

Preemptive Bids

Every bridge player is familiar with preemptive bids but few use them to great advantage. Preemptive bids might be described as the “great equalizer” because, no matter how good your opponents are, they will not be able to cope with every situation. And that is how to win at bridge — give your opponents a lot of problems.

This lesson applies not only to preemptive opening bids but also to *direct* jump overcalls; for example, if your right-hand opponent opens with 1 ♣ and you jump to 3 ♥. The requirements and responding methods are virtually identical.



Skip bid... *Four Spades!*



No problem. *Double!*



Oh yeah? *Redouble!*



In that case I take back my double.

I recommend an aggressive use of preemptive bids. Don't wait for the classic hand; look for every opportunity. This strategy will make your bridge sessions less consistent; but there is no reward for consistency in duplicate bridge. A steady player who scores 55% every session will almost never win; while the player who alternates from 45% to 65% will win nearly half the time.

Universal Rule

A player who makes a preemptive bid surrenders captaincy. Only his partner may instigate further bidding for his side. In other words:

Once you preempt *do not bid again* unless partner bids — and even then you should generally pass any nonforcing bid.


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▶ Playing Tricks


In order to determine when and how high to preempt it is necessary to estimate how many tricks your hand will win if your long suit is trumps. In some cases this requires only common sense:

1.  ♠ K Q J 10 7 5 4 6 tricks
 ♥ 8 3 2
 ♦ 3
 ♣ 7 3


Clearly you will win 6 tricks in your own hand if spades are trumps.

In other cases it requires a guess. The best procedure is to estimate how many tricks your *honor* cards will win, then:

Add 1 additional trick for each card over 3 in any suit.


2.  ♠ 8 7 tricks
 ♥ A Q 8 7 6 4 2
 ♦ Q 8 6 2
 ♣ 3

You have two honor holdings to consider. The ♥ A-Q is sure to win 1 trick and might win 2 so figure 1.5 tricks. The ♦ Q may be worthless or it may win a trick, so figure half a trick. That's neat: $1.5 + 0.5 = 2$ tricks. Add 4 more tricks for the heart length and 1 for the fourth diamond.

3.  ♠ 9 5 tricks
 ♥ 10 3

♦ Q J 10 8 5 3
 ♣ J 8 4 2

The ♦ Q-J-10 will win 1 trick; ignore the ♣ J. Add 3 more tricks for the diamond length and 1 for the fourth club.

4.  ♠ 9 5 2 6 tricks
 ♥ —
 ♦ K 7 3
 ♣ K J 9 7 6 5 2

It would be very unlucky if the ♣ K-J-9 all lost to the A-Q-10 so figure 1 trick. The ♦ K is more likely than not to provide a trick so take the optimistic view and count it. Add 4 more tricks for the club length.

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Requirements

The point-count and suit-length requirements for a preemptive bid are rather flexible:

0 to 10 HCP — although with 10 HCP you should prefer a one-bid if your hand qualifies.

At least a 6 card suit — contrary to popular belief, a 7+ card suit is not required.

No side 4 card major Q-x-x-x or better — note that this permits a weak 4 card major.

Vulnerability

The primary consideration before making a preemptive bid is the vulnerability. The traditional practice is to overbid two tricks vulnerable or three tricks nonvulnerable. This “rule of 2 and 3” is simple, but it will not give your opponents many problems. The modern “rule of 2, 3 and 4” is far more effective:

Overbid *two* tricks at unfavorable vulnerability (vul. vs. not).

Overbid *three* tricks at equal vulnerability.

Overbid *four* tricks at favorable vulnerability (not vul. vs. vul.).

Let’s determine the correct opening bid for Examples 1-4 at each vulnerability situation:

1. Open 2 ♠ (a weak two-bid) at unfavorable; open 3 ♠ at equal; open 4 ♠ at favorable.

2. Open 3 ♥ at unfavorable; open 4 ♥ at equal or favorable (never preempt past game in your suit).
3. Pass at unfavorable or equal; open 3 ♦ at favorable.
4. Pass at unfavorable; open 3 ♣ at equal; open 4 ♣ at favorable.

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Responses to Preempts

The greatest danger of a preemptive bid is not the bid itself but what an inexperienced player might do in responding. *Pass* is the key word. Even with as many as 15-16 points, it may be unwise to respond since partner has already overbid by 2, 3 or 4 tricks according to the vulnerability (which you know).

When responding to a preempt, think in terms of the *tricks* you can provide, not point count.



- 5.
- | | | | |
|----------------|------------|-----------|----------|
| <i>Partner</i> | <i>You</i> | ♠ A Q 9 6 | Both Vul |
| 3 ♥ | Pass | ♥ 2 | |
| | | ♦ K Q 6 3 | |
| | | ♣ Q J 9 2 | |

Partner shows 6 tricks and your hand should provide 2, maybe 3. Do not commit the folly of bidding 3 NT as you will be unable to use partner's suit for lack of entries. If the vulnerability were *unfavorable*, I would take a chance and bid 4 ♥.



- 6.
- | | | | |
|----------------|------------|--------------|----------|
| <i>Partner</i> | <i>You</i> | ♠ 2 | None Vul |
| 3 ♠ | 4 ♠ | ♥ A K 10 5 3 | |
| | | ♦ A Q 8 2 | |
| | | ♣ Q 8 4 | |

There is a good chance you can provide 4 tricks, enough for game opposite partner's 6. Note that you do not need trump support to raise a preempt. If the vulnerability were *favorable*, I would pass 3 ♠.



- 7.
- | | | | |
|----------------|------------|-------------|---------|
| <i>Partner</i> | <i>You</i> | ♠ K J 7 6 5 | Any Vul |
| 3 ♦ | Pass | ♥ A K 8 5 3 | |
| | | ♦ — | |
| | | ♣ Q 3 2 | |

Partner's bid is not what you wanted to hear, but the situation is likely to get worse if you bid. The best chance for a good score is to hope your left-hand opponent bids.

Winning Tip

When passing a preempt with a good hand, do not give it away by huddling. If you pass in tempo there is a better chance your left-hand opponent will bid or double and get into trouble.

8. 

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>	♠ K 8 2	Both Vul
3 ♠	4 ♠	♥ 9 5 3	
		♦ A 10 6 4 3	
		♣ 7 2	

Here you do not expect to make 4 ♠, but the opponents almost surely have a game (probably 4 ♥). Partner's 6 tricks and your 2 tricks will make 4 ♠ a profitable sacrifice even if doubled; and there is a chance you may steal the contract. The 4 ♠ raise would be correct at any vulnerability.

New Suit Response

Most of the time you will either pass or raise partner's preempt, but it is also possible to bid a new suit. This requires 6+ cards, or a strong 5 cards at the 3 level. Further, you must be prepared for partner to bid again if your bid is not game.

A new suit response below game is *forcing* by an unpassed hand.

9. 


<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>	♠ A Q 7 5 4 3	None Vul
3 ♣	3 ♠	♥ A 3 2	
		♦ 3	
		♣ K 8 4	

Your bid is forcing. Partner should raise to 4 ♠ with two or three trumps. Otherwise he will usually bid 4 ♣, then you will raise to 5 ♣ since you expect to provide 5 tricks. If partner instead opened 3 ♦, you should *pass* because there is no safety in the likely event partner has no spade fit.

10. 

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>	♠ K Q J 9 6	Both Vul
3 ♦	3 ♠	♥ A K Q 9 8	
		♦ 2	
		♣ 8 2	

With two strong suits this hand is worth bidding despite the potential misfit. If partner does not raise spades you will next bid 4 ♥ (nonforcing) to offer a choice.

11. 

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>	♠ 2	None Vul
3 ♥	4 ♦	♥ 10 3 2	
		♦ A K J 8 7 6	
		♣ 9 7 4	

Here your bid is tactical. You are sure the opponents can make 4 ♠ and you intend to sacrifice in 5 ♥. The advantage of 4 ♦ is that your partner will know what to lead if the opponents buy the contract.

3 NT Response


Another possibility is to bid 3 NT over partner's minor-suit preempt (rare over a major). Generally, you should have at least three cards or a doubleton honor in partner's suit plus stoppers in the other suits.

Do not bid 3 NT with a singleton or void in partner's suit unless you expect to win 9 tricks alone.

12. 

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>	♠ A Q 3	Any Vul
3 ♦	3 NT	♥ K J 9 6 2	
		♦ K 3	
		♣ Q J 4	

You hope to run partner's diamond suit; A-Q-x-x-x-x would be nice, though you may succeed opposite lesser holdings.

13. 

<i>Partner</i>	<i>You</i>	♠ A K 9 3	Any Vul
3 ♣	3 NT	♥ A 10 2	
		♦ 9 7 2	
		♣ A 8 3	

You do not have a diamond stopper, but 3 NT is the best hope for game (especially at matchpoints). Even if partner has no help, the lead may not be a diamond or the opponents may cash only 4 tricks.

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If Partner Has Passed

If your partner has passed (you are in third or fourth seat), there are a few additional considerations about preemptive opening bids:

A preempt at the level of *game* may contain more than 10 HCP if a slam is unlikely.

A preempt in *fourth-seat* (after three passes) should contain 8+ HCP; else pass the deal out.

14. 

Partner

You

♠ 9 3

Any Vul

Pass

4 ♥

♥ A K Q 9 8 6 2

♦ K 9 3

♣ 3

In first or second position you should open 1 ♥, but a slam is extremely unlikely once partner has passed. The preempt may keep the opponents out of the auction.

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