

Pre-emptive bidding: Lecture 2

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If an opponent has bid, when you should make a preemptive overcall?

Bear in mind that you can overcall *at the same level* with a 5 card suit and, say, 8 HCP. RHO bids 1D, you hold something like AJxxxx, Qx, xx, Jxx. With this hand, 1S is the right bid in case partner has some cards and can get into the auction. If partner has passed, you *might* try 2S because it gets in the opponents' way; it tells partner you have a 6-card suit; and it's lead-directing for partner.

Take away the heart Q – now you only have 6 HCP. For most people, that's still enough for a 1S overcall. If that makes you nervous, or if it's too weak for your partnership agreement, then you could make a 2S bid, especially at favorable vulnerability. Even then, if your partner hasn't bid yet, why not just pass and see what happens? If partner hasn't bid – why say anything? Either the other opponent or your partner is likely to come into the auction, so a 2S overall is as likely to create problems for partner as for the opponent.

Now suppose RHO opened 1S and you have xx, AJxxxx, Qx, Jxx. This is not strong enough for to bid 2H – you should have opening points for a two-level overcall. A 3H preempt misleads your partner about how many hearts you have but it might be a reasonable call (lead-directing, if nothing else) if partner has passed and if you are favorable vulnerability. Take away a club and give yourself an extra heart and 3H becomes a solid bid. And you've given partner a good picture of your hand.

Preemptive minor overcalls require length: RHO bids 1S, you have: xx, Qxx, KQxxxxx, x – 3D is a good call. Take away a diamond and give yourself an extra club – then it's not so clear but might be a good call at favorable.

When thinking about a preemptive overcall, it's important to think about the state of the auction so far. Are you more likely to create trouble for the opponents or for your partner? A preemptive overcall should send your partner a clear message – you have a few points, a decent 6 or 7-card suit, and nothing else.

Never preempt over a preempt!

Responding to preempts:

Important point #1: when you have made a pre-emptive bid, **your partner is in charge of the auction**. You've told your story and assume your partner understands. So if partner passes, you have nothing more to say.

Important point #2: If your partner preempts and you make a one-level raise in the same suit, **it's NOT invitational** – it's 'extending the preempt' – your hand is not that strong but looks like reasonable support for partner – you think the opponents have most of the points, maybe a game somewhere, and you want to make life difficult for them.

- depends on vulnerability – best situation is when they're vul and you're not, and you think they have the points. You can get in the way without taking too big a risk (you can go down three doubled for -500 and still do better than them making game for 600 or more).
- you should have values where partner doesn't

Example: Partner opens 2H and you have Axx, xx, KQxx, Qxxx – a decent 11 points. You have an 8-card heart fit with partner and a reasonable chance of getting a trick out of each of the other suits. The opponents could have anything from about 20 to 25 – perhaps they have game somewhere.

Whether RHO passes, doubles, or bids, you can say 3H – not too risky and creates problems. Say again: this is NOT invitational to partner!

What if you have xxx, KJxx, Qxx, Axx? You have a very nice heart fit (presumably partner has an honor or two) but the rest of your hand is full of losers. Raising to 3H on this hand is riskier than with the previous one.

Now suppose you have a stronger hand: there's something called **the rule of 17**, which like all such rules should not be taken too seriously (see Larry Cohen: <https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/rule-of-17>). Add your HCP to the number of cards in your partners suits – if it's 17 or more you should be thinking about game. (Applies to 2S and 2H pre-empts only – in diamonds you need more to go to game, but you can still push the bidding).

Examples (stolen from Larry Cohen): Partner opens 2S and you have Kx, Qxx, AQJxx, Kxx – 15 HCP plus two spades = 17, game is a possibility. (See below for how to proceed).

With x, KQxx, AQxx, Kxxx – 15HCP plus one spade, so a count of 16 after partner opens 2S. Not enough for thinking about a game try. Should you raise to 3S on this hand? Not a good idea – you have values in the other suits but only 1 trump, for a 6-1 fit. But if you have one more spade and one less club, 3S is more reasonable at favorable vulnerability. Judgment call (and depends on how well you trust your partner's preempts!)

BUT: suppose you have KQx, AQJxxx, x, xxx – 12 HCP plus 3 spades = 15. But unless your partner's preempt is horribly weak, he should most likely have the spade Ace plus an honor or two elsewhere. You have a solid chance at no spade losers, zero or one heart losers (depends on where the K is), one diamond and – you hope partner has a club honor or a doubleton! Bid 4S! It's not guaranteed to make but has a strong chance.

What about x, KQxx, KQxx, AQJx? This is 17HCP plus one spade, for a count of 18 – but you have a terrible trump fit. This is less likely than the previous hand to make 4S, and NT is a bad idea because you have a singleton opposite partner's length.

Exploring for game:

Partner's preempts and you have a good enough hand that you want to at least think about a game contract. The standard way to get more information is to bid 2NT as a forcing response, asking partner to say more about his or her hand. (The 2NT bid is not alertable, but responses are.)

The simplest system is “asking for a feature” – this means you want to know whether the pre-empting bidder has an ace or a protected king (Kx at least) in another suit. Why? Because you want to know if you have another entry into partner’s hand in order to assess how your hands might play together – in particular if you might make 3NT.

Responses to 2NT by the pre-empter:

- with a minimum hand, **even if you have a feature**, just repeat your suit at the next level -- eg 2S bidder has QJxxxx, Kx, xx, xx – the K is a ‘feature’ but this is a dead minimum pre-empt. Respond 3S.
- if your hand is better and has a feature, bid the suit with the feature -- eg KQxxxx, Kxx, x, xx – bid 3H to show the feature
- with a good preempt and a solid suit, bid 3NT – because you’re thinking that declarer will be able to run off 5 or 6 tricks in your suit, even if the HCP total is a little shy of game requirement – eg AKJTxx, x, QJxx, xx. (The hope is that declarer can set up a side entry with the QJxx even if the spade Q is badly placed).

After opener has given an answer to the 2NT inquiry, it’s up to responder to set the final contract. If opener rebids his suit, pass – if you had a hand strong enough to go to game after even a weak pre-empt you should have done so at the outset. With the 3NT response, also pass – you should be in the right place, and again, if you had enough to go 4S you should have done so initially. When pre-empter bids a new suit, showing a feature and a decent-strength hand, responder has to make the decision. If the ‘feature’ is in a suit where you have length and values, 3NT might well work – but if the feature is opposite a weak singleton or doubleton – much less likely. Probably best to go to 3 of the pre-empter’s suit, or maybe 4 if you were borderline and simply wanted to know whether partner had more than a minimum.