longer suit? If the answer to that is "yes", then you can preempt. Whether or not you SHOULD preempt is another question, but just keep in mind for now that you CAN. What constitutes a "good" suit? The most common definition of this (and one I happen to like) is that it's a suit headed by two of the top three OR three of the top five cards. You will notice that I haven't mentioned anything at all about high card points. Correct, and I won't be. When we open with a preempt our goal is to disrupt the opponent's bidding as the likelihood of the hand belonging to them is higher than the likelihood of the hand belonging to us. We're trying to get in their way – we're not doing this with the hopes of bidding a contract that can actually make.

How High do I Preempt?

The basic answer is that with a six card suit, we preempt at the two-level. With a seven card suit, at the three-level and with an eight card suit, at the four-level. However, there is one small issue and that's with the club suit. The poor club suit is almost not even a real suit anymore. Since we can't open 2♣ as a preempt, occasionally we really want to preempt in clubs but since we only have six of them we are forced to open 3♣. You're only one card short – no big deal!

Plusses and Minuses

Now that we've discussed the basic requirements to preempting, we're going to look at a few things in a little more depth and look at when we need to be careful about preempting and when we might decide to get a little crazy with our preempts.

Vulnerability – If we are vulnerable and we get doubled, if we happen to find our partner with few points and bad support, we can quite quickly go for 1100 or 1400. Watch the vulnerability and be more conservative when you are vulnerable, less conservative when non-vulnerable.

Position – By far the best seat to make a preempt in is third seat. Why? Think about what's going on here – your partner passed and your right hand opponent has passed and it's your turn to bid. If you held something like ♠QJTxxx ♥xx ♦xxx ♣xx, what do you think your left hand opponent has? They have a HUGE hand! Further to that, it's almost guaranteed that your opponents have enough for game between their two hands. Third seat is a great seat to preempt in so use this as your spot to get a little creative. In first or second seat you want to again be a little more conservative, particularly in second seat. Fourth seat is a special case which will be discussed later.

Outside 4 Card Major – It's usually not a good idea to make a preemptive opening bid when you also hold a 4 card major suit. The reason for this is that your partner may well hold 4 or 5 cards in that major but have no fit at all for the suit you're preempting in. Therefore a strong guideline is to avoid preempting with an outside 4 card major (that said, 3rd seat is a great time to ignore this guideline).

Voids – When your hand contains a void it quite often has better playing strength than what you may first think. Preempting with a void isn't something you should never do but it's something to think about before you decide whether to preempt or not.

Outside Aces – Similar to voids. One strong guideline would be that if you have an outside ace AND a void you probably shouldn't be preempting.

Putting it all Together

Now that we've examined the requirements for making a preemptive opening bid and we've looked at things that make it either more or less attractive to do, our next step is to decide when to make the jump and preempt. This is not an exact science. Look at your hand at think about things on this list and decide whether or not this is the time. As an example, if you were vulnerable and in second seat, this would be a horrible time to preempt with something like this: ♠QJTxxx ♥xxxx ♦x ♣xx. The seat is wrong, the vulnerability is wrong and you have an outside 4 card major. If you were not vulnerable and in third seat, that would change everything and preempting would be the right thing to do.

Preempting in 4th Seat

If the purpose of a preempt is to interfere with the opponents bidding then preempting in 4th seat really doesn't make much sense. If you open with a "preemptive bid" in fourth seat you are saying "Partner, I have around 11 to 14 total points so I think this is a makeable contract". Since your partner is a passed hand, game is very unlikely when you only hold 11 to 14 points so in this scenario you don't mind preempting your partner. They should normally pass when you do this in 4th seat but occasionally, if they have a fit for your suit, they may raise you to game.

Responding to a Weak 2 Bid

When responding to a weak 2 opening we play a response structure termed ROLF — Raise is the Only Non-Force. On the surface, this implies that the only non-forcing bids by Responder are a raise of opener's suit. In practice, it's a little more complex. A jump to game by Responder is also not forcing. It's a sign-off and Opener is expected to pass. Also, a raise isn't just non-forcing - it's not invitational either. Opener is expected to pass, since Responder is the captain. Responder could have either a strong hand or a weak hand when raising opener's suit. The opponents should be guessing what to do, not Opener.

A new suit by Responder below the game level is forcing. With a fit — usually three-card support but perhaps a doubleton honor — Opener should raise. Without a fit, Opener rebids the original suit with a minimum and bids something else — a new suit or notrump — with a maximum.

A response of 2NT is forcing also, and we'll deal with that next.

The 2NT Response

There are times when Responder needs more information from Opener to determine the best contract. Responder may need to know whether Opener has a minimum or a maximum for the weak two-bid, or whether Opener has some additional feature in their hand. Most partnerships use a 2NT response as an artificial bid, asking for a further description of the weak two-bid.

In response to the artificial 2NT bid, Opener simply rebids their suit with a minimum of 5 to 8 points. With a maximum for the weak two-bid — 9 to 11 points — Opener bids another suit to show a feature — usually an ace or a king. With no outside feature, opener can rebid 3NT to show a maximum.