**Better Preempts**

by [Andrew Gumperz](http://bridgewinners.com/profile/andrew-gumperz/)

Every preempt has a chance to score a big victory and a chance to suffer a big defeat. Defeats occur when the preempt earns a large minus score. However, not all numbers are equally costly *when measured in IMPs.* Suppose you are my teammate in a KO match. After playing, I come back beaming and proudly announce +800 on the first board. Is that a good or a bad result? It all depends:

* If you scored -1440 defending 6NT, then my +800 loses 12 IMPs
* If you scored -140 defending 3S, then my +800 wins 12 IMPs

The value of a raw score when measured in IMPs depends on what other scores are possible on that board. +800 was terrible when my alternative was to make a vulnerable 6NT. It was great when my alternative was a small plus in a partial.

The notion that the value of a score is relative has an important implication when you are preempting/sacrificing (i.e., bidding for a minus score). *Do not intentionally bid for a minus with significant side-suit defense.*  
  
The more defense the preempter holds, the less likely the opponents can bid and score a big number on their own.

**X KQJ10xxx xx xxx**

Your hand is probably worth zero tricks on defense. Chances are excellent the opponents can make a game since partner is unlikely to hold four defensive tricks. If the opponents double your 3♥ preempt, even if you go -800, the IMP loss will be small.

**X AJ10xxxx Kx xxx**

Your hearts are at least 1 sure trick and your diamond will take a trick around half the time. While you would still preempt, this hand is far more likely to defeat a game contract.

**X A109xxxx Kx Qxx**

Your hearts have a sure trick and both minors are worth 1/2 a defensive trick. With 2 likely defensive tricks in your hand, it won't take much from partner to defeat a game.

**X AKxxxxx Qx xxx**

Your hearts are 1-2 defensive tricks and your diamond is half a defensive trick as well. The opponents often will not have a biddable game. If partner has a scattered 9-count, the opponents only have 22 HCP between them. If the opponents double your 3♥ contract, you could lose a lot of IMPs.

**My First Tip**Evaluate your *defense* before making any preemptive jump opening, overcall, or raise. When you have defensive values, the opponents often will not have the combined strength to bid to a game. In these cases, a minus score in a doubled contract will normally IMP poorly.

The ace of your suit is bad for preemption because it is almost certainly a defensive trick, and may lead to more (for example: giving partner a ruff, or providing a quick entry to lead towards partner's tenaces). Side-suit high cards are also bad.

On the other hand, secondary honors (QJ10) in your long suit(s) are good for preemption because they protect you from going down too much while having little to no defensive value.  
  
  
**My Second Tip**  
At the other extreme, preempt aggressively with a weak hand, good shape, and no defense. For example:

**X QJ10987 J10xxx x**

**?**

 This hand has *negative* defense. Your partner's ♦AKxxx which look great on defense will take one or even zero tricks. The opponents are a favorite to make anything they bid.  
  
What should you bid to stop them? Some players would pass this weak hand. Others would step out with 2♥, or even 3♥. I would open it 4♥. Crazy? Some people think so. But they are viewing this hand with blinders on. 4♥ will give the opponents a terrible headache, will win more often than it loses, and when it loses, the cost will almost always be cheap because we have no defense.

**Conclusion**Players have argued for years about whether conservative or aggressive preempts are "better". That argument is misguided. Neither style is better. In some situations, it pays to be aggressive, in others conservative. The biggest determining factor is your defense.

* When your hand has defense *preempt conservatively.*The cost of being wrong is high!
* When your hand has no defense *preempt hyper-aggressively.*The cost of being wrong is low!

My next article looks at more factors that affect how costly a preempt may be if it goes wrong.

**Better Preempts II: Vulnerability**

Preemption is a form of *gambling*. By preempting, you intentionally risk a negative score in your contract in exchange for a chance to earn a positive score when your opponents misjudge. Vulnerability, both yours and theirs, affects that gamble.

The traditional advice is embodied in the "Rule of 2 and 3." The rule states that when NV versus Vul, since you can afford to go down 3 doubled against an opposing game, preempts should be within 3 tricks of the level of the bid. At equal vulnerability, since you can only afford to go down 2, a preempt should be one trick more sound. Modern experts believe this advice is too conservative.

**KQJxxxx x xx xxx**

**?**

By the rule of 2 and 3, this is an acceptable 3♠ preempt only at favorable. However, no expert would give serious thought to not preempting 3♠ at equal vulnerability.

**x xx QJ10xxxx xxx**

**P P ?**

By the rule of 2 and 3, this 5-trick hand is not worth a preempt at any colors. But anyone who passes this hand NV in third seat is seriously under-preempting.

The Rule of 2 and 3 may be good enough for beginners, but it is a blunt instrument for aspiring tournament players. The rule focuses on one factor--keeping numbers smaller than the value of an opposing game, while ignoring more important considerations. If you follow the rule carefully, you will be taking risks that are too large in some situations, while not taking enough risks in others. To develop an expert understanding of preemption, you must look much deeper.

**Vulnerability**

Vulnerability has two effects on raw score. It increases:

* *The penalty* when our contract fails
* *The bonus* when our game or slam makes

Both effects drive us to preempt more conservatively when vulnerable. The first notion is easy to understand--if our penalties are larger, IMP losses will be larger when we go for a number. But why should an increased game bonus also make us want to preempt less often?

When you preempt, you make constructive bidding more difficult for *both sides*. If the hand belongs to you, your partnership is much more likely to miss bid after a preempt than after a pass. Don't believe me? Consider these hands. They are easy to bid to the best spot using an uninterrupted constructive auction.

**X xx AQJxxxx xxx**

**J109x AQx Kx Axxx**

**P P 1♣ P**

**1♦ P 1NT P**

**3♦ P 3NT**

**X xx Qxxxxxx Qxx**

**J109x AQx Kx Axxx**

**P P 1♣ P**

**1♦ P 1NT P**

**2♦ P P P**

But what happens if North opens both hands with a preemptive 3♦? Partner will have a terrible guess when to bid 3NT and he is certain to go wrong some of the time.

**J109x AQx Kx Axxx**

**3♦ P ?**

When we preempt, we accept *two* major risks--the risk of a large penalty in our contract and the risk of missing a game. Surprisingly, the risk of missing a game is a bigger consideration than going for a number! Numbers don't occur often. But if partner is an unpassed hand, preempts can lead to missed games, especially when the preemptive style allows a wide range of values and shapes. Since missed games cost us 10 IMPs apiece when we are Vul and only 6 when we are NV, the increased game bonus is a strong incentive to preempt more cautiously when Vul than when NV.

How can we reduce the missed-game price tag? When we are Vul and partner is an unpassed hand, restrict preempts to hands with the correct length and good suits. Missing a good game will be expensive, so tailor your preempts so that partner can easily judge when to raise your preempt to game. Wild and undisciplined preempts are for NV situations when the cost of missing game is low or for when partner is a passed hand, so that a missed game is unlikely.

**Their Vulnerability**

Their vulnerability also has a strong effect on the decision to preempt. It affects:

* The penalty when *they* go down
* The number of tricks we can go down and still outscore their game

When we preempt, sometimes we push the opponents into failing contracts, even disastrously failing contracts. We will win more IMPs on those hands if the opponents are vulnerable when it happens. When they guess wrongly to defend instead of declare, we will win more/lose fewer IMPs if their game/slam is vulnerable.

However, there is one important note that tempers our enthusiasm. If the opponents cannot make a game, then the increased bonuses are irrelevant. An NV or Vul partscore is worth exactly the same to them. So preemption is equally unattractive against Vul and NV opponents when they only make a partscore. How can we know if they can make game? We can't know for sure of course, but when we hold significant outside defense, enough to think they can't bid a game, their vulnerability is no longer as big an incentive to preempt.

Which is more important, our vulnerability or theirs? Our vulnerability slows us down every time we are vulnerable. Their vulnerability helps us only when they are vulnerable *and* they have a game or slam. So their vulnerability helps less often than ours hurts.

**The Vulnerability Traffic Light**

When considering a preempt, I rate preemptive opportunities by the traffic-light scale:

**Green Light:**    NV on Vul

**Green Light:**   NV on NV

**Yellow Light:**  Vul on Vul

**Red Light:**       Vul on NV

The best time to preempt is NV on Vul, and the worst time is Vul on NV--that much is clear. Why should NV on NV be a better opportunity for preemption than Vul on Vul? In both cases, a down 2 sacrifice against a game will win 3-4 IMPs so they are seemingly equal.  But NV on NV is superior because a bad sacrifice against a game is not the only way to lose. A preempt could cause us to miss a game or to go down (possibly doubled) when opponents can only make a part-score. In either case, the damage will be far worse when we are vulnerable.

* If we miss a game, it costs 10 IMPs when we are Vul and only 6 IMPs when NV
* If they can only make a partial, our penalty is much higher when Vul

When you consider all the ways a preempt could go wrong, it becomes clear why NV preempts are so much more attractive than Vul ones.

Notice how the traffic light differs from the rule of 2 and 3. Using the traffic light we treat NV on NV as an opportunity for aggressive preemption, even though it is an equal vulnerability.

**Digesting This Information**

To summarize, there are two ways to fail by preempting--we could miss a game or give up a number. Both cost more when we are vulnerable. When partner is a passed hand, one of those scenarios (missing a game) is no longer likely. Using these observations, we can put our advice about preemption style into this grid.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **We Are Vulnerable** | **We Are Not Vulnerable** |
| **Partner is Unpassed** | Conservative | Aggressive |
| **Partner is Passed** | Aggressive | Super-Aggressive |

When we are vul and partner is unpassed, we must be **conservative**. We can lose by missing a game or by giving up a number, and IMP losses will tend to be larger.

When we are NV and partner is unpassed hand, we can be **aggressive** because IMP losses for missing game or a number will be smaller than the first case.

When we are Vul and partner is a passed hand, we can be **aggressive**. We have only one way to lose (a number) instead of two.

When we are NV and partner is a passed hand, we can be **super-aggressive**. We have only one way to lose and the losses will be smaller.

But what do these vague terms conservative, aggressive and super-aggressive mean? To some degree, that is up to you. If we wanted to translate them into rule of 2 and 3 terms, we could say:

* Conservative = within 2 tricks of your contract
* Aggressive = within 3 tricks
* Super-Aggressive = within 4 tricks

My own personal scale might be closer to the rule of 2, 4 and 5! The scale you use doesn't matter as much as correctly recognizing when to apply the brakes and when to accelerate. The rule of 2 and 3 suggests that Vul on Vul in second chair is just as good as NV on NV in 3rd chair, when, in fact, the former is 2 tricks of leeway and the latter is 4-5 tricks!

**Examples**

**KJ10xx x xxx Q10xx**

**P P ?**

Open 2♠. You are NV and pard is a passed hand. Gentlemen, the green flag is waving. Go! Go!

**KQJ10xx x xxx xxx**

**?**

Open 3♠. You are NV and your hand is pure. Yes, partner is unpassed but at least being NV will limit the damage from any game you miss. 3♠ will be far more damaging to the opponent's constructive auctions than 2♠.

**Xx x Q10xxxxx Kxx**

**?**

Pass. Vul on vul facing an unpassed hand is not the time for stepping out. If you open 3♦ and partner bids 3NT, he will be disappointed. Your preempt ought to show something like: ♦AKxxxxx, ♦AQTxxxx, ♦KQT9xxx. Holding one filling honor, partner should be able to count on running the suit in 3NT.

**KJ109xxx x Qx xxx**

**P P ?**

Open 3♠. Vul on vul is normally a yellow flag for preemption, but because partner is a passed hand there is little danger of missing a game, so our aggression is restored.

**Conclusion**

Vulnerability changes both the costs and the rewards of preempting. In general, our vulnerability is far more important than theirs. When we are vulnerable, it increases our potential costs all the time. When they are vulnerable, it only improves our rewards if they can also make a game. So aggressive preemption NV, and cautious preemption Vul is a good simple guideline. However, we can tune that further.

When you are vulnerable, you can relax the cautious approach when partner is a passed hand. Missing a vulnerable game is not a concern, so loosen up. When you are NV, you can preempt aggressively in general. If you are NV and partner is a passed hand, go wild.

Both the old rule of 2 and 3 and the more recent rule of 2, 3 and 4 for more modern players, are unreliable guides to preemption because they focus on how high to preempt, rather than *when to preempt*. If you want to preempt like a pro, base your preemption style on seat position and your vulnerability instead.

**Parting Tips**

* Undisciplined preempts are vastly safer when partner is a passed hand.
* Vulnerable preempts in a minor suit facing an unpassed hand should suggest that the suit will run facing one top honor. (AQxxxxx, KQxxxxx, AKxxxxx, etc.)
* When NV, err in favor of aggression; when Vul, err in favor of caution.
* Fear the missed game, not the telephone number.
* Preempt when there is a lot to gain and little to lose. Pass when there is a lot to lose or little to gain. NV facing a passed hand has a lot to gain and little to lose. Vul facing an unpassed hand has a lot to lose. If you are preempting at a similar frequency and on similar hands in both scenarios, something is wrong.

**Better Preempts III: Who has the Values?**

A preempt is a bold stroke made by a weak hand to consume bidding room and create uncertainty. Creating uncertainty is a good thing if the deal belongs to the opponents. However, if it belongs to us, that uncertainty bites us instead. The preempt is unnecessary when we own the hand because partner will open if we pass and we can bid slowly to the right contract. Think of a preempt as *a bet that the hand belongs to the opponents.*Based on this observation, we should only preempt when we believe the deal belongs to the opponents. But how can we know? Though we cannot know for sure, we can make an educated guess based on clues from our hand and the preceding auction.

**Who Has The Values?**

Assume you have the below hand and are considering a preempt, and that any bidder preceding you has passed. How many HCP can you expect partner to hold? What about the opponents?

**Xx Q10xxxxx x KQx**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Seat** | **LHO** | **Partner** | **RHO** | **Opponents HCP** |
| *1st* | 11 HCP | 11 HCP | 11 HCP | 22 HCP |
| *2nd* | 13 HCP | 13 HCP | 7 HCP | 20 HCP |
| *3rd* | 17 HCP | 8 HCP | 8 HCP | 25 HCP |
| *4th* | 11 HCP | 11 HCP | 11 HCP | 22 HCP |

The chart above shows the *expected distribution of HCP*. The numbers shown are the most common for each player. On real deals the number will vary and may be more or less. But if the chart says a player rates to hold 17, he will hold 17 much more frequently than 11. Thus, even though these numbers are imaginary in some sense, they orient us as to what we can plan for.

In first seat no one has passed in front of you.  Consequently, the 33 outstanding HCP rate to be divided evenly between the three unseen hands. The opponents rate to hold a 22-18 advantage in total HCP and will own the deal significantly more often than we will.

In second seat, your RHO is a passed hand. A passed hand normally has at most 11 HCP, but how many HCP can we expect on average? To answer this question, Eugene Hung kindly ran a simulation. Assuming you are in second seat with 7 HCP and a 7-card suit, he calculated a mean HCP for a passed hand of 7.2 HCP (which I rounded down to 7). When we simulated a third seat preempt, the mean HCP for a passed hand jumped up to 7.9, which I rounded to 8.

When your passed-hand RHO rates to hold 7 HCP, the opponents' expected advantage in HCP goes away (not surprising since you and RHO have the same count). The hand will belong to our side half the time, and when it belongs to the opponents, it will frequently be a part-score deal. The justification for taking risks declines. Therefore we must protect ourselves by preempting conservatively with good suits and normal length.

In third seat, your partner is limited by his pass. If we give partner and RHO 8 HCP, the opponents have an excellent chance for game despite a passed hand RHO. The justification for a risky preempt has increased enormously since we have a couple tricks of leeway against their likely game.

In fourth chair, we run into a special case. We have the option to pass the hand out if we expect a negative score by bidding. Since a preempt is by design a bid for a minus score, we should never preempt in fourth chair. Instead, jump openings are used to show intermediate hands--hands in the 10-14 HCP range, with a good suit (usually 6) and game interest.  With both opponents having passed, their total is at most 22 HCP, so the auction will either be a game auction in your direction, or a part-score battle. Using jump openings with intermediate-strength hands helps to win the part-score battles by shutting the opponents out when they might be able to compete for the partial.

**What happens to HCP around the table when preemptor holds only 4 HCP?**

**Xx `QJxxxxx x Jxx**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Seat** | **LHO** | **Partner** | **RHO** | **Opponents HCP** |
| *1st* | 12 HCP | 12 HCP | 12 HCP | 24 HCP |
| *2nd* | 14.25 HCP | 14.25 HCP | 7.5 HCP | 21.75 HCP |
| *3rd* | 19 HCP | 8.5 HCP | 8.5 HCP | 27.5 HCP |
| *4th* | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |

Predictably, the opponents are more likely to have a game when your hand is a king lighter. In first chair or third chair, this is a significant incentive to preempt, since the likely game or slam for the opponents gives you leeway. However, take a good look at second chair. Partner's expected hand has gotten stronger when our hand is weaker. With an average of over 14 HCP, he is likely to have the values to bid on in *precisely the situation when you would least like him to bid.*

The moral? While a light hand may encourage you to preempt in 1st or 3rd seat, watch out in 2nd seat. Extra credit: Why did I write N/A for fourth chair?

**What happens when preemptor holds 10 HCP?**

**Jx Qxxxxxx x AKx**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Seat** | **LHO** | **Partner** | **RHO** | **Opponents HCP** |
| *1st* | 10 HCP | 10 HCP | 10 HCP | 20 HCP |
| *2nd* | 11.5 HCP | 11.5 HCP | 7 HCP | 18.5 HCP |
| *3rd* | 14 HCP | 8 HCP | 8 HCP | 22 HCP |
| *4th* | 10 HCP | 10 HCP | 10 HCP | 20 HCP |

The opponents are much less likely to hold game values when preemptor has 10 HCP. When the opponents rate not to have a biddable game, any negative score will IMP poorly for us. Thus, ironically, when we have a maximum-HCP preempt, it is important to hold a good suit. If we go for a number holding a poor suit (trumps breaking badly) we have likely lost 10+ IMPs since opponents are so unlikely to have a game. We want a hand like: ♠x,♥KQJTxxx, ♦xx, ♣Axx when preempting with an HCP max. The opponents will have a hard time doubling us, and our contract has a good chance to make even if they do.

**Conclusion**

When you preempt, you are making a guess about who owns the deal. The analysis shows that the more HCP we have, the less often the opponents own the deal. A 6-HCP increase in our hand from 4 to 10 HCP enormously decreases the chance that the opponents own the deal.

When opponents can bid and make a game, we have more leeway to preempt since we don't care about going down 2 or even 3 doubled. Therefore, we can take great risks preempting with very weak hands. At the other extreme, we must be cautious preempting with values to avoid going for a number against a partial.

In addition to our own HCP, passed-hand opponents and partners massively influence which side rates to own the deal.

* In 1st seat, the opponents own the deal a majority of the time when we have a weakish hand. This supports an aggressive preemption philosophy.
* In 3rd seat, since we are weak and partner has also passed, the opponents are virtually guaranteed to own the deal; we can really flex our muscles.
* In 2nd seat, since RHO is limited, partner often holds significant values, so we preempt conservatively.
* 4th seat is a special case. We never need to intentionally bid for a minus (we can pass instead), so our jump openings are intermediate, not weak.

Seat position, not vulnerability, is the single most important factor driving effective preemption. The rule of 2, 3 and 4 is built upon on how much you can afford to lose when the opponents can make a game. It says nothing about whether the opponents are likely to make a game. When considering a preempt, our first test should be whether preemption rates to do us some good. Only if we pass that first test should we ask "how high?" (and consult the rule of 2, 3 and 4 if we like).

**Better Preempts IV: Preempts by Seat Position (part 1)**

My last article discussed how seat position changes expectations about where HCP rate to be and how much that affects decisions to preempt. I argued that seat position, not vulnerability, is the most important criteria in determining when to preempt. Vulnerability can tell you how high to preempt, but isn't as useful for telling you whether it's a good idea to preempt in the first place. Seat position lets you know when a preempt has a good chance to be effective.

The most important conclusion was the huge difference between second and third seat. In second seat partner is a favorite to hold values which should incline you towards sound preemption. In third chair partner is certain to hold limited values, providing the green light to preempt as often as possible. First seat is a bit of a tossup; my suggestion was to preempt aggressively NV and conservatively when vulnerable. Fourth chair is a special case; since you can pass with weak hands that expect a minus score, jump openings become intermediate calls showing constructive hands. This article will look further at what are appropriate preempts based on seat position.

**First Chair**

In first chair, the outstanding HCP rate to be split evenly between the three unseen hands. If you hold 8 HCP or fewer, the opponents will own the deal 2/3 of the time or more. That makes first seat a preemptor's seat. On the other hand, there is still room for partner to have a good hand so we can not completely ignore our own constructive bidding. Vulnerable, when the cost of missed games is high, I recommend a reasonably sound style. NV, you can step out as long as your partner understands what you are doing.

That last point is the most important. If partner expects your 3-level preempts to show seven with two of the top three honors and you preempt holding 6 to the jack, I predict tears. Partner will overbid, hanging you when your bold preempt was about to earn a swing. So before you adopt my suggestions, discuss them with your partner. Varying your style significantly based on seat position and vulnerability requires knowing when preempts are and are not disciplined.

**X xx KQ109xx J10xx**

**?**

Open 3♦. This is a fine hand for preemption and 1st chair NV offers good chances to earn a reward. 3♦ is much more preemptive than 2♦. When NV, take the risk to increase the chance of pushing them around. Vulnerable, pull in a notch with 2♦ unless you are looking for a swing.

**X xx KQ10xxxx J10x**

**?**

Open 3♦. This is a minimum vulnerable 3♦. You can do it because the suit quality is good and you have 2 of the top 3 honors. If partner bids 3NT, the suit will run and you should make it.

**X Ax KQ10xxxx J10x**

**?**

Open 1♦. This is too good for a non-vulnerable 3♦.

**X xx AKQ10xxx J10x**

**?**

Open 1♦ or 3NT if you play it gambling. A good rule is to never preempt three-of-a-suit on a solid suit. If you open 3♦, how is partner supposed to know that 3NT is gin opposite:♠Axxx, ♥Axxxx, ♦xx, ♣Qx? A preempt should promise a broken suit.

**X QJxxxxx Kx J10x**

**?**

An easy 3♥.

**X Qxxxxxx Kx AJ10**

**?**♥. With so much outside, I'd rather open 1♥ than 3♥ or 2♥.

**X Axx xxx QJ109xx**

**?**

3♣. Aggressive, but a winner on balance.

**X Axx xxx QJ109xx**

**?**

Pass. Same hand, but this time vulnerable.  A clear pass dictated by the vulnerability.

**Second Chair**

RHO is limited by his pass, so partner rates to hold more HCP. He is more likely to have game-invitational or better values. The opponents are less likely to have a game their way. Second seat is a poor spot for aggressive preemption. In particular, be wary of preempting on light values. When you are light, partner is even more likely to have the hand that will bury you.

**AQJxxxx xx x xxx**

**P ?**

This is a par 3♠ call in second chair if partner wants to bid 3NT. Your hand will provide the expected tricks.

**AQxxxxx xx x Kxx**

**P ?**

A max 3♠ call in 2nd chair.

**Q10xxxxx Qx x Kxx**

**P ?**

Pass. Not the time for 3♠.

**KQJxxx x xx Q10xx**

**P ?**

You might try an aggressive 3♠ NV in 1st or 3rd, but in second seat 2♠ is a stand out.

**K10xxxx Axx x Qxx**

**P ?**

Pass. Your suit is bad and you have plenty of outside cards. It is quite safe to pass marginal weak twos in second chair.

**Q10xxxx KQx x Qxx**

**P ?**

Pass. I see weak twos in second chair like this all the time. 2♠ might be fine in 3rd chair but in 2nd chair it is losing bridge.

**Q10xxxx Jxxx K Ax**

**P ?**

Pass or 1♠. Do not open 2♠. Do you really want to to play 2♠ facing: ♠x, ♥AKxxxx, ♦Qxx,♣Kxx?

To summarize: good suits, but not solid, with possibly an outside card.

**Third Chair**

In third chair, LHO is marked with an opening hand and often holds extras. Preempt on any excuse.

Unfortunately, just because you want to preempt does not mean the card gods will deal you ideal hands for preemption. And if you wait for ideal hands, you won't be able to preempt as often as you would like. The only way to preempt more often is to drop your standards. In 3rd chair, you should be willing to preempt:

* at the 3-level on a 6-card suit
* at the 2-level on a 5-card suit
* with side suit values
* with side 4-card majors
* with bad suits
* with very bad hands (0-4 HCP)
* with reasonable hands (9-12 HCP)

Almost every rule about what preempts "should" look like can be relaxed. You have relative safety because constructive bidding is a non-issue with partner being a passed hand.

**Q10xxxx KQx x Qxx**

**P P ?**

2♠. Stick it to them.

**KQ10xxx Qxx Qx Qxx**

**P P ?**

2♠. Your game chances are poor. Make them guess.

**KQ10xx xxxx x xxx**

**P P ?**

2♠. Good 5-card suit. Great time to preempt. 4-card heart suit...who cares?

**QJ10xx x xx xxxxx**

**P P ?**

2♠. Opponents are cold for game and may have a slam. Get in there!

**KQ10xxx xxxx x xx**

**P P ?**

3♠. With a pure preemptive hand, apply maximum pressure.

**Xxx x KQ10xxx xxx**

**P P ?**

3♦. Another pure hand. 3♦ will do much more damage to their constructive bidding than 2♦ will.

**Xxx x KQ10xxx AQx**

**P P ?**

3♦. Wide-ranging preempts don't always have to be weak. Any hand which is unlikely to make game can be bid as a preempt if you choose. If you open 1♦ what will happen?

1. LHO will overcall 1M
2. Partner will make a negative double
3. RHO will raise the major
4. You will compete to 3♦
5. Opponents will make a careful decision whether to pass, or bid on to 3M or 4M.

What happens if you open 3♦ instead? It is much harder for opponents to find their 3M or 4M contract, and you frequently make your own contract! If your contract goes down, the opponents are frequently making a higher-scoring contract. All in all, an ideal situation to throw a curveball at the opponents.

**Axx x Q10xxxxx xx**

**P P ?**

Pass. Unfavorable, you have to be careful even in 3rd chair. This suit is not good enough for an unfavorable preempt.

A few words to the wise:

1. if you are preempting with a shorter than normal suit, do it when you hold good interior texture: Q-J-T-9 are extremely important cards for preventing doubles. When your 6-card 3-bid is going for a number, an opponent holding Axxx may not be able to tell, whereas one with AJTx certainly will.
2. Just because you may open a weak two on garbage, doesn't mean you have to open 3M when you hold a normal weak two. In 3rd chair, preempts don't just get weaker, they get *wider ranging*. 2♠ can vary from ♠QJTxx, ♥x, ♦xx, ♣Kxxxx to ♠KQxxxx, ♥xx, ♦KQx,♣Jx.
3. 2♠ is much more preemptive than 2♥. Same for 3♠ versus 3♥. When you hold spades, you don't have to take as many risks as when you hold lower suits. When you hold a lower-ranking suit, you may have to significantly overbid to achieve some damage to their auction. Alternatively, you may decide not to bother to preempt at all, if you think the risk isn't justified.
4. Under this style, when your partner has preempted in 3rd chair, don't raise unless your hand is exceptional: 4+ card support and shape. Think of it like a balancing auction where partner has bid for both of you.

**Fourth Chair**

In fourth chair, you have an alternative we haven't seen before. You can pass and end the deal. When you expect to go minus on the board (whether on defense or declaring), pass and accept a zero instead of a minus. Th e only reason to bid *anything* is to get a plus score. Further, since both opponents have passed, they are unlikely to make a game, so you have no leeway for sacrifices. In short all your jump bids should contain useful values. You will open either because game is possible or because you expect to win the partscore battle. Intermediate high-level opening bids showing goodish hands with a long suit can help win those partscore battles.

* A 2-level opening shows about 10-13 HCP and a good 6-card suit.
* A 3-level opening shows about 10-14 HCP and a good 7-card suit.

Why not open these decent hands with a 1-level bid? When you hold a hand like: x, AKxxxx, AJx, xxx you expect to make something in hearts, but you also fear the opponents might buy it in spades, if given room to find their fit. A 2♥ opening gets you to a likely making contract and may shut the opponents out of a higher-scoring contract or provoke them into a costly penalty.

**AQJxxxx Jx x Axx**

**P P P ?**

3♠. This is a par intermediate 3♠ opening.

**AQJxxx Jx x Axx**

**P P P ?**

2♠. This is a par intermediate 2♠ opening.

**Kxxxxxx Ax x AQx**

**P P ?**

1♠. Suit is too weak for 3♠.

**Conclusion**

Seat position has more effect than vulnerability on whether or not to preempt. In second chair, Goren and Roth are your models. To quote BW's Steve Bloom, a second seat preempt is, "a positive step toward getting to our best contract, and a negative step toward the bad guys getting to their optimum spot." Another second seat maxim: *When in doubt, don't.* There is nothing wrong with resolving close decisions in favor of pass. Save your preempts for hands that look clear to you.

In third chair, Marty Bergen and Kit Woolsey are your men. The real debate is not whether you should change your style in third chair, it is by how much. I advocate a big shift, especially NV. However, this shift is dependent on discussion with partner! If partner thinks that because your last preempt, vulnerable in second seat, showed ♠AQJTxxx, ♥x,♦Qx, ♣xxx, your 3rd seat non-vulnerable 3♠ on this board will show something similar, you have a big problem. Make sure he knows that almost anything goes in 3rd chair. We can summarize our jump opening strategy in this table:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Vulnerable** | **Not vulnerable** |
| **1st Seat** | Conservative | Aggressive |
| **2nd Seat** | Conservative | Conservative - Average |
| **3rd Seat** | Aggressive (Conservative at unfavorable) | Super-Aggressive |
| **4th Seat** | Intermediate | Intermediate |

You may not feel comfortable bidding as often as I do in 3rd chair, and that is fine. Or you may think my second seat advice is too conservative--that is fine too. Regardless of what limits your partnership uses for preempts, if you are not preempting much more often in 3rd chair than in 2nd, then either you preempt too much in 2nd or not enough in 3rd. The only way to increase the frequency of 3rd seat preempts is to relax your preemption criteria to allow more hands to qualify and then adjust your responses to preempts accordingly. Responder should assume preemptor is at the lower end of the range for a preempt when picking his call.

**Better Preempts: Tipping the Scales**

I think of the decision to preempt as a balancing act. I balance positive preemption factors such as good vulnerability against negative ones like poor seat position and bid when the balance is in favor of preemption. Two important contributors to preemption decisions have so far received short shrift:

* suit quality
* side suit distribution

**Suit Quality**

Which suit would you rather hold when preempting?

1. ♥AKxxxxx
2. ♥QJT9xxx

While the first suit contains 4 more HCP and rates to take more tricks, the second is preferable for preemption. The first suit contains one to two defensive tricks. If the suit breaks badly and you suffer a number in your contract, the opponents may not make a game meaning the number will be very costly when measured in IMPs. The second suit has no value on defense and hence any number you surrender rates to be counter-balanced by the game or slam the opponents can make and may not cost too many IMPs.

More importantly, suit 2 is less likely to be penalized. That may seem counter-intuitive when the suit is 4 points weaker in HCP. Understanding why will help you choose when to act conservatively and when to overbid.

Against the first suit, an opponent holding 4 trumps will hold something like: ♥QJ9x. His trumps are worth two defensive tricks and may have no value if he declares (in a suit). Two extra tricks is a huge swing. If we convert 2 tricks into HCP, that is like saying the hand has 6 HCP more when it defends than when it declares. Consequently your opponent will resolve questionable decisions in favor of defending: *at the worst possible time for you, on a deal where your suit means you have chances to defeat a contract they bid.*

Against the second suit, an opponent holding 4 trumps might have ♥AKxx. His holding is worth 2 tricks, both on defense and on offense. If the defender converts a takeout double, he risks missing a game or slam since his high cards are working on offense. He will often resolve close decisions in favor of declaring.

When you preempt, you must think not only about your offense and defense, but that of your opponents too! The more you fear the possibility of a number, the more important your intermediates become. In any situation where preemption is unattractive, for example, vul against not in second chair, the Q-J-T-9 assume great importance.

**Suit Quality and Shorter than Normal Suits**

Intermediates are especially important when preempting on a shorter than normal suit. When you have intentionally made an extreme overbid because the situation was highly favorable to preemption, you have chosen to play with fire; when playing with fire, it is a good idea to put some asbestos in your underwear.

* ♣QJT9xx is far safer than ♣QJxxxx for a 3-bid
* ♠KQT8x is far better than ♠KQxxx for a 2-bid

There is another interesting point about trump spots. In practice, a preempt on KQJT9x is no  more likely to be penalized than the same preempt on KQJT9xx. The opponents don't know you have preempted on a 6-bagger. Axxx won't look like a good holding to convert a takeout double. Consequently, you can often get away with outrageous overbids on shorter suits when the suit quality is exceptional. Even if your preemption style is extremely risk-averse, when the situation favors preemption, allowing preempts on shorter suits with excellent trump quality can double or triple the frequency of your preempts with no additional risk.

**X KQJ109x xxxxx x**

**P P ?**

A 4♥ opening on this hand is relatively safe and will wreak havoc on enemy bidding.

The opposite is true with weaker suits. Kxxxxx is far more likely to be penalized than Kxxxxxx. Your shorter suit means an opponent is more likely to hold 4 and since your hand contains the small spots, their 4-card holding is very likely to contain high ones that look good for defense.

**X Axxxxx K10xx xx**

**P P ?**

Despite the good shape, good vul and good seat position, 2♥ is enough. A 3♥ preempt could easily run into a stiff penalty and with a couple of defensive tricks in your hand you will often defeat an opposing game so a number on these cards would be costly.

**Side Suit Shape**

Which of these hands would you rather hold for your 2♠ preempt? (And more importantly, why?)

Hand 1

**KQJ10xx xx xx xxx**

Hand 2.

**KQJ10xx x xxx xxx**

Both hands count to 8 losers, but intuitively the second one *feels* better. Why?

*Hand 2 will take more tricks on average\** *than Hand 1.*

What is the difference between them? The second hand has lost a 2nd-round heart loser and replaced it with a 3rd-round diamond loser. There is a better chance partner can provide a high card to cover a 3rd-round loser (a queen) than a 2nd-round loser (a king). Further, if partner has shortness in diamonds, there could be an extra trick via an additional ruff. Occasionally partner has ♦AK allowing you the timing to discard a 3rd-round diamond loser. Each possibility is extremely minor. But there are three of them and in total they mean that the second hand will take perhaps 1/10 of a trick more an average than the first. That difference is small, but it isn't zero. All hand evaluation metrics, such as HCP and Losing Trick Count conflate small difference for the sake of simplicity.\*\* Experts recognize this and mentally compensate.

*Hand 2 provides slightly better chances of defeating an opposing contract.*

On hand 1, the opponent's trump suit is guaranteed to be dividing for them. On hand 2, they might run into a 4-1 break in a heart contract. A preempt can fail by pushing opponents into a successful contract they might not otherwise have bid. That is slightly less likely to happen on hand 2.

*Hand 2 provides slightly better chances that the opponents have a big fit*

If the opponents misjudge when they do have a big fit, you will score a big win.

All of these advantages are small. However in sum they add up to a measurable advantage for Hand 2. In close decisions, such slight differences can tip the balance from pass to bid or may encourage you to a larger overbid. For example, NV in third chair, I would preempt 2♠ with hand 1, but 3♠ with hand 2.

In general, I preempt cautiously with flat outside shape. All these shapes make for marginal preempts:

* 7-2-2-2
* 6-3-2-2
* 5-3-3-2

The last shape is so poor that I never preempt with it. When holding one of the first two shapes, if  conditions favor preemption, I preempt only to the "normal" level (2-level with 6 and 3-level with 7) when I might bid an extra trick holding a side singleton.

Side suit shape is especially important when preempting on shorter than normal suits. A good general rule is to always have a side-suit singleton when preempting a level more aggressively than traditional guidelines recommend. So when preempting at the 3-level on a 6-bagger, 6-3-3-1, 6-4-2-1 and 6-5-1-1 are excellent 6-3-2-2, not so much. At the 2-level, 5-4-3-1 good and 5-5-2-1 excellent. 5-4-2-2 and 5-3-3-2, not so much.

**Conclusions**

Interior suit quality and side suit distribution frequently tip the balance on preemptive decisions, either from pass to bid, or from lower preempt to preempt one level higher. Interior suit quality can be more important than suit length. I.e., a strong 6-card suit is a safer 3-level preempt than a weak 7-card suit. Suit quality is so important it is an error to make hard rules about suit length. Even if your partnership plays a sound preemption style, when suit quality is superb, you should permit preempts on shorter suits because it will greatly increase your frequency of preempting without adding meaningful risk.

When preempting on shorter than normal suits, in general, you will not be happy when your 5-card 2-bid or 6-card 3-bid is doubled for penalty. Excellent suit quality and good side-suit shape ensure that opponents disproportionately bid on over your preempts.

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\* I often use the phrases "rates to" or "on average" when discussing preempts. What do I mean by that? To properly evaluate a hand, you must consider its worth opposite a range of possible hands for partner. Suppose we could play these hands opposite the same 100 dummies, count the number of tricks we took in each case, and then divide the tricks by 100. That would be the average tricks each hand was worth and would be a measure of the offensive value of each.

\*\* A truly accurate HCP count is so complex it would be completely unusable at the table. 4-3-2-1 point count is a simplification that treats many holdings that differ greatly in strength the same. AJT counts as the same 5 HCP as KQ tight, yet the first is almost twice as strong as the second. Experts make many counterbalancing mental adjustments because they recognize the conflating effect of these simplifications.

**Better Preempts: What is the upside? part I**

Earlier articles focused largely on self-protection--how to preempt without risking painful consequences. However, controlling damage is only half the battle. The other half is finding opportunities where a preempt is likely to generate a big reward. This is the first of several articles on judging whether an auction offers a small or a large reward for preemption and adjusting your preemption tactics accordingly.

**Large and Small Rewards**

Experts think of a preempt like a bet. With X% chance of winning, they are risking $Y to gain $Z. An expert would rather risk $10 for a chance to win $100 than for a chance at $1. An expert would also prefer his bet has a 75% chance of winning rather than a 10% chance of winning.

To change from the betting metaphor to preemptive terms, we would much rather risk -500 in a doubled preempt for a chance to win +500 than for a chance to win +50. We have encountered two scenarios where reward for preemption is low:

* The hand belongs to us. In this case a preempt can't win anything at all. If we bid slowly instead, we would reach the same or a superior contract as we would if we preempt.\*
* The opponents can only make a partscore.

If you were certain the opponents could only make a partscore, or that the deal belonged to your side, you'd never risk a large number on a preempt, since the reward for victory is small. In practice nothing is ever certain, but often your hand and the auction suggest that the deal belongs to you, or that the opponents *probably* cannot make a game. In those situations your preemptive strategy should be conservative to protect yourself from numbers.

Fortunately, in most auctions, there is some chance of winning big with an effective preempt. But even when a bet offers a large reward, experts will not automatically place a large bet. Suppose the bet will win only 1 time in 10. The expert would only be willing to risk $1 to win $10 if the chance of success is 10%. In preemptive terms, if we are going to risk going -500 or -800 we would rather do it with a good chance to collect a 500+ reward than with a poor one. And if we think the chances are poor we should preempt conservatively, only risking -100 or -200 for a small chance to win +500.

How can you tell when preemption will or will not succeed frequently? Let's look at two examples. We will start with an auction where a preempt is unlikely to succeed.

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\*  The exception is opening game bids. An opening 4M or a 1m -- (P) -- 4M response can be bid with a weak or a goodish hand. When bid on a good hand, you hope 4M shuts the opponents out of a cheap sacrifice. You intentionally risk missing a slam in exchange for a better chance to avoid an opposing sacrifice. If you don't fear a sacrifice, or you think slam chances are too good, you bid slowly instead.

**Auction 1**

**P 2♥ 3♠ ?**

Consider the three ways a preempt can win and whether these outcomes are likely in the above auction:

*1. A preempt might drive the opponents into the wrong strain.* Having already found a fit, the opponents will rarely get to the wrong strain after your 3♠ bid. They could defend when they should declare, but they would virtually never play game in the wrong strain.

*2. A preempt might drive opponents too high or too low.*With RHO a limited hand, LHO often already knows whether the deal belongs in partscore or game, and with RHO so weak, slam is almost always not a factor. Your preempt can only give LHO a problem when he has invitational values, and even then, he will make the right decision at least half of the time.

*3. A preempt can locate a cheap sacrifice.*This is the best chance for your preempt to pick up a decent number of IMPs, as long as partner can judge accurately to avoid a phantom sacrifice.

Why was this auction so poor for preemption? The boat had already sailed before it was your turn to bid. With their 1♥ -- 2♥ sequence, the opponents had found their fit, and one player had limited his hand. Consequently, there was little uncertainty remaining about the deal, and the chance a preempt would cause them to err was small.

Does this mean you should never preempt after a raise? No. You don't want to miss the occasional cheap sacrifice. However, it does mean you don't want to risk a big number after a single raise. Let's take a look at some hands in this auction.

**KJxxxxx xx Qxx x**

**1♥ P 2♥ ?**

Holding this hand you should pass. 3♠ risks a large number with little upside.

**KQJxxxx x A10xx x**

**1♥ P 2♥ ?**

This is the hand a preempt shows when preemptive tactics are oriented towards finding a sacrifice. Although you might be tempted to bid 4♠ directly, how would you feel if partner tabled ♥QJTx of hearts and a stiff spade? You would have just traded a plus score versus 4♥ for -300 when 4♠ was doubled. Preempting 3♠ allows your side to save when partner has limited defense, and protects you from a phantom sacrifice when he does.

How should advancer continue after your 3♠ preempt? If you promise a very good preempt, partner can afford to sacrifice often and with relatively dull hands. He can judge accurately when their contract will be cold, and he doesn't need much to bid further since he knows your call shows excellent offense. Your preempt is a strong invitation to sacrifice. Let's look at this from the point of view of the advancer:

**A10x Jxx xxx Kxxx**

**1♥ P 2♥ 3♠**

**4♥ ?**

This is an easy 4♠ bid. Your hand is rather poor, so what makes it a clear 4♠ call? First, you can tell that 4♥ is a big favorite to make, since partner's hand must be offensively oriented and you have little defense. Second, given the 7-8 offensive trick hand your partner has promised, you can more or less guarantee 8 tricks for your side, and possibly 9.  So a sacrifice is likely to be profitable.

**Auction 2**

The last auction was no fun. Who likes to hear that our wild "creative" calls are pointless? Perhaps we need to look at a high-success auction as an antidote.

**1♣ 3♠ ?**

This time every factor favors preemption: The opening call means the hand likely belongs to the opponents, and at the same time, opener's hand is wildly undefined. He might hold a 4-3-3-3 12-count or he could hold a distributional 7-4-1-1 19-count. Responder has no idea if they have a fit and if they do, where their fit lies. Furthermore, responder has no idea whether the hand belongs in partscore, game or slam, since he has no idea yet how strong opener is. Since your call consumed so much bidding room, the opponents will often be stuck with a pure guess.

Chances that this preempt drives the opponents into the wrong strain or to the wrong level are high. Your preempt also allows to find a cheap sacrifice when advancer has a fit and little defense. The opponents will have more trouble judging when to defend against this 3♠ than the last one, because they are uncertain of the correct level. They fear collecting a paltry +500 when they were due a slam bonus.

What does that suggest about preemption tactics? With such good chances, preempt as often as possible. The only way to preempt more often is to preempt on a wider range of hand types, including many on which risk is substantial or the hand includes significant side defense.

Given the large upside to preemption, 3♠ is a reasonable call with each sample hand below:

**KQJ98x x xxx xxx**

**1♣ ?**

**KJ9xxx xx AQ10x x**

**1♣ ?**

**KQJxxxx xx Qx xx**

**QJ9xxx x x xxxxx**

**QJ9xxxx Axx x xx**

What about poor partner? If you preempt on such a wide range of hands, won't he have a terrible time judging what to do? Yes he will. In general, he must guess that your 3♠ call was already an overbid, and err in favor of conservatism, since you are far more likely to have stretched than to have been dealt a conventional preempt. As a result, he may miss a cheap sacrifice a small percentage of the time when your preempt had full preemptive values. That sounds bad, but remember you are preempting five times as often as the guy who preempts only with full values. As a result, your many victories will outweigh the occasional missed sacrifice. In favorable preemption scenarios, this is a cost of business.

Looking again from the point of view of advancer:

**A10x Jxx xxx Kxxx**

**1♣ 3♠ X ?**

You have the same hand we saw before, but this time you wouldn't dream of bidding on. 4♠ might either go for a huge number or it might be a phantom sacrifice. You have no way to tell because your partner's 3♠ call is so wide-ranging. Fortunately, it doesn't matter much in the long run. You will win plenty of boards when the opponents have bid too little/too much, or arrived at the wrong strain because partner's preempt consumed so much bidding space. Passing will lead to success more often than not. In this scenario, the prempt was oriented towards making the opponents guess wrong, not towards finding sacrifices. Sacrifice only when you have a big fit and shape and limited defense.

**Conclusion**

Experts preempt aggressively only in situations where they believe that the reward is large and chances of success are high. In these situations, they are willing to preempt on hands where losses could be high if opponents have the cards to double them.

The upside for preemption varies enormously based on the preceding auction. The upside for preemption is low whenever any of the following are true:

1. The hand belongs to you
2. The opponents can't make a game because you have significant defense
3. The opponents probably already know their best final contract

Whenever upside is limited, employ solid preempts and be conservative in advancing to protect yourself from numbers, and to allow your partner to judge accurately when to sacrifice.

The upside for preempting is high when:

1. The hand belongs to them
2. The opponents can probably make a game
3. The opponents don't yet know the correct strain or level

When the upside is good, be aggressive, bordering on foolish, to collect the frequent large rewards for preempting.

When the hand belongs to the opponents, the upside for a preemptive jump overcall (PJO) is a function of:

* How much information opponents have already exchanged
* How much useful bidding space our bid conveys

Your opponents will be trying to pick a strain and a level in their constructive auction. The biggest determinant of strain is whether or not opponents have a fit. This article, will examine fit auctions for good and poor opportunities to preempt.

**Express-Fit Auctions**

As we saw last week, when the opponents have already bid and raised a suit the reward for preemption has dropped precipitously. Raise auctions are called "express-fit" auctions, because the raise announces the fit expressly. The worst auctions for preempts are express-fit auctions where one opponent has limited their hand:

**1♥ P 2♥ ?**

**1♥ P 3♥ ?**

**1♣ P 2♣ ?**

In all these auctions, preempts (either PJO's or raises) should be sound. We can't afford to risk a large number when chances of causing them to go wrong are small. Still bad, but better, are unlimited-raise auctions:

**1♥ P 2NT ?**

They haven't yet found their level and they have announced an excellent chance for game or slam, which gives us protection. We have some upside.  It's possible we can upset a slam auction, and we have the safety of knowing they have game values. While this is a mediocre time to preempt, it is a great auction to stick in a lead-director because opponents can rarely double effectively.

**1♣ P 2♣ ?**

This auction is better for preemption. Despite the raise, opponents have not necessarily settled on the strain. NT will often be their best spot. Also, unlike the earlier Jacoby auction, they have not yet settled at their level. In addition, since both opener and responder could be either unbalanced or balanced, there is much more uncertainty than after the Jacoby auction as to where they belong, and a preempt could cause them to guess wrong.

**Implied-Fit Auctions**

Express-fit auctions are not the only auctions where the opponents' fit affects the potential reward. Consider this hand:

**KQ10xxx x xxxx xx**

**1♥ ?**

RHO has shown a five-card heart suit. You have a singleton heart. LHO is likely to hold 3+ hearts.  What will happen over your 2♠ preempt? LHO will raise hearts and the opponents will usually bid easily to a comfortable contract. Our preempt didn't do much damage. Why not? *LHO already knew about the heart fit before we made out 2♠ call.* Even though the fit was not announced in the auction, the key information (that RHO held 5 hearts) had crossed before we made our not-so-destructive preempt.

Could we have anticipated that 2♠ didn't rate to do much damage? Yes. The stiff heart in your hand means there are lots of hearts in the deck for LHO to hold, and consequently they will usually have a heart fit. The singleton heart makes this an *implied-fit auction.*When the opponents have named their implied fit, the upside to preemption is often not much better than i`f they had already shown their fit. Contrast that scenario with this one:

**KQ10xxx xxxx x xx**

**1♥ ?**

This time you hold four hearts in addition to your spade six-bagger. LHO probably holds only one or two hearts. Without a heart fit, a preempt rates to be much more disruptive. After your preempt, LHO will usually make a negative double; if partner can raise to 3♠, the opponents will frequently be in a pickle:

**1♥ 2♠ X 3♠ ?**

Now they must find their fit at the 4-level. They will be stumbling in the dark to find both fit and correct level. Your chances of a big plus score are much better in this auction than the last one. Even expert players often overlook how subtle differences in side-suit shape change the odds offered by a preempt.

**Implied Fit Auctions in the Sandwich Position**

Now let's look at a couple of auctions in the sandwich position.

**Xxxx x KQ10xxx xx**

**1♣ P 1♥ ?**

Given the implied heart fit, 3♦ has relatively low upside. LHO will often just raise to 3♥ or 4♥, and has a good chance to judge accurately. You might not want to risk a number with such a low upside.

**X xxxx KQ10xxx xx**

**1♣ P 1♥ ?**

This time our singleton spade and partner's failure to overcall 1♠ suggest the opponent's fit is in spades, a suit neither one has mentioned. A 3♦ preempt will often cause them to miss this fit. With much more upside, you can preempt more aggressively. I call an implied fit in an unbid suit a "hidden fit." Hidden fit auctions are some of the best times to preempt.

**Implied Fit in the Minors**

Implied fit is a much bigger factor in a major suit than in a minor. When the fit is in a minor, opponents have not settled on the strain since 3NT is a likely final contract. Further, since opener's call didn't promise five cards, they may not always be aware of their fit:

* After 1♣, responder needs 5 clubs to be certain of an 8+ card fit
* After 1♥, responder needs only 3 hearts to be certain of an 8+ card fit

**Xxx xxx KQ10xxx x**

**1♣ ?**

Here the implied fit is in clubs. Unlike our example where the fit was in a major, LHO frequently cannot know about the fit with any certainty. This implied fit is nothing to worry about.

**Pushing The Opponents Into Game**

In general, I never worry about an opening preempt pushing opponents too high. I do worry about PJO's having that effect. When it occurs, it is usually in an implied-fit auction.

**KQJxxx xx xxx xx**

**1♣ P 1♥ ?**

This is the classic scenario where a PJO could push the opponents into a game they would not otherwise bid. What will LHO do if you preempt 2♠ or 3♠? He will raise hearts of course. He may have to overbid, but your call has forced him to guess, and we all know people guess to raise far more often than not. What is worse, you have no defense, so their "lucky" game would roll home. When bidding against an implied fit, you would much rather have a defensive surprise for the opponents that would cause their game to fail if they guess to bid.

**AQ10xxx Qx J10xx x**

**1♣ P 1♥ ?**

Contrast this hand with the last one. When preempting against an implied fit, some defensive strength is useful. If your opponents overbid to 3♥ or 4♥, you have an excellent chance for a plus score on defense holding this hand.

**KJ10xxx KJ9x x xx**

**1♣ P 1♥ ?**

Given your heart holding, the opponents probably have not yet found their fit. Therefore a preempt has great upside. And if LHO does happen to hold a heart fit, your preempt will push the opponents into a tenuous contract.

**Scary and Safe Preemptive Raises**

Let's look at a couple of preemptive raise auctions, where your partner has opened, and the opponents have overcalled. Should you raise or pass?

**Xx QJxxx xxx xxx**

**1♥ 1♠ ?**

A dangerous preemptive raise. You have no defense, and opponents have an implied fit in the boss suit which they have bid. Your preempt won't do much damage: you are unlikely to be able to sac in 5♥, and you might push them into an overbid that makes. This preemptive raise makes me nervous.

**Xx QJxxx xxx xxx**

**1♥ 2♣ ?**

This is a fine preemptive raise. Where is the enemy fit? Unless partner holds four spades, the opponents' fit is in spades, a suit they have not yet bid. 3♥ will make it much more difficult to find that hidden fit. This preemptive raise gives an excellent chance to win a swing.

**Conclusion**

Any time the opponents have named their strain, a preempt has less chance to succeed. At the other extreme, when the opponents have a hidden fit, a preempt has an excellent chance to do damage. Small differences in your side-suit distribution enormously affect the odds offered by a PJO or a preemptive raise.

Last week we discussed how the progress of the opponent's constructive auction affects the upside to preemption. We focused on fits, both express and implied. This week, we will look at auctions where opponents may already know their level.

Any time that one opponent has made a tightly limited call, chances are good the other knows the correct level. We have already seen one example, the limited single raise. Limited bids of NT are another common auction after which level is often known before you can make a preemptive jump overcall. After a limit bid, preempts should in general be sound, as in all of the following auctions:

1♣ -- (P) -- 1NT (8-10) -- ?

1♦ -- (P) -- 2NT (11-12) -- ?

1NT (15-17) -- ?

2NT (20-21) -- ?

**Comparing 1NT in Different Auctions**

Let's look at a few similar-sounding auctions to see how preemptive opportunity can change based on how limited a call really is.

1♣ -- (P) -- 1NT (8-10) -- ?

This is a poor time to preempt. RHO's strength is well defined, and he has denied a major. LHO usually already knows what level to play, and he can rule out playing in a major, so he will usually also know the strain. Preempts should be sound.

1♦ -- (P) -- 1NT (5-10) -- ?

This is a better time to preempt. RHO can have a wide ranger for his 1NT response to 1♦than in our last auction, and his shape is less constrained. RHO might have been forced to bid 1NT with length in the other minor, but too weak for a 2/1 response, e.g., ♠Axx, ♥x,♦xxx, ♣Kxxxxx

1♠ -- (P) -- 1NT (forcing) -- ?

This is an even better time to preempt. RHO could have 5-11 HCPs, and he could have almost any shape. Contrast that with the preceding auctions where he has denied a 4-card major.

**Xx KQ109xx x xxxx**

**1♣ P 1NT ?**

Pass. LHO will often already know whether the hand belongs in game. 3♥ is much too risky.

**Xx KQ109xx xxxx x**

**1♦ P 1NT ?**

Pass. Still too risky.

**Xx KQ109xx x xxxx**

**1♠ P 1NT ?**

3♥. Good chances of disrupting the opponents.

**One Major Openings**

Not all opening bids are equally limited. Sometimes, the opponents system provides an advantage to them in dealing with preemption.

1♠ (Two-over-one, 11+ HCP) -- ?

This is a good time to preempt. RHO has show his longest suit, but his strength is largely undefined.

1♠ (Precision, 10-15 HCP) -- ?

Interestingly enough, a limited opening bid such as a Precision one-of-a-major presents only a fair time to preempt. RHO has shown his suit and limited his strength. Much of their work is already done, and the preempt won't do as much damage as in the preceding case, since the responder is already in a good place to judge whether to compete, pass or double.

**Reverse Flannery Convention**

The [Reverse Flannery Convention](http://colin.bridgeblogging.com/2008/10/23/reverse-flannery-responses-to-1m/) also provides significant preemption protection. If you have not heard of this convention, responder's jumpshift into a major after a one-minor opening shows both majors and limited values. (i.e., 1m -- (P) -- 2M)

1♣ -- (P) -- 1M -- ?

This is a good auction to preempt. Both LHO and RHO are virtually unlimited, and game could exist in any strain.

1♣ -- (P) -- 2♥ (5♠, 4+♥ and 5-8 HCP) -- ?

1♣ -- (P) -- 2♠ (5♠, 4+ ♥ and 9-11 HCP) -- ?

Two terrible auctions to preempt. Both Reverse Flannery jumpshifts are tightly-limited and describe shape precisely. The upside for preemption is negligible. If you preempt at this point, your preempts must be sound.

**X xx KQ109xxx xxx**

**1♣ P 2♥ ?**

Pass. 4♦ is a big risk and there is not enough upside to justify it.

**X xx KQ109xxx xxx**

**1♣ P 1♥ ?**

3♦ or even 4♦. Automatic to preempt.

**Strong Club**

1♣ (Two-over-one) -- ?

This is a good time to preempt.  Opener can have a wide range of values and the strain is completely unknown.

1♣ (16+ any shape) -- ?

This is a great time to preempt. Opponents do not have any shape information, and RHO is strong, meaning game+ their way is likely.  Disrupting their Precision auction with a preempt will get in the way of them finding the best strain and level.

**KQ109xx x xx xxxx**

**1♣ ?**

2♠ or 3♠ if you need a swing. You can justify either call.

**KQ109xx x xx xxxx**

**1♣ ?**

3♠. Very easy. On this auction you must stick it to them.

The same principle applies in all of the above auctions: *The more unlimited the opponents’ hands (in high cards and shape), the greater the preemptive opportunity.*

**1NT Opener**

As previous discussed, you would much rather preempt a 1-minor than a 1NT opening, since 1NT is so well-defined.

**KQ109xx x xx xxxx**

**1NT ?**

Bid 2♠. LHO will often already know whether the hand belongs in game. Since RHO's shape has been described accurately, LHO will often know which strain to play, or may have have reduced the possibilities to a choice between two strains. Further, LHO has a much better chance of judging accurately when to penalize you. 3♠ is much too risky.

**KQ109xx xxxx x xx**

**1♣ ?**

Bid 3♠. RHO has made a nebulous 1♣ opening. Your preempt will be very destructive and the opponents will have a tough time deciding when to penalize you. They don't want to collect +500 when they were due +1430. Preempting after an unlimited opening like 1♣both reduces the risk and increases the reward, when compared to preempting after a narrowly-defined 1NT opening.

**Conclusion**

  Two factors determine whether a preempt offers good chances for a reward:

* Whether or not LHO knows the suit in which the opponents hold a fit.
* Whether or not LHO knows the correct level.

The reward for preemptive calls of all kinds varies enormously based on how much information the opponents have already exchanged. In some auctions, preempts are largely pointless unless you strongly believe you have a cheap sacrifice. In other auctions, the reward is so high you should preempt as often as possible. The amount of information they have already communicated drives how desirable a preempt is in the given auction.