

How to Handle Preempts (Part 2)

– by Steve Wood

Let's start with a quick review. These are the 9 principles we discussed in Part 1 about handling preempts.

1. Don't Expect Perfection
2. Know What Your Bids Mean
3. Avoid Guessing (as much as possible)
4. ***“The Player Who Strains to Bid Is the One Who Is Short in the Opponents' Suit”***
5. It's Not About HCP
6. Count on Your Partner
7. Read the Situation
8. Be Careful About Making Off-Shape Doubles
9. Be Careful About Bidding with the “Death Holding”¹

Each of these principles is discussed in detail in the written materials for Part 1..... so if you missed Part 1 or would like to refresh your memory, I encourage you to find those materials on the BCA website.

For extra review, let's look at a couple of problem hands.

¹ The “death holding” is something like xxx, Jxx, or Qxx in the preemptor's suit. With holdings like these, it is extremely likely that the preemptor's partner has a singleton in that suit.... and that singleton lead usually is very dangerous.

Example 1

You hold ♠ KJ4 ♥ 3 ♦ AJ84 ♣ J7532.

Your side is vulnerable – they are not.

As dealer, you pass, and the bidding goes:

Pass – 2♥ – Pass – Pass

It's your turn – what, if anything, do you bid?

Answer: Double

You are a passed hand, so partner knows you have 11 HCP or less. You have support for all of the suits. You are short in their suit, so you are the one who should strain to bid. Partner is marked with some HCP, but with 3-4 cards in their suit, she may not have been able to bid (she will not have strained to bid, because she is not short in their suit – and she knows she can count on you, if you are short in their suit). She may even have a good hand with good hearts behind the opener, hoping to pass your double for penalties. Double has many ways to win and only rarely will lead to trouble. (No, this double does not promise 4 spades – you would prefer to have 4 spades, but sometimes the dealer doesn't give them to you).

Example 2

You hold ♠ A94 ♥ K876 ♦ AJ7 ♣ J86.

Neither side is vulnerable.

Dealer to your right opens 3♣.

What, if anything, do you bid?

Answer: Pass

You have a marginal opening hand with flat distribution. You are not the one who is short in the opponents' suit – in fact, you have the “death holding” in clubs. Pass and see what happens. Partner is likely to be short in clubs.... and if she is, she will strain to act. If 3♣ is passed out, your side probably didn't miss anything..... and if it turns out you did, so be it. Better to get a so-so result every once in a while than to get zeroes by guessing and wildly overbidding. Notice that on Hand #1 it was automatic to bid with 10 HCP, while on Hand #2 you really wouldn't dream of bidding with this 13-HCP hand.

Example 3

You hold ♠ K963 ♥ KT2 ♦ KT6 ♣ Q87.

Neither side is vulnerable.

You pass as dealer, your LHO opens 2♥, partner passes, and your RHO passes.

The bidding has been P-2♥-P-P to you.

What, if anything, do you bid?

Answer: Pass

You have 11 HCP and support for all three unbid suits, including four spades, so how bad can it be to double? But think again, because warning signs are flashing. You have three hearts, so partner may be relatively short in hearts, yet she did not make a bid. Either she has a mediocre hand or has heart length or both. If that is true, you don't want any part of this auction..... so you pass and let them play 2♥. It's a good thing, too, because your RHO – holding a good hand but a singleton heart – was salivating at the chance to double anything you bid. Partner had 6 HCP with Jxxxx in diamonds and xxx in hearts. If you had doubled, she would have bid 3♦..... and RHO would have doubled that, holding ♠ AT72 ♥ J ♦ A853 ♣ AJ32. RHO leads his singleton J of hearts, and partner is down 500 or more in 3♦-X.

Remember – “The player who strains to bid is the one who is short in the opponents' suit.” You are not short in the opponents' suit, so you don't strain to bid. On the other hand, partner would have strained to bid over 2♥ if short in the opponents' suit. Her silence is a loud message.

Now that we're back in the swing of things, let's look at a few more principles to help us handle preempts.

Rule #10 – Play the Odds

Any good gambler will tell you that it's impossible to be successful over the long haul if you don't know the odds. Wild or undisciplined actions may strike gold every once in a while – but they are usually fool's gold. If you consistently choose the percentage action (or inaction), you will come ahead over time.

Let's look at an example.

Example 4

You hold ♠ J5 ♥ AKT4 ♦ KJ32 ♣ A63.

Both sides are vulnerable.

Your RHO is the dealer, and he opens 3♣.

What, if anything, do you bid?

In other words, what is the percentage action here?

Answer: Pass

You have 16 HCP, so it feels like you should bid something.... but what can you bid? If you double, you are promising at least 3-card spade support, and you don't have it. What if partner bids 3♠ on a 4-card suit? What if he jumps to 4♠ on a crummy 5-card suit? True, you will be fine if partner bids a red suit.... but a corollary of Murphy's Law is that partner almost always bids your short suit.

You could bid 3NT.... but this is very dangerous with a single stopper and no good source of tricks.

What about pass? To make game, you need partner to have shortness in clubs and about 10 HCP. If he has that, won't he strain to act in the balancing seat with shortness in the opponents' suit? Yes, there's the solution! If partner has what we need to make game, the odds are very good that he will bid over 3♣..... so pass and see whether partner can act. If he can, you are in business. If he can't, then game is still possible your way but not likely. This approach will get you into the right spot about 80% of the time..... not perfect, but it's a lot better odds than your other choices can offer.²

Rule #11 – Double of Preempts and Raises of Preempts Are Takeout, Not Penalty

If an opponent preempts and we double – either directly or in the balancing seat – it is takeout.

This is obvious when they open something like 3♣ or 3♥, but it is also true if they open 4♥ or 4♠. If, for example, the auction starts 4♠-X-Pass, it is important to know that partner has a good hand and is asking you to bid. It is not a penalty double (in the old, old days, it used to be.... but not in modern bridge). That said, partner has to be strong enough that he can stand to defend 4♠-X if you pass the double. So, as responder, you evaluate your hand and decide whether there is a contract you can bid that has a reasonable chance of making. If so, bid it. If not, pass the double and let partner's strength help you defeat them.

What about situations where one opponent preempts and the other raises the preempt?

Here are some possible sequences.

3♣-P-4♣ -- double here is takeout.

3♦-X-4♦ -- double here is takeout – a “responsive” double. It shows enough strength to act at the 4-level but without a clear bid to make. A textbook hand in this auction would be 4-4 in the majors with about 8+ HCP. (Of course, we all know that we seldom are dealt a textbook hand).

² In actual play, my partner guessed to bid 3NT, got doubled, and caught me with a balanced 1-count. That was -1100 and a lot of IMPs down the drain. Stated differently, my partner strained to bid, even though he was not short in their suit – ouch!

2♥-X-4♥ -- again, double here is takeout – “responsive” – values but without a good bid to make. Partner can pick a suit or, if he has a good defensive hand, he can pass the double and accept a penalty against 4♥-X. The important thing to know is that responder’s double is not for penalties.

Now let’s look at another variation. What if partner doubles, they raise the preempt, and partner doubles again?

3♣-X-4♣-Pass
Pass-X-Pass-?

This second double by partner is still takeout. Partner is telling you that he has extra values.... that is, a stronger hand than he promised with his initial takeout double. Maybe he doubled 3♣ with ♠ KTx ♥ AQxx ♦ AJxx ♣ xx. If so, when the raise to 4♣ comes back around to him, he will pass – figuring that you heard his double and didn’t act, so it’s time to stop bidding. But what if he doubled 3♣ with ♠ AQTx ♥ AKxx ♦ KQTx ♣ x? This is the kind of hand where the doubler will double again. He is not doubling “for penalties” – he is doubling to show his extra values. Now the ball is in responder’s court. If he has a good bid to make, he makes it..... and he stands a good chance of success, because he has a very good picture of doubler’s hand. If responder has no good bid available, he can pass the double..... especially if he has something useful in trumps.

Here’s another type of preempt. Your LHO opens the bidding, partner doubles, and your RHO makes a preemptive jump raise.

1♥-X-3♥ or 1♠-X-4♠ or 1♦-X-3♦

In all of these situations, if responder doubles, she is saying, “I have values to go with your double, partner, but I don’t have a clear bid to make. You decide where we are going.” Now the doubler is in charge. Normally, he will take out the double to a suit he likes at an appropriate level. With a more balanced takeout double, he may decide to convert the double to penalties (especially with a trump trick or two).

Example 5

You hold ♠ QT643 ♥ Q74 ♦ J95 ♣ 83 with both sides vulnerable.

Dealer to your left opens 1♥, your partner doubles, and your RHO jumps to 3♥ (preemptive). What do you do now?

You have 5 HCP, but the Q of hearts is likely to be wasted, so really you're down to 3 HCP. If you could bid 3♠ and be sure partner would pass, maybe it would be OK. But partner will reason that you volunteered a bid at the 3-level, and if he has some extra values, he will put you in game. Not good.

If you are going to make 3♠ or even 4♠, what do you need partner to have? Extra values and a single or void in hearts. Unless the opponents are fudging – and opponents have been known to fudge – they have 9 or 10 hearts between them, so partner is marked with shortness, and you are halfway there. If you pass 3♥ and partner has heart shortness and extra values, as you hope, won't he double 3♥ (or even 4♥) at his next turn? Yes! That has to be the right move – pass 3♥ and count on your partner. If you can make 3♠ or 4♠, he will bid again. If he doesn't, you don't belong at the 3-level or higher. So, the solution is Pass.

Now, let's tweak your hand just a little -- ♠ QT643 ♥ T74 ♦ KJ95 ♣ 8.

That's 6 HCP instead of only 5..... but what a difference! Partner is very short in hearts, he has support for your spades (maybe even 4 of them)³, and his takeout double should include something useful in diamonds. It's time to volunteer 3♠ over the preemptive 3♥ jump raise. If the auction ends there, you expect to make it. If partner raises you to game, you expect to make that, too. And if the 1♥ opener chooses to bid 4♥ over your 3♠, you will count on partner to make the right decision (you have described your hand very well with your 3♠ bid, so you will abide by partner's decision over 4♥ -- you will not do something goofy like bidding 4♠ yourself).

³ Partner's double of 1♥ does not promise 4 spades. She will try to have 4 spades when she can, but what do you expect her to do over 1♥ with ♠ KJx ♥ J ♦ AQ64 ♣ K8743?

Rule #12 – Use 4NT to Find the Best Fit

To many players, 4NT is always Blackwood. But when preemptive bids have put us under pressure, we need to find our best fit – so 4NT as Blackwood is out, and 4NT as a fit-finding tool takes center stage. Stated differently, in a preemptive setting, when we haven't established our fit yet, 4NT by either player offers partner two places to play – usually in the minors, but not always.

It would be easy to fill a complete lecture with information about this “fit-finding 4NT.” Today, we will hit the high points.

In general, when your partner makes this 4NT bid – suggesting that she has two places to play – your duty is to bid the cheapest suit that would be acceptable to you as trumps. If that is one of partner's places, then she passes (or sometimes has enough to raise to slam). If not, she will correct to the cheapest remaining suit, and you will know she has that suit plus the third possible suit.

Remember, the goal is to find the safest possible trump fit, because we are at a very high level -- 5♣ and 5♦ pay a game bonus, just like 5♥ and 5♠. This is definitely true at IMPs, where making your game contract is paramount. Even at MPs, we rarely have the luxury of worrying about major vs. minor – our goal is to go plus, which almost always results in a good score.

Here are some possible sequences.

4♠-4NT-P – Partner has a good hand with at least 5-5 in two suits. You assume the minors and bid accordingly. If partner rejects your choice, it means he has the other two suits. So if you bid 5♣ here, partner will pass if one of his suits is clubs (or bid 6♣ with a monster hand). If he corrects you to 5♦, that means he has diamonds and hearts – and you will either pass or choose 5♥. From a logistical standpoint, you can see that it's better to choose the lowest suit if you can, leaving partner room. Also, partner's 4NT shows a good hand. He is not sacrificing, and he doesn't have a piece of cheese for a hand. If you have a good hand, too, you can consider jumping in response to 4NT.

2♥-X-3♥-4NT – No, responder is not asking for aces. We don't even know what trumps are. A bid of 4♣ or 4♦ here would be encouraging but not forcing. What if responder has both minors and enough strength for game? That's what 4NT says. Doubler will pick his better minor – and if he happens to have a very strong double, he will consider whether to jump to slam in that minor.

1♠-X-4♠-4NT – Again, this is the “fit-finding 4NT.” Responder has two places to play..... most likely the minors, but maybe 5-6 cards in a minor plus 4 hearts. At the 5-level, especially at IMPs but also at matchpoints (usually), we want to make our contract, not try to find a perfect 4-4 fit in a major (which could go down on a bad trump break).

Example 6

You hold ♠ Q7 ♥ 9 ♦ J8652 ♣ KT952.

Your side is vulnerable, and the opponents are not.

Your LHO deals and opens 3♥. Partner doubles, and RHO raises to 4♥. You like your hand, but you don't have enough to volunteer a bid at the 5-level, so you pass. The 3♥ bidder passes, and partner doubles again. Remember Rule 11 – partner's second double is still takeout – he hasn't switched to penalty mode all of a sudden. Partner has a takeout double with significant extra values, and he is leaving it up to you to do the right thing.

Luckily, you have good prospects in both of your minors – but which one is best? The only way to find out is to ask your partner. The way to do that is to use the “fit-finding 4NT.” Partner will pick a minor, and there you will be.

This hand is from actual play this week on BBO. Jim Hilton (my partner that day) held ♠ AKT86 ♥ Q5 ♦ AK3 ♣ AJ3, so he bid 5♣ (if the choices are equal, bid the lower one). On a lucky day, we might have done better in 4♠ at matchpoints if spades behave nicely, but when opponents are preempting, suits have a way of breaking badly. But we were playing IMPs, so we weren't worried about spades vs. clubs – we were just trying to bid a game that makes. The 5♣ contract was safer than 4♠..... and in fact, it made an overtrick.

Closing Discussion Hand

You hold ♠ Ax ♥ AKJ6 ♦ AJ972 ♣ J2.

Your side is vulnerable, and the opponents are not.

Your LHO is the dealer, and she opens 3♣.... pass, pass around to you.

What you do now?

Hint: There is no “good” bid. It is a question of what action or inaction has the best odds of getting you to a reasonable spot more often than not.

Those of you who read *The Bridge World* are familiar with their Master Solvers' Club feature. A panel of experts gives their answers to tough bidding problems, and an expert moderator summarizes the answers and awards each one a score. This is a hand from the Master Solvers' Club.

There are four plausible bids. Let's look at each one in ascending order.

3♥ -- Given that your hand is off-shape for a takeout double, it would not be completely crazy to bid your strong 4-card heart suit. However, the Dallas Aces once did a very thorough study and determined bidding a strong 4-card suit in this kind of situation is usually not successful. So, if you bid 3♥, you get some points for creativity..... but a low score – 30 out of 100.

3♦ -- A simple overcall is possible, but there are two strikes against it: (1) the suit is a little short and anemic for a 3-level overcall, and (2) it understates the overall value of the hand, especially in the balancing seat. On the plus side, if partner volunteers 3♠, you will know she has at least 5 of them plus some values – but partner is likely to be in a tough position over 3♦..... and good luck finding a 4-4 heart fit. Score 70 out of 100.

3NT – It's not obvious to try 3NT with only J2 in the opponents' suit, but many of the experts gravitated toward it, anyway. Their reasoning? 3NT shows the value of the hand reasonably well, and modern non-vulnerable preemptors seldom if ever have AKQxxx(x) in their suit. With a fitting club honor, RHO

might have bumped the preempt to 4♣ or even 5♣, so there is good reason to hope that partner has something in clubs. If she does, it will be better if the preemptor has to lead clubs around to your J. This bid shows how experts play the odds in a tough situation. Score 90 out of 100.

Double – The flaw here is that partner might jump to 4♠..... but if she does, she is highly likely to have a 5+-card suit. If partner bids a red suit or 3NT, you are in good shape. If she bids 3♠, now you can bid 3NT (see above). By doubling and then bidding 3NT, you are showing a flexible hand, *i.e.*, a hand that can live with 3NT but also is interested in other contracts. An immediate 3NT discourages partner from pulling to another contract, because it often is based on lots of HCP with a long suit as a source of tricks. When you double a 3-level preempt and then bid 3NT, you are not showing more points than a direct 3NT – you are showing a different type of hand, *i.e.*, a flexible hand. Responder can judge accordingly – such as by bidding her 4-card heart suit over 3NT. If all else fails, you will play 3NT – and if partner has a few HCP and a little bit in clubs, you will make it. That's how you play the odds and count on partner! Score 100 out of 100.