

5: Preemptive bidding - counting losers and winners

Preemptive bids, used properly, are highly effective bids. They give partner (and opponents) an accurate idea of the trick-taking potential of your hand, at the same time using up a lot of bidding space that the opponents might have used in order to find their best contract. Or, to put it another way, they are both constructive (help partner) and obstructive (mess up the opponents).

Opinions differ (don't they always?) when it comes to the subject of how sound or light a preemptive bid should be. All bridge authorities do agree that a preemptive bid shows a hand with significant trick-taking ability, but one that is not strong enough to make a normal one-level opening. Preempts are usually made with a hand of about 5-10 HCP, and a 6-card or longer suit with the points concentrated in the long suit. The suit is usually headed by 2 of the top 3 honors or 3 of the top 5.

Let's follow Audrey Grant (and Karol Monroe) in adopting this guideline:

- Weak two ("mini-preempt") bid shows a 6-card suit, or about 5 playing tricks
- Three level preempt shows a 7-card suit or about 6 playing tricks
- Four level preempt shows an 8-card suit or about 7 playing tricks
- Five level preempt (very rare) shows a 9-card suit or about 8 playing tricks

The suggested level of these preempts is based on the idea that even with no help from partner, you can afford to go down 3 tricks doubled.

The simplest way to determine the level of your preempt is to base it on the length of your longest suit, as above. A more accurate way is to estimate the number of winners in the hand, still subject to the 5-10 HCP requirement. A good way to count playing tricks is to first count losers, according to these "rules":

- Only the first three cards in any suit can be losers.
- In the first three cards, only the ace, king and queen are not losers.
- "Droppable" honors are losers - i.e. singleton king and doubleton queen.
- A queen is half a loser unless it is in combination with an ace, king or jack.

Now: playing tricks (winners) = 13 - number of losers

A normal minimum opening bid usually has 7 losers, i.e. 6 winners. Counting playing tricks/winners takes into account the number of top honors in a hand as well as distribution. The more top honors and the more distributional, the more winners.

Exercise: Count the losers in these suits:

1. ♠K652 2. ♥A5 3. ♦Q7 4. ♣764 5. ♣76432

Now count the losers and playing tricks/winners in these complete hands:

6. ♠10943 ♥742 ♦J95 ♣764
7. ♠KQJ10876 ♥832 ♦3 ♣73
8. ♠8 ♥Q102 ♦7 ♣K10986432
9. ♠AKJ9863 ♥2 ♦8763 ♣7
10. ♠AKJ9863 ♥2 ♦763 ♣87
11. ♠3 ♥AQ107652 ♦K3 ♣K76
12. ♠63 ♥92 ♦KQ10873 ♣Q107

What is your bid on hands 6 through 12? If preempting, base your bid on the number of cards in your long suit.

Basing your answer on number of winners, what is your bid on hands 6 through 12?

What to do about $5\frac{1}{2}$ or $6\frac{1}{2}$ winners? (Maybe use vulnerability to decide)

Some other things you should know about preempts...

- Don't preempt over an opponents' preempt, but you should try hard to compete. Why make a sacrifice when the opponents are probably sacrificing?!
- Once you have preempted, you should not bid again unless partner makes a forcing bid, like a new suit or a conventional 2NT over a weak two-bid.
- Don't preempt above the level of game in your suit.
- Don't open a weak two-bid if you have a 4-card major on the side. If you have a 4-4 major suit fit with partner you will never find it.
- Don't preempt in 4th seat after 3 passes. What are you sacrificing against?

Counting winners/losers is a valuable hand-evaluation tool, useful for a lot more than deciding about preempts. You can use the method in conjunction with point count to decide on upgrading or downgrading any hand. For example, what are your thoughts about this hand?

♠6 ♥A5 ♦AK873 ♣AKJ76

Only 19 HCP and 2 length points, but just 4 losers. This is worth upgrading to a 2C opening.