



Play & Learn

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Factors in preempting, part 2

Last month, we examined how factors such as suit length, suit quality, the trick-taking potential of your hand and partnership style influence your preempts. Vulnerability and position also affect your decisions.

Vulnerability: Any time you preempt, there is a danger that you will be doubled for penalty, so you must consider the potential cost. A preempt is successful when the score you give up is less than the value of the contract your opponents could have made if you had not preempted. Vulnerability affects the size of both your penalty and the opponents' game or slam bonus and should always be considered.

Some players follow the Rule of Two and Three for preempts – overbidding to go down two when vulnerable and down three when not vulnerable, which limits the penalty to 500 points. More daring players prefer the Rule of Two, Three and Four as a guideline, which also takes into account their opponents' vulnerability. They consider all three states of vulnerability:

- Favorable – not vulnerable vs. vulnerable opponents. You can be four tricks short of making your preempt.
- Equal – both sides the same vulnerability. You can be three tricks short of making your bid.
- Unfavorable – vulnerable vs. non-vulnerable opponents. You are within two tricks of making your bid.

Using The Rule of Two, Three and Four will make you a tougher competitor even if you go down too much occasionally. As long as you can put one bad result aside, you are likely to come out ahead in the long run.

Position: In first seat, you preempt to obstruct your opponents' bidding, but partner's hand is of unknown strength. Discuss and follow your partnership agreements on preempting so that partner can make an accurate decision when you catch him with a good hand. You can use judgment to deviate slightly from your agreed style, but remember that partner is counting on you to have described your hand accurately.

In second seat, after dealer has passed, there is one difference. When preempting as dealer, you preempt two opponents and your partner. When you are in second seat, you're preempting only one opponent and your partner. With a 50–50 chance that you are preempting partner, it's important for second-seat preempts to be disciplined.

Put on your preempting shoes in third seat! Partner is a passed hand, so game is remote. LHO is probably champing at the bit to open the bidding. Make it hard on him! Third-seat preempts are more obstructive than constructive. You might preempt with less length or strength than normal. What would you do at favorable vulnerability holding:

(1) ♠Q987543 ♥7 ♦J2 ♣943

(2) ♠J42 ♥87 ♦KQJ1087 ♣75?

Hand (1) can open 3♠. Your suit isn't good enough to preempt in first or second seat, but now you're quite sure that LHO wants to bid. Make him start looking for a fit at the four level!

Hand (2) is a 2♦ opening in first or second seat. In third seat, open 3♦. Your suit is a card short, but there is little danger of going down too much, even if you are doubled for penalty. You could also open 3♦ at equal vulnerability because of the good suit.

At unfavorable vulnerability, you might open only 2♦. Be cautious about bending the rules in third seat at unfavorable vulnerability. A penalty double, or even down two undoubled, could give the opponents their best possible score.

Preempts in fourth seat follow different guidelines. Don't preempt two opponents who have chosen not to bid. Letting the opponents go plus is worse than passing the hand out, so we only open in fourth seat when we expect to make the contract or set the opponents opposite partner's fair share of the remaining points. Fourth-seat "preempts" are never weak – they are often made with decent minimum opening hands that would have opened at the one level as dealer. ■