



# Play & Learn

BY PAT HARRINGTON ✉ [mrsbridge@embarqmail.com](mailto:mrsbridge@embarqmail.com)

## Factors in preempting, part 1

We've seen how preempts can foul up our opponents' bidding. While preempting can be fun and effective, it also involves some risks. Let's explore those risks as we look at factors that go into determining when and how high to preempt.

### Suit length

Because a preempt is a high-level bid often made with less than opening strength, you need a safety net of some kind. The length of your suit provides some of that net. A typical three-level preempt contains a seven-card suit. Generally, the more cards in your long suit, the higher you will preempt.

### Suit quality

Having a good suit provides another piece of your preempting safety net. The best definition of a good suit is one that will produce tricks. Which would you say is the better suit?

- 1 ♠A J 7 6 4 3 2 or
- 2 ♠Q J 10 9 8 7 3?

Students always want to know how many points or how many honors they need to preempt. Other than a preempt generally having less than opening strength, the real issue is the number of tricks your hand can win assuming your long suit will be a source of tricks. While not cast in stone, it's often suggested that the preempt suit should contain two of the top three cards or

three of the top five.

If partner has little or no support, you have to rely on a good split of your opponents' spades with holding (1). Opposite a singleton or void from partner, you could lose as many as five spades depending on the split. With holding (2), you will probably lose only two spades. The quality of your suit depends on more than just the top honors. Intermediate cards such as the 10, 9 and 8 make your long suit better. Additionally, the opponents are more likely to make a penalty double when they expect to win trump tricks that are not the ace or king.

### Trick-taking potential of the hand

Deciding how high or whether to preempt is influenced by the length and strength of suits other than your long suit. It's OK to have an ace or king outside of your suit. But most of your strength should be in your long suit so partner doesn't expect you to produce many tricks in other suits when defending. With too much outside of your suit, you risk hearing partner sacrifice when you could have set the opponents. A void or a second long suit might also make your hand too strong to preempt. You often hear the warning not to preempt with a side four-card major. Would you preempt as dealer holding any of these hands?

- a ♠K Q 10 8 7 5 3 ♥A 6 ♦Q 7 6 ♣5
- b ♠Q 10 7 4 ♥8 ♦A J 10 7 6 4 3 ♣5

- c ♠K Q J 10 6 5 3 ♥7 6 5 2 ♦9 ♣5
- d ♠K Q J 10 6 5 3 ♥— ♦K 9 4 ♣6 5 2
- e ♠Q J 10 9 6 5 3 ♥— ♦9 4 3 ♣Q 5 2

You are too strong to open 3♠ with (a). Open 1♠. Opening 3♦ on (b) could prevent your side from reaching a good 4♠ contract. Pass to give partner, whose strength is unlimited, a chance to open, leaving you room to discuss your best contract. With (c), spades is so likely to be your best trump suit that it's fine to preempt with four weak hearts. The void combined with a hand at the top of the preempt range makes (d) too good to open 3♠, but you might preempt with (e), a weaker hand.

### Partnership style

Make sure you and partner are on the same wavelength so that the problems your preempts cause are for the opponents and not your side. When you preempt as dealer or after one pass, partner's hand is an unknown quantity. If your side has sufficient strength, you want to be able to reach your best game or slam. This is where the descriptive nature of a preempt is key. If partner doesn't know how much you overbid, how can partner choose the right level? If your hand is not clearly defined, how can partner know where to play?

Next month, we will discuss how vulnerability and position affect preempting decisions. ■