



# Adventures in Bridge

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## ***This Week in Bridge***

### **(411) Modern 2-Level Preemptive Openings**

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Level: 3 of 10 (1 of 6)

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#### **General**

When to use a 2-level preemptive opening bid is a matter of personal and partnership style. There is no absolute *right* or *wrong* answer to a preempting style, unless we consistently have a lot of disastrous results, of course. The most important thing is for us to be in agreement with partner about what to expect from our preemptive openings in a variety of different situations. Having said that, preemptive openings bids have evolved over the years and adopting the modern style will allow us to do more damage to the opponents and not get into trouble as often.

#### **Evolving Philosophy – “Why Do We Preempt?”**

##### ***The Old Reason***

When preemptive opening bids (“Weak-Two Bids”, which is not a name that I like) were first adopted, they were used to describe offensively oriented hands that could take more tricks than their HCP suggested. By showing a long strong suit (with two of the top three honors) we allowed partner to bid a game when they can visualize tricks (9 or 10) instead of counting HCP. This helped us bid game on far fewer than the traditional 24 or 25 combined HCP.

##### ***Modern Reason – “Better Answer!”***

Once players starting using preemptive opening bids on a regular basis, they quickly realized that many of their good results came NOT from when they bid to their “thin games”, but from when the opponents had difficulty bidding to their correct contracts. Players began to understand that preemptive bids function better as destructive bids than as constructive bids. Taking away the opponents’ bidding space makes it more difficult for them to communicate and thus more difficult for them to reach the correct contract. Forcing the opponents to guess what to do is “winning bridge!” Since preempts are such an effective destructive bidding tool, we should strive to make them as often as possible, while striving to avoid poor results for our side.

#### **Think! - “What Should We Consider When Deciding to Preempt?”**

If our goal is to make a 2-level preemptive opening bid as often as “sanely” possible, then we need to figure out what we need to consider to help us make good decisions about when to do this. Developing this skill is more of an art-form than a science and takes time to improve.



## Vulnerability

Considering the Vulnerability is an important part of our preemptive decision-making process, because it helps us determine how many tricks we can go down and still likely get a good board. The idea is that when we have a long suit, the opponents will frequently be able to make a contract as declarer because they also have a long suit – this is an “offensively oriented board.”

- **Partscore Deal** - This is when neither side can make a game on the board. Then we need to be -50, -100, or maybe -150 to get a decent result. If we are -200 or more it will be a horrible score (-200 is called the “Death Score”), so we need to try to avoid that result and not go down many tricks especially if we are vulnerable.
- **Game Deal** - This is when then the opponents can make a game if they declare the hand. In that case, the number of tricks we can go down (assuming we are doubled) will be determined by the relative vulnerabilities. For example, if the opponents can make +620 declaring in 4♥ then we will be ok with -100, -300, or -500. But -800 will be too much and get us a bad result.

## Types of Vulnerability

Many players think there are only two types of vulnerability: Nonvulnerable or Vulnerable (NV: White or V: Red). But from our discussion above you can see that not only is our vulnerability important but so is the opponents’ vulnerability. Thus, there are **4 types of vulnerability**:

- **White vs. Red (Favorable)** –
  - This is the most aggressive vulnerability!
  - If it is a game deal, we can afford to go down 3 tricks doubled (-500) and still do better than if the opponents bid and make a game (-600.)
  - We preempt as often as we possibly can when we are blessed with this vulnerability.
- **All White** –
  - This is the second most aggressive vulnerability!
  - If it is a game deal, then we can afford to go down 2 tricks doubled (-300) which is better than the opponent’s game (-400).
  - If it is a partscore deal, we are still safe going down a trick or two (1 trick if doubled.)
  - We still preempt the bidding aggressively all white.
- **All Red** –
  - This is the third most aggressive vulnerability and is more conservative.
  - If it is a game deal, it is similar to all white above.
  - If it is a partscore deal, we are more at risk than before. Down two or down one doubled will result in the -200 “Death Score” and be a horrible result for us.
- **Red vs. White (Unfavorable)** –
  - This is the most conservative vulnerability – Danger of disaster!
  - If it is a game deal and we are doubled, we can only afford to go down one trick (-200) and still do better than the opponents’ game (-400). If we go down two tricks doubled, or more, (-500) then we will get a poor result.
  - If it is a partscore deal, it is similar to the all red above.



### Position – What Seat are you in?

The position (or seat) that we are in is another important factor to consider when deciding whether to preempt or not. Let's try to understand how our thinking should change in different seats around the table.

- *First Seat (Dealer)* – This is the seat that we preempt in most aggressively. If our goal is to make life difficult on a player with a very good hand, then the odds are 2 to 1 in favor of one of the opponents being the person with the good hand instead of our partner.
- *Second Seat* – This is our most conservative seat. One of our opponents has already passed (the dealer) and thus the player with a good hand is either our LHO or our partner.
- *Third Seat* – This is the most varied seat. When our partner is a passed hand we are free to make more tactical bids. In this case, we can open at the 2-level with a slightly weaker or a slightly stronger hand than we would in the first or second seat.
- *Fourth Seat* - In the fourth seat we do not preempt. If we have a weak hand, we will just pass the hand out. A 2-level opening in the fourth seat is "To Play." It is usually a 6-card suit with 11-14 HCP and no game interest opposite a passed hand partner.

### Opponents – Whom Are You Playing Against?

Another thing to consider in deciding about a preempt is whom we are playing against. When we are playing against players that we are weaker than, then it pays to "mix things up." In this case, we should try to put more pressure on them and take more risk by making "frisky" preempts. If we are up against players who are weaker than we are, then we can monitor our risk and be more conservative.

### Scoring Type – Matchpoints vs. IMPs

It is very important to consider the type of event we are playing in as well. When we play in a team event (IMPs) we are generally a bit more conservative about our preempts. The idea is that we do not want to lose the entire match on just one bad board, so we have to be careful not to get doubled and go down a very large number of tricks or "go for our life". In contrast, when we are playing pairs, then the worst that we can do is get a zero on a board – we cannot ruin our entire day. This allows us to be free to take more risk and try to generate more good results for ourselves. Having said that, when we're playing pairs we do have to consider one other important factor: – 200, "The Death Score." In teams if we are -200 and our teammates are +140 then we only lose a couple of IMPs, no big deal. But in a Pairs event if we are -200 and all the players are just in a part score, then we are getting a zero. We might as well have been -1400 on the board – it will be the same disastrous score.



### Suit – “What Does a Good Preempt Suit Look Like?”

A good preempt suit is one that has minimal danger of getting us into trouble when partner does not have a fit. One of the best tests for determining if this is a good suit to preempt is to ask ourselves how well the suit will play if partner has a singleton in our suit. The traditionally accepted idea of 2 of the top 3 honors is NOT the best kind of suit to have in order to survive these kinds of misfit auctions. The most important cards to have are the interior spot cards: J, T, 9... These intermediate cards give our suit strength and solidity even when partner doesn't have help for us.

- AKxxxx opposite x
  - This will usually result in 2 losers when the suit breaks the expected 4-2.
- QJT9xx opposite x
  - This will result in the same 2 losers when the suit breaks the expected 4-2.

Notice that in the first example we used 7 HCP to accomplish these 4 tricks and in the second example we only used 3 HCP. We would much rather have the second holding.

Let's list a few other examples of good suits:

- AJT9xx
- KJT9xx
- KQT9xx
- QT98xx
- JT98xx

These suits will all play pretty well and we will usually not get into too much trouble if we preempt with these kinds of suits.

### ***Evens vs. Odds***

One of the big dangers in preempting is losing tricks to cards that wouldn't be able to take tricks if the opponents were playing on offense. If the opponents set our preempt many tricks, but they took all their tricks with big cards, then we are ok – they could have made a game or a slam on their own. But if the opponents take tricks with small trump cards or good spot cards, these are tricks that they won defending that they would not have won if they were playing offense. If this happens we can be in big trouble and go down a very large number.

There are a couple of classic examples of this called “Even – Odd Hands” that bear mentioning.

- (Our Hand) AQT864 vs. (LHO Hand) KJ9753
- (Our Hand) KJ9753 vs. (LHO Hand) AQT864

If our opponent holds these cards behind our cards they will take lots of tricks - win 5-6 trump tricks – and this can be a disaster. We can't predict when this is going to happen, but it is something to be worried about and be on the lookout for.



## Hand – “Preempt More or Less?”

When we are deciding what to preempt, we want to consider the quality of our suit but we also want to consider the overall quality of our hand. Some factors to consider:

- HCP,
- Location of our honors,
- Suit quality and spot cards,
- Shape of our hand.

The overall shape of our hand is one of the things that is not considered enough by many bridge players. We all know that 4333 hands are a horrible shape for declaring, but many of us don't consider that 5332, 6322, and 7222 hands are also “horribly balanced hands”. These hands do not take as many tricks as their cousins. Compare the following:

- 5332 vs. 5431
- 6322 vs. 6421
- 7222 vs. 7321 vs. 7420

*Note: These distributions are not suit specific (5431 does not have to be 4-card ♥.)*

Sometimes we open 2-level preempts with other than 6-card suits:

- Open a 2-level preempt with 5431 shape with a good 5-card suit and no 4-card Major.
- Open a 2-level preempt with 7222 shape, especially when vulnerable.

## Conclusion

Preempting the bidding at the 2-level is one way of forcing the opponents to make a decision about coming into the bidding at a level higher than they may be comfortable doing. The use of this bidding tool is an ‘art form not a science’ and there is a lot to consider when you are making preemptive bidding decisions. Keep this in mind and work develop your own judgment and style in the important part of the game. But your goal is to learn how to attack as often as you possibly can, while not getting too many poor results, so start attacking your opponents!