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This Week in Bridge

(414) Responding to Higher-Level Preempts

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

When partner preempts the bidding, they take away a lot of valuable bidding space. We hope that the opponents are the side with good hands and this loss of bidding space harms them more than us. But when we are the player with a good hand then this preempt has made our life more difficult. In this case, we must overcome the damage of partner's preempt by effectively making use of the bidding space that we have left. Let's take a look at how we respond to partner's 3-level (or even higher) preempts and attempt to reach the best final contract – partscore, game, or even slam.

Raising to Game

When we have a big fit for partner we generally raise as a Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) bid – extending the preempt (we might make it as well). When we have a smaller fit, we want to try to visualize a reasonable hand for partner (given the vulnerability and seat the preempt is made in) and try to count tricks – to see if we think partner will be able to make game (enough tricks) opposite our hand.

Exploring Slam

When partner preempts and we have an excellent hand we will want to explore slam. This will traditionally be a hand with a fit, lots of controls, and a source of tricks. Frequently, these will be hands with 6331, 6421, or 5431 distributions. These shapes with a trump fit in one of the 3-card or 4-card suits, control with shortness, controls (Aces in a side suit), and a strong source of tricks – this makes slam a good possibility.

Example 1

♠ 7

♥ K854

♦ AKJ842

♣ A9

This is not all that many HCP, but lots of tricks opposite something like ♥AQJxxx(x). If partner opens 3♥ then we have a great chance of making slam.



Responding to 3-Major Preempt with a Fit

When partner opens the bidding with 3♥ or 3♠ and we have 3+card support for their suit, we usually apply the Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) and raise to game – we expect to have a 10+card fit so we bid to the 10-trick level. This is true whether we have values (hoping to make) or no values (extending the preempt).

If partner opens the bidding 3♥ or 3♠ and we have a doubleton in their suit, we do not have a large enough fit to bid game without values. Instead, we must judge if our hand is good enough for partner to make game in 4-Major. When partner opens 2-Major we have bidding space to inquire about Opener's hand by using 2NT as an asking bid (Feature, Ogust, etc.), but after a 3-Major opening we do not have the bidding space needed to find out more information and we must guess. However, we can make this guess an educated one. We should consider partner's expected hand strength based on the position and vulnerability where they made their preempt. Additionally, we should use good hand evaluation techniques (not just our HCP) to determine if we should raise to game or not – Aces, Kings, and ruffing values are most useful opposite partner's preempt.

Opposite a First Seat All Vulnerable 3♠ opening, consider the following hands for Responder:

Example 2

♠ K7
♥ J62
♦ KQJ8
♣ QJ53

Example 3

♠ K7
♥ AK6
♦ 9753
♣ K753

Both hands are 13 HCP, but if partner holds ♠AQxxxx and no other honor cards, then opposite the hand in Example 2 we are unlikely to make a game. But opposite Example 3 we have about a 50% chance of bringing in 10 tricks. The second 13 HCP hand is much better in support of a 3♠ preempt from partner.

Note: Although a 3NT bid is possible opposite a 3-Major preempt, it is rare unless Responder thinks Opener's suit is likely to "run".



Responding to 3-Major Preempt without a Fit

When partner opens 3-Major and we have a singleton in their suit we have an 8-card fit (presumably), but with only a singleton in partner's suit, communication to partner's hand will be difficult in a notrump contract. Thus, we should only bid 3NT if we have a very good hand and likely a source of tricks of our own. With a singleton in partner's suit we are most likely to raise to 4-Major when we have a good hand, but here we need a better hand than if we had a larger fit.

Example 4

If we have the following hand and partner bids 3♠ vulnerable:

♠ 5
♥ AK32
♦ K865
♣ K743

Game is not a good contract opposite this hand:

♠ AQ9732
♥ 764
♦ 2
♣ 98

But 3♠ might have a decent chance of making.

When we have a void in partner's suit, it's good bet that their hand will be mostly useless to us. We may bid 3NT with an excellent hand and usually a long strong minor of our own. If partner opens 3♠ with a good hand and a 6+card suit, we can bid 4♥ (non-forcing) to look for another game. If partner opens 3♥ we can respond in ♠ but stay at the 3-level. Here bidding 3♠ only shows a good 5+card suit and is forcing. The reason we can bid ♠ with only a 5-card suit is that partner can rebid 3NT without a ♠ fit.

Example 5

Opposite a 3♥ preempt from partner (in first seat, none vulnerable) this is a hand that would bid 3♠ even with only a singleton ♥.

♠ KQJ84
♥ 7
♦ AK53
♣ A54



Responding to 3-minor Preempt with a Fit

When partner opens 3-minor and we have a large fit, we apply the *Law of Total Tricks* (LOTT) and extend the preempt when we have a poor hand (3♦ usually shows a 7-card suit, 3♣ can frequently be a 6-card suit by Opener). We may also jump to 5-minor with a good hand and a large fit when we have reason to believe that 3NT will not be a good contract; usually we have a void, singleton, or two small cards in an outside suit.

When we have a fit for partner's minor suit and a good hand, we can also respond in a good 5-card Major to look for a better game in a Major suit fit. We can bid 3NT with a good fit and a decent hand – often our fit will allow us to make 9 tricks. We can do this aggressively when we have a fit because if partner does not have a fit for our Major, then we can usually safely land in partner's minor suit at the 4-level.

Responding to 3-minor Preempt without a Fit

When we do not have a fit for partner's minor then we no longer have a safe place to land if partner does not have a fit for our suit. We must have an excellent hand (usually a very long Major) to bid in our own suit. Bidding 3NT without a fit is also dangerous because setting up partner's suit will not be easy – thus making 3NT will be extremely difficult unless we have a source of tricks on our own.

Preempt Keycard

Some partnerships like to use 4♣ as a Keycard Ask after a preemptive opening bid. If slam is not there to be bid, this 4♣ Keycard Ask allows the preempting side to stay lower than if we use 4NT to ask for Keycards:

- 3♦ / 3♥ / 3♠ - 4♣* Keycard in the preempt suit
- Over a 3♣ preempt, 4♣ needs to remain an extension of the preempt, so we use 4♦ as the Keycard Ask over a 3♣ preempt.

Note: Some players use this over 2-level preempts as well.

In the case of preempts, we also use a different set of steps instead of 1430 (a preemptor should not have 3 or 4 Keycards, so we should not need to have those in our answering steps.) Thus, we use "Preempt Keycard Steps."

Preempt Keycard Steps - 01122

- Step 1 (4♦) – Zero Keycards (we can relay, if there is room, to ask for the Queen)
- Step 2 (4♥) – 1 Keycard w/o the Queen
- Step 3 (4♠) – 1 Keycard w/ the Queen
- Step 4 (4NT) – 2 Keycards w/o the Queen
- Step 5 (5♣) – 2 Keycards w/ the Queen



Responding to 4+Level Preempts

When partner opens the bidding with game then we have no chance of missing a game. Our only decision is should we explore slam or not. Most of the time we simply pass. But occasionally we have a great hand (usually with an excellent fit and a source of tricks) and then we have a chance at a slam. In these auctions we usually either bid 4NT Keycard or simply just bid a slam.

Conclusion

Responding to partner's high level preemptive opening can be a challenge. First, we must evaluate the quality of our cards. A large part of that is our fit for partner's suit. Generally, the larger our fit, the easier our bidding will be. When we have a fit we know at least one safe place to play and this gives us freedom to explore for other (better) fits. When we do not have a fit there is a danger of a misfit and we may get into trouble if we respond and end up in 3NT or at the 4-level. It takes experience to properly judge these situations in "real time" at the table. Keep working on developing your judgement when partner preempts and catches you with a good hand!