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This Week in Bridge

(463) 3rd Seat Opening Bids

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Level: 5 of 10 (2 of 6)

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General

Opening the bidding in the 3rd seat is very different from opening the bidding in the 1st or 2nd seat. Normally, Responder is the Captain of the auction because they know more about our combined assets than Opener. But when partner is a passed hand, Opener in 3rd seat actually knows more about our side's values than partner does. They will be best placed to answer the question of whether our side can make game. Thus, a 3rd seat Opener is generally the Captain of the auction.

3rd seat Opener begins by choosing between constructive or tactical bids. Constructive bidding would generally be to bid in a similar way as we would as if we were opening the bidding in the 1st or 2nd seat (as if partner was not a passed hand.) Tactical bidding is choosing a different call than we would in the 1st or 2nd seat to make life more difficult on our opponents (a call that will create more problems for our opponents during the auction.) Let's look at some of our 3rd seat tactical bidding options, the problems each bid can create for the opponents, and how we might choose between them.

Tactical Options

When we open the bidding with the goal of creating a difficult bidding problem for our LHO (or our opponents in general) then we want to eat up as much bidding space from our opponents as possible. Let's see our options for how we might do that:

Strength (Opening Light)

One of the things we can do in the 3rd seat is open the bidding light (with as little as 8+ HCP if we have the right type of hand.) If we choose to open light, we need to balance (consider) three parts of the auction:

- Lead-directing,
- Eating up bidding space from the opponents,
- Surviving the rest of the auction (what to bid next)

When choosing to open light we will frequently have to balance between opening our "best suit" vs. "most destructive suit". In 3rd seat we have more control (options) for what we might open – in 1st/2nd seat the bidding rules generally dictate what suit we open (fewer options.)



Example 1

♠ KQT73
♥ A7
♦ 742
♣ 765

With this hand we can open 1♠ light to help partner get off to the right lead and make the opponents start their auction at the 2-level.

1-level vs. 2-level (Level of Opening)

When we are in the 3rd seat our range for a 2-level opening expands from the traditional 5-10 HCP to 3-12 HCP. This could be a bit weaker or could be a bit stronger - it's any hand that is not interested in game opposite a passed partner. So if we have a 6c♣ suit and 11 HCP we may choose to open 2♣ instead of 1♣. This makes the opponents start their auction at the 3-level!

Additionally, we may choose to preempt 2♣ in the 3rd seat on a hand with a good 5-card suit.

Example 2

♠ KQT93
♥ 3
♦ AT86
♣ 765

We should be careful preempting with a 5-card suit and 5332 distribution (balanced hand.) These hands rarely play well, even when they have a fabulous suit.

Note: Just as we might stretch to open the bidding at the 2-level instead of the 1-level, we might also stretch to open at the 3-level instead of the 2-level with a borderline hand.

4-card Suits

We may also choose to open a 4-card Major in the third seat. This can be a little tricky, but if we have a hand like:

Example 3

♠ KQJ6
♥ A6
♦ Q65
♣ 6543

We would clearly prefer to open 1♠ over opening 1♣ -- to get a ♠ lead and preempt the bidding for LHO.



When opening light we also may prefer to open a 4-card Major in an effort to make the opponents find their likely fit a level higher than they would if we open 1-minor. Compare 1♣ vs. 1♥ opening bids in this example:

Example 4

♠ 987
♥ KQT6
♦ 54
♣ KQT3

Note: Each partnership has their own agreements (style) about what they expect from a 4-card Major in the 3rd seat. Some people expect it to be lead-directing (a good suit) if it is only 4-cards. Other players attempt to be as destructive as possible (willing to open on as bad a suit as xxxx). The amount of risk we are willing to take opening a 4-card suit in the 3rd seat is a matter of personal and partnership style. Be sure to consider vulnerability when thinking about risk!

Aggression

Opening 1♠ is more preemptive than opening 1♥. Opening 1♥ is more preemptive than opening 1♦. Opening 1♦ is more preemptive than opening 1♣. So we will stretch more to open 1♠, less for 1♥, less for 1♦, and even less for opening 1♣ (which we generally open to be constructive.) There is also the option of opening at the 1-level vs. 2-level with ♠, ♥, ♦. With ♣ we do not have the option of opening light at the 2-level. Considering these things, then when partner opens the bidding in the 3rd seat we should understand which bids partner will be most aggressive with:

- 1♠ Most Aggressive,
- 1♥ Less Aggressive,
- 1♣ Less Sound - ♣ more aggressive than ♦ because of the lack of a 2♣ preempt option.
- 1♦ Most Sound

Conclusion

Opening in the 3rd seat is an art - the art of “getting away with murder!” by being destructive to your opponents without getting into too much trouble yourself. It is similar to preempting in that way – it is about risk vs. reward, and we must remember to consider vulnerability when evaluating risk. Look for opportunities to attack your opponents from the 3rd seat, and try opening:

- With fewer HCP,
- With a 4-card Major,
- At the 2-level with a 5-card suit,
- At the 2-level outside your traditional range,
- At the 3-level or higher with fewer cards than you would normally have.

Or try to attack them in any other creative way you can think to!