

How to Handle Preempts **(Part 1)**

– by Steve Wood

In today's world of bridge, opponents are constantly coming at us with preemptive bids – particularly strong players, who seem to be even more aggressive about throwing in those pesky jump bids.

Why do they do this?

Preempts make it harder for us to bid, because we have to start at a higher level. Our comfortable system of 1-level bids and responses goes out the window when an opponent throws in a preempt. Often, a preempt puts us in a position where we have to guess – and if we guess wrong, that's a good board for the opponents.

There is another reason why stronger players preempt a lot – *they don't think you can handle it!*

The goal today is to give you some concepts and principles that will help you fight back and deal more effectively with preempts.

Rule #1 – Don't Expect Perfection

When faced with a preempt, nobody gets it right all of the time – not even the best experts in the world. So, the next time an opponent preempts against you, keep your expectations reasonable. Stay true to the bidding agreements that you and your partner have. There are weak spots in all agreements, and they may not work very well in a particular situation. But “staying in the boat” is the best way for the partnership to survive.

Remember, if your opponents preempt, it is likely that the same preempt is being made at most other tables in a matchpoint game. If you do a better job against the preempt than the players at other tables, you are going to get a good score. So, don't panic. Relax and come up with a plan that has the best percentage chance to succeed.

Rule #2 – Know What Your Bids Mean

This sounds simple and obvious – but many partnerships haven't spent the time and energy necessary to pin things down.

For example, let's say your RHO opens 2♦ -- we think we know what it means to overcall 2♥ or 2♠, but what would it mean if we jumped to 3♥ or 3♠ instead? If we overcall 2♥ or 2♠, and partner bids a new suit, is that forcing? What if he's a passed hand? What if we overcall 2NT – how much strength does that show, and what do our bids mean after that? If we make a takeout double of 2♦, does Lebensohl apply? If we make a takeout double and the next player raises to 3♦, what does it mean if partner doubles? Lots of questions, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. The only practical answer is for you and your partner to block out some time to talk through these situations, so you both know what your bids mean.

One axiom you probably have heard: "You Can't Preempt Over a Preempt." If an opponent preempts and you jump over that, it is a strong bid, not a preempt. If you have ♠ KQT9xxx ♥ xx ♦ Kxx ♣ x, you are planning to preempt 3♠. But if your RHO opens 2♥, a 3♠ bid is out the window, because it would show a good 6+-card suit and extra values beyond a normal opening bid. Now you bid 2♠, light on HCP but enough overall strength to bid.

The focus of this talk is not to plow through all of the various possibilities, so there is a quick summary attached as Appendix A. The summary doesn't cover everything, but it at least will serve to frame the discussion between you and your partner.

Rule #3 – Avoid Guessing (as much as possible)

One of the preemptor's goals is to make you guess. Resist that if you can, understanding that in some situations you are going to be forced to guess because there's no way around it.

Let's say your RHO opens 2♠, you are vulnerable and they aren't, and you hold ♠ Jxx ♥ Ax ♦ Jxx ♣ KQJxx. Given the chance, you would have opened the bidding, but now you're stuck dealing with a 2♠ bid. You have pretty good clubs – should you guess to bid 3♣? No! A vulnerable overcall at the 3-level shows a much better hand than this and typically a 6+-card suit.

There is no real reason to guess to bid. Pass and see how things develop. Partner may be able to act. In fact, as we'll see in Rule #4, there is a feature of your hand that should make you optimistic that partner might come to your rescue – but not if you mislead her by guessing to bid when you shouldn't.

Rule #4 – “The Player Who Strains to Bid Is the One Who Is Short in the Opponents' Suit”

If I could pick only one of the rules presented here, it would be this one.

Stated differently, if you are not sure whether to bid, a critical factor in favor of bidding is shortness in their suit – and a key reason to pass may be the lack of shortness in their suit. “Shortness” means a singleton or void.... or perhaps a doubleton in some circumstances.

Look again at the example hand for Rule #3 above. You know you are short on values for a vulnerable 3♣ overcall. Should you strain to bid anyway? Well, are you the one who is short in the opponents' suit? No, you're not.... so you should not strain to bid. Case closed. An easy pass.

Let's look at another example. You are vulnerable and your opponents are not. You hold ♠ x ♥ KT97xx ♦ Q52 ♣ AQx. Your LHO opens 2♠ as dealer, pass, pass. Do you stick your neck out by bidding 3♥ vulnerable with only 11 HCP and a marginal suit? The answer is “yes” – because you are the one who is short in the opponents' suit.

Why does this “rule” work a very high percentage of the time? The key is to consider what your shortness implies about partner's hand. The 2♠ bidder presumably has six spades, your RHO hasn't raised, and you only have one spade. The odds are heavy that partner has 3-4 spades, if not more. If she does, then it is very likely she has a hand with some HCP – perhaps quite a few HCP – but can't bid over 2♠ herself. For example, maybe partner has a hand like ♠ Jxxx ♥ QJx ♦ AJxx ♣ Kx. This is a full opening hand, but partner was not even tempted to bid over 2♠. Why? Because the spade length prevented her from having enough cards in the other suits for a takeout double. She has a reasonable hand, but she had to pass.

This leads us to the flip-side of the rule: “A player who has length in the opponent's suit does not strain to bid.” Partner would not dream of doubling

2♠ with the example hand above – but let's change her hand to ♠ x ♥ QJxx
♦ AJxx ♣ KJxx. Same HCP in almost exactly the same locations, but it's
nowhere near the same hand. With this hand, partner would double 2♠
directly -- even though she is a little light in HCP to force her partner to bid
at the 3-level – because she is the one who is short in the opponents' suit.

You might protest, it's too risky to go to the 3-level on these hands! But
“risk” comes in many forms. One form of risk is getting doubled and going for
a telephone number. Another form of risk – one that comes up much more
often than the big penalty – is letting the opponents steal the hand in 2♠ for
+50 or +100 or even -110 (heaven forbid) when your side was cold for +140
or +170 or +620 in hearts. If you won't take the risk of going down at the 3-
level every once in a great while, then you are going to suffer many poor
scores by not competing even when your “rules” say you should. And the
zero you get will be just as round as the zero from going for -800 (rarely).

Let me be clear – I am NOT saying that “we have to bid because we
can't let them play 2♠.” That is a bunch of baloney. There are many times
when it is better to let them play 2♠ -- perhaps doubled. I am saying that the
partnership can't be scared to apply its rules and principles when preempts
come up. At the end of the day, scared bridge is losing bridge.

A few more examples.

Example 1

You hold ♠ J853 ♥ A94 ♦ AQJT9 ♣ 7 with neither vulnerable.

Dealer to your right opens 3♣ -- what do you do now?

You have 12 HCP and support for all of the unbid suits, so it's
reasonable to think about bidding. Should you strain to bid? You have a
singleton club. You are the one who is short in the opponents' suit, so you
decide in favor of bidding. If you pass 3♣ around to partner, he may be too
weak to bid or have too many clubs to strain to bid.

What do you bid? The diamonds are nice, and some might bid 3D.
However, this hand really is good for all three unbid suits, and the best scores

come in the majors and notrump. Double 3♣. You have done your duty and now can leave things up to partner.

Example 2

You hold ♠ K854 ♥ A98 ♦ J98 ♣ A98, vulnerable vs. not vulnerable.

Dealer to your left opens 3♣, passed around to you. Now what?

You have an opening hand, but now we're talking about bidding at the 3-level. Should you strain to bid? You have three clubs. This means partner is likely to be short in clubs (if he isn't, you definitely want to defend). But partner – who will strain to bid with short clubs – did nothing. Therefore, the odds are that partner has a mediocre hand.... and he even may have 2-3 clubs (leaving preemptor's partner with 0-1 clubs, bad for his partner in 3♣ but great for him if we bid and he gets some ruffs). There are no guarantees, but the percentage move is to pass.

Rule #5 – It's Not About HCP

Maybe you have noticed that we haven't made any hard and fast rules about how many HCP you're supposed to have to bid over a preempt. That's because the decision about whether to bid is not primarily about HCP – it's more about shape and the logic of the situation.

Here are two examples.

Example 3

You hold ♠ J864 ♥ T965 ♦ AKT93 ♣ void, only they are vulnerable.

Dealer to your left opens 3♣, passed around to you. Your move?

You only have 8 HCP, but to pass out 3♣ in this situation would be a very bad move. You have excellent support for all three unbid suits. You have an AK combination for defense, if necessary. You are the one who is (very) short in the opponents' suit. And you have every reason to hope that partner has some HCP but was unable to bid because of his club length. In fact, partner may have very nice clubs and be itching to defend against 3C-X. The

odds heavily favor a double. Partner knows you are in the balancing seat and will cut you some slack. You can hope to make a part-score, maybe a game.... or maybe even a big plus in 3C-X.

Example 4

Here is an extreme case – you hold ♠ KQ52 ♥ QJ9843 ♦ 73 ♣ 4

Your side is vulnerable, they are not.

Dealer to your left opens 3♣, pass, pass. Your turn.

Again, you only have 8 HCP.... but it's not about HCP! You have excellent shape (“6-4, bid some more”), a nice suit, and you are the one who is short in clubs. Bid 3♥. Yes, there is risk in bidding, but there is even bigger risk in passing and letting the non-vulnerable opponents steal the hand in 3♣ for -50 or -100 (or even +110) against our likely +140 or more. Partner realizes you are in the pass-out seat and will cut you some slack, if she can.

Notice that there's a good chance partner has club length and can't bid. This hand comes from actual play, and partner's hand was ♠ A74 ♥ KT6 ♦ T86 ♣ AQJ2. A nice 14 HCP with no semblance of a bid directly over 3♣. Partner has an easy 4♥ bid over your 3♥ balance, and you will make it easily.

Rule #6 – Count on Your Partner

Counting on your partner means taking actions and refraining from acting based on confidence that he or she is following the concepts and agreements you have made. You don't need to push things – you have a partner you can count on.

Example 5

You hold ♠ AQ7 ♥ QJ84 ♦ AQT2 ♣ T8, both sides vulnerable.

Partner passes. Your RHO opens 3♥. What do you do?

You have 15 HCP and two stoppers in their suit, so maybe you could bid 3NT. However, there are two warning flags – partner is a passed hand

and you don't really have a source of tricks. Where are your nine tricks going to come from? It's clear that partner is short in hearts, so if 3♥ is passed around to her, she can be counted on to bid if at all possible. She knows you will not play her for big hand, because she passed originally. That fact gives her protection. If partner can bid over 3♥ in the balancing chair, her most likely action will be to double with something like ♠ K832 ♥ 5 ♦ K853 ♣ KJ62 (or perhaps even a little less if the shape is perfect). That will suit you just fine, as you will pass 3H-X for a nice score.

If partner can't act over 3♥, then you know she lacks the HCP that you would have needed to make 3NT, if you had bid it all by yourself. Better to pass 3♥ and count on your partner.

Example 6

You hold ♠ 974 ♥ J873 ♦ AT4 ♣ A64, neither vulnerable.

You pass as dealer. Your LHO opens 2♠, followed by two passes back to you. Now what?

It is tempting to bid here. You are a passed hand, so partner knows you have very limited strength. Your shape is flat, but at least you have support for all three suits, including hearts. Something should be bothering you, though. Why didn't partner bid? If he is short in spades, he would have strained to bid..... but he didn't. Either he isn't short in spades – which means the 2♠ bidder will have trouble, and so will you if you bid at the 3-level – or he is short in spades but has a mediocre or bad hand. You are not short in spades, so you should not strain to bid. Pass.

Rule #7 – Read the Situation

Very often, a close look at the situation will allow you to see a detail that either prompts you to act or keeps you out of trouble. It may be difficult to see what is happening until you see that extra clue.

Example 7

Vulnerable against non-vulnerable opponents, you open 1♦ holding:

♠ AJ97 ♥ AQ43 ♦ T9872 ♣ void

Your LHO preempts 3♣, which is passed around to you.

Do you re-open with a double or not?

On the one hand, you are minimum in HCP for your opening bid, so you are reluctant to get involved at the 3-level. On the other hand, partner may be licking his chops with a fistful of clubs, hoping you will oblige him with a re-opening double, which he will pass for penalty. What is happening?

Up to now, a detail has been left out.... one that could be very important. Did you open 1♦ as dealer, or did your RHO pass first? If you were dealer, RHO's hand is not limited – he could have a good hand with short clubs, hoping you will put your neck on the guillotine by re-opening. But, as it happens, RHO was dealer, and he passed. This marks your partner with some values..... yet he failed to act over 3♣. There are no guarantees, but the percentage move is to double.

In actual play, my partner – Louis Sachar – read the situation perfectly and doubled back in. My hand was ♠ K65 ♥ J52 ♦ 54 ♣ AQT42, and 3C-X went down 3 for +500 and a great score. The preemptor was not particularly light – holding ♠ QT4 ♥ K76 ♦ 6 ♣ KJ98763 – but the penalty was severe.

Example 8

You hold ♠ JT7 ♥ K932 ♦ A9 ♣ J843.

Your side is vulnerable, they aren't. Dealer to your right passes, you pass, and LHO opens 2♦ (weak), which is passed around to you. What is your read on this situation, and what do you do?

You only have 9 HCP. However, partner is marked with some strength, because your RHO is a passed hand and your LHO made a weak opening. Partner may have some diamond length that prevented her from acting over 2♦. Even better, she may have good diamonds and be itching to hear a re-opening double from you – which she will pass cheerfully for penalties. If your LHO is "out there" with a scroungy weak 2♦ in third chair non-vulnerable – a distinct possibility – 2♦ doubled may be a very good spot for your side. It

is clear cut to double back in with this hand. Yes, you have modest HCP, but you are protected because partner knows you are a passed hand. She is not going to get carried away if you double – and if she has a penalty pass, she will be ecstatic that you read the situation and took action. “The player who strains to bid is the one who is short in the opponents’ suit.”

Rule #8 – Be Careful About Making Off-Shape Takeout Doubles

Notice that the rule isn’t “don’t make off-shape takeout doubles.” That is not realistic. When we say “be careful,” we mean that you must have a good reason for doubling and you must have a plan for what to do when partner bids your short suit.

In theory, the takeout doubler of a preempt is supposed to have at least 3-card support for all three unbid suits. In practice, however, the doubler may have to compromise a little bit.

After a 3♦ preempt, a hand like ♠ AQxx ♥ Kxx ♦ Jx ♣ AQxx is a perfect takeout double – ample HCP with support for all three unbid suits. But what if the hand is ♠ AQxx ♥ Kxxx ♦ Axx ♣ QJ? It’s the same number of HCP, but now the distribution is flawed for lack of 3-card club support. Should you double anyway?

Most experts would double with this hand, because there is a good reason for doubling (16 HCP with 4-4 in the majors) and a plan if partner bids 4♣ (pass and hope QJ tight is enough support). But take away the A of diamonds and you should pass without a problem – your 12 HCP don’t justify a bid at the 3-level. Besides, you are not going to strain to bid, because you aren’t the one who is short in the opponents’ suit! If 3♦ is passed around to partner and she has 0-2 diamonds, she will strain to bid, and you will be OK.

Example 9

You hold ♠ AK9x ♥ QT ♦ Ax ♣ JT9xx, vulnerable vs. not.

Dealer to your right opens 2♦ (weak). Do you double or not?

You have a nice 14 HCP, but you can’t overcall in either spades or clubs. The only rational possibilities are “double” and “pass.” You appear to

be the one who is short in diamonds, so you have a good reason to double. Do you have a plan if partner bids 2♥? Yes, you can pass and hope your heart support is adequate. So, make your takeout double.

Note that you definitely can't bid 2♠ or 3♣ or 2NT (heaven forbid) if partner responds 2♥! All of those bids show very strong hands, much stronger than what you have. If you are not willing to pass a 2♥ response, then you can't double in the first place (because you don't have a viable plan for dealing with 2♥).

Change the hand to ♠ AK9x ♥ Q ♦ ATx ♣ JT9xx. Now, you must pass the 2♦ opening. You have no plan if partner bids 2♥. On the other hand, your diamond length means partner is likely to be short in diamonds, so she will strain to bid. If she does, you will be great shape – especially because you didn't make a desperate, unsound bid at your first turn.

Rule #9 – Be Careful About Bidding with the “Death Holding”

If your RHO preempts and your holding in his suit is something like Jxx, Txx, or xxx, you have the “death holding.” Why? Because if your LHO is short in that suit, he has an easy opening lead – and if your partner has something like Qxx, Kxx, or xxx in that suit, your side is in big trouble right off the bat.¹

So, over a 2♠ preempt by your RHO, you would double with a hand like ♠ Jxx ♥ KQTx ♦ AQxx ♣ KQ, because your 17 HCP might mean that partner will be stuck, even if she has short spades and is straining to act. When you double with a hand like this, you have your eyes open to the danger, because you can see the “death holding” in your hand (for example, if partner bids a Lebensohl 2NT over your double, you will bid a normal 3♣, not something stronger).

¹ This is true about simple 2-level overcalls, too. If RHO opens 1♠ and your holding in spades is Jxx, Txx, xxx, or the like, it is dangerous to overcall. If your hand is borderline, pass might be the right move. Besides, partner still has a bid – if she is short in opener's suit, she will strain to act!

But change your hand to ♠ Jxx ♥ KQTx ♦ Axx ♣ Kxx, and you will pass 2♠. With a mushy 13 HCP and the death holding in spades, you are not going to double. Pass – hopefully, partner has short spades and can act.

The Bottom Line

When opponents make frisky preempts, they are trying to make your life difficult and hoping to hustle you into making unsound bids. To get good results against these tactics, you have to accept the fact that they are going to get you sometimes, and you have to understand that your partnership must employ the concepts and principles that both of you have studied, discussed, and agreed upon.

If you are “just guessing” or “playing a hunch” over a preempt, then the opponents have you right where they want you. Play partnership bridge, and you can win!

APPENDIX A – Bidding Structure Over Opponents’ Preempts²

After a Weak 2♦

- 2M= 5+-card suit, opening hand (or extra playing strength)
 - New suit by responder is forcing unless PH
- Responsive doubles apply – 2♦-2M-3 ♦/4♦-X
- 2NT= 15+-18 HCP, balanced or semi-balanced
 - Ideally, at least 1½ stoppers in their suit
 - “Systems on”
- 3♣= 6+-card suit (usually), sound opening hand
 - Responsive doubles apply – 2♦-3 ♣-3♦/4♦-X
- 3♦= cue-bid asking for a diamond stopper – good hand with tricks
- 4♦= jump cue-bid -- “pick a major” – good hand, at least 5-5 majors
- Jump to 3M= good 6+-card suit, good hand – not a preempt
 - Typically, a hand that would have jumped to 3M after 1M-1NT
- Jump to 4M= good playing hand (“what you think you can make”)
- Jump to 3NT= 18+ HCP with a source of tricks on the side
 - Responder must have very long suit to pull to 4M
- Double= at least an opening hand (usually), support for other suits
 - Can be off-shape if there is a good reason and a plan
 - If followed by new suit, shows extra values and flexible hand
 - If followed by 2NT or 3NT, shows extra values, flexible hand
 - Responsive doubles apply – 2♦-X-3♦/4♦-X

After a Weak 2♥ -- same as after Weak 2♦, except:

- Jump to 4m= at least 5-5 in that suit and spades, good hand
 - “Leaping Michaels”
- Jump to 4NT= at least 5-5 in the minors, very good hand

After a Weak 2♠ -- same as after Weak 2♦ and Weak 2♥, except:

- Jump to 4m= at least 5-5 in that suit and hearts, good hand
 - “Leaping Michaels”

After a 3♣ or 3♦ Preempt

- 3-level overcall= 6+-card suit (ideally), sound opening hand
 - New suit by responder is forcing unless PH
- 3NT= 16+ HCP, balanced or semi-balanced, stoppers

² Abbreviations – M=a major suit, m=a minor suit, PH=passed hand

- Often “source of tricks” – only pull to 4M with very long suit
- With flat hand and lots of HCP, consider double then 3NT
- 4-level cue-bid= “pick a major” – good hand, at least 5-5 majors
- Jump to 4M= strong hand, good 6+-card suit
- Double= Takeout, good hand, support for unbid suits (ideally)
 - The better the shape, the less HCP required
 - Double followed by new suit or NT shows flexible hand

After a 3♥ or 3♠ Preempt – same as after 3♣ or 3♦ preempts, except:

- 4-level cue-bid= “Michaels” – strong hand -- other major + a minor
- Jump to 4NT= both minors, very strong hand
 - Over 3♠, could be hearts and diamonds (correct 5♣ to 5♦)