

Fifth Chair



Bidding Against Preempts

By Mike Lawrence

The topic for this class is the most frustrating that I've ever offered.

You are sitting there happily admiring your very nice hand when your RHO starts to think. Something is coming and sure enough, your RHO announces that he is about to make a skip bid (preemptive bid). And sure enough, "Two Spades" he bids, or if it's a really bad day he bids "Three Spades" or something higher.

Not nice.

This lecture is to give you some insights on what you can do.

WARNING

I can tell you one thing. No one will always do the right thing after a preempt. Bridge is tough enough to play when your opponents are silent.

When they preempt it is tougher yet. The materials I'm about to give you will be a big help, but you have to take it to heart that you and your partner are going to do the wrong thing all too often to suit you.

Let me show you how bad life can be when a preempt catches you off guard. Sooner or later you will experience a hand like this one:

S Q8

H AJ

D AKJ3

C KJ873

You sense your RHO is winding up to do something. Sure enough, he bids 3S. No problem you think, I have nineteen points. Surely I have nothing to worry about. Do you know what to bid? I don't. Give this hand to your friends and they'll say things like: "Disgusting", "There is no answer", "Where did you get this problem?".

Me? I hate making a takeout double without proper support for the other major, I can't bid no trump without a spade stopper, and bidding 4C on a lousy suit scares me. Let's just say that this is an impossible hand to bid, give the opponents credit for finding the perfect moment for their preempt, and move on to some easier hands.

There is one truth that you will learn from this discussion that you already know, but which you may not have acknowledged.

BIDDING AGAINST PREEMPTS IS A DRAG

If you agree that bidding against preempts is a pain, the hand above being a good example of that, then I can give you a marvelous piece of advice that you should glom onto with vengeance.....

YOU SHOULD PREEMPT MORE OFTEN YOURSELF

If their preempts are annoying you, why, I ask, should your preempts not be annoying to them? I am not going to suggest that you go to this extreme, but I can tell you of a player who has won many important National Championships opening hands like this one:

S 109764

H A7

D 653

C 763

This "unnamed" player opened this thing with 2S. Yes, he did. Got away with it too. The amazing thing about this hand was that he did it against two *many-time world champions*.

Now that we know what we are up against, let's see what we can do to make things more equitable. Just keep in mind that it will be IMPOSSIBLE to be perfect. Here are some tools to help deal with preempts.

THE RULE OF SEVEN

THE TAKEOUT DOUBLE

THE OVERCALL

THE JUMP OVERCALL

THE CUEBID

I am going to discuss these topics during the quiz section that follows. I do wish to discuss the Rule of Seven first, however, as it is different from the other items on the list. It will help your bidding judgment in a way that you will definitely appreciate.

The Rule of Seven is not so much a rule as it is a guideline. When an opponent opens with a preempt, you have to have a bid at the three or four level, a far cry from the normal overcalls at the one or two level. The Rule of Seven is a guideline that tells you what you are entitled to wish for in your partner's hand.

Say that your RHO opens two hearts in first seat. What do you need to have to bid two spades? Or three clubs? Or double? The Rule of Seven says you are entitled to hope for seven ORDINARY high card points in your partner's hand. Say you are thinking of bidding two spades. You can wish for partner to have something like this hand:

S 87 H J874 D A932 C Q105

This hand has nothing special. It has seven high card points, some more useful than others. It does not have a wonderful shape and it does not have wonderful trumps.

An optimist would wish for his dummy to have a magic hand like this one:

S 10873 H 2 D A876 C K1094

This is not the kind of seven point hand that you can wish for. If you need your partner to have this fine hand to make it safe for you to bid two spades, then you should not be bidding.

Here is another way of looking at the Rule of Seven. If you play at the two level in a suit, you need 22-23 points, counting shape. If you play at the three level, you need 23-24 points, counting shape. If you play at the four level, you need 24-26 points, counting shape. When a decision is put on you, add your values to what partner rates to have, note how high you have to bid, and see if your partnership has enough points to warrant bidding. I remind you that this is not infallible. If your partner has nothing for you, you go down.

HOW SHOULD YOU BID WHEN YOUR PARTNER BIDS OR DOUBLES?

If your partner makes a takeout double or makes an overcall, you should view a seven point hand as being expected. Say your LHO opens 2D and your partner bids 2H and RHO passes. What should your reaction be with these three hands?

NO ONE VULNERABLE: 2D 2H PASS ?

HAND ONE S Q8763 H 62 D Q72 C 1094

HAND TWO S 873 H J43 D J3 C KQ763

HAND THREE S A7543 H 1094 D A7 C J104

Here is what you should be thinking on these three hands:

Hand one has less than the seven points that you expected. Your partner will be quiet unless forced to bid.

Hand two does have seven HCP and it does have modest support, but it is more or less what your partner thinks you have according to the Rule of Seven. This hand is not good enough to bid with, but two hearts should make.

Hand three has more than the Rule of Seven suggests. With this hand your partner owes you a bid. Raising to three hearts seems about right. If your partner has another point or two, he should raise you to game.

In the quiz hands starting below I will discuss further ways the Rule of Seven can be applied, as well as examples of the other themes I mentioned above.

BOTH VULNERABLE: RHO BIDS 2H. YOUR CALL?

S K1084 H 83 D AJ8 C AQ98

Not a hard hand. The Rule of Seven says that you can count on your partner to have seven modest points. You have about fifteen so ought to be safe in bidding. Double is the bid because you have no suit to bid, and you do have takeout shape.

That was an easy question. Here is a harder one. Say your hand had only three spades and one more diamond. Would you still double two hearts?

Here is the same hand with one less spade:

S K108 H 83 D AJ87 C AQ98

The answer is a strong yes. You should double two hearts. It is true that your partner may bid spades and end up in a bad contract, but it DOES NOT HAVE TO happen unless you are one of the truly unlucky bidders in the world. Here is a guarantee.

If you hear your RHO opponent open with two hearts and you do not contest with a double, you will miss out on many hands.

Look at the good things that can happen. Your partner may have a five card spade suit. He may have four good ones. He may bid clubs, or diamonds or no trump. Perhaps, if the opponents compete, your partner can double them.

At the least, your side may be able to push them one trick too high. Look for reasons to bid, not reasons to pass. Be OPTIMISTIC if you have any excuse to do so.

NO ONE VULNERABLE: RHO BIDS 2H. YOUR CALL?

S KJ1042 H 532 D A8 C AK9

Bid two spades. This is a fairly good hand, but one that needs a fit or some high cards from your partner to make game. If your partner has an ordinary seven points, you will probably make two spades and don't rate to make much more. If your partner has nine or more points, he will bid if he has a fit and you will go one.

One thing you should NOT do with this hand is double. Your partner will bid a minor suit much of the time and that will leave you to wonder whether to bid spades at the three level. Seldom will you double when you have a good five card suit to show.

NO ONE VULNERABLE RHO BIDS 2D. YOUR CALL?

S KQ763 H Q8 D Q43 C K52

Hands like this one try your will power. You would bid one spade after an opening one diamond bid, but against a two diamonds you should pass. The Rule of Seven tells you this, as well as good judgment. Your hand is supposed to be worth twelve points plus one for shape, but that is optimistic. Even if you count this hand as being worth twelve points, the Rule of Seven says you have less than twenty points which is not enough to make two spades.

There is a hidden danger to bidding two spades that you should be aware of.

Let's take a short trip to the other side of the table. What does your partner expect from you? What should he do when he has a good hand with spade support? Should he try to guess that you have a real overcall or do you want him to infer that you are stepping out of line?

NORTH HAND: S AJ92 H A732 D 106 C Q94

SOUTH HAND: S KQ763 H Q8 D Q43 C K52

If these are the two hands, you have a potential to go down in three spades, let alone four. If I held the north hand I would raise to game and would be sad to see that it had no play at all. This hand should be easy except for players who just can't stand to sit still. You have a hand that would be happy to bid one spade over one diamond, but here the bidding is at the two level.

Just because your opponent has preempted does not mean it is safe to bid.

Some of the biggest penalties come when someone unwisely bids against a preemptive bid. Your judgment should warn you that bidding with this hand is dangerous. Listen to it.

Here is another hand. No one vulnerable. RHO bids 2S. What is your call?

S K3 H 4 D A9873 C KJ874

The first question is whether to bid and if you decide the hand is worth a bid, the second question is what to bid.

As to whether to bid. The Rule of Seven says you should pass. Competing for nine tricks requires in the vicinity of 23 points. You can trust (wish) that your partner has seven. Let's pretend that you have the same distribution, but had another ace to make the hand worth bidding with.

What should your bid be? Do I hear any votes for TWO NOTRUMP? I wish I had the ability in this format to have a show of hands. I bet that a number of players here would choose to bid two notrump, thinking they were showing the minor suits. This bid can work, but I hate this treatment. Here is why. There is a much better way for you to play a two notrump overcall. Here it is.

RULE ONE: A two notrump bid over a weak two bid shows a strong balanced hand. Typically, you have about 15 to 19 high card points and a stopper in their suit. The reason that this is the preferred treatment is that it is more important to show a good balanced hand than a hand with both minors.

Showing a strong notrump hand may allow you to bid a game. Showing a hand with the minor suits may get you just to a part score. The next hand will help put this in perspective.

NO ONE VULNERABLE: RHO bids 2S. Your call?

S KQ7 H 98 D AK98 C KQ83

This is a nice hand, but it won't be easy to bid now that your RHO opened with two spades. How should you handle this hand? I think it is agreed that you have to bid something. Bidding a four card suit is not right, so you must choose between double and two notrump. Double, I can promise, you is terrible. Your partner will bid hearts much of the time and you will have to bid three notrump just to avoid putting this hand down in dummy.

That could be too high. Passing three hearts does not feel right either.

MUCH better than doubling and then wondering what to do later when your partner bids three or four hearts is for you to bid two notrump over two spades. This is a descriptive bid which your partner can accurately respond to. Your partner can bid stayman asking for a major, he can raise notrump with eight or nine or more points. If you use transfer bids you can use them here too, as well. Finally, your partner can pass if he has a bad hand. If you double, you will often get to three notrump on hands where your partner would have been happy to have passed you in two notrump.

Isn't it better to make a bid that gets his opinion?

REMINDER - When the opponents' rudeness has made life difficult for you, you have to cater your bidding to show the important hands that you have. Showing a strong notrump hand is more important than showing the minor suits.

I can almost hear someone asking me what to bid when you have a good hand with both minor suits. Bid them. Overcall in your longer suit (diamonds if you have equal length) and hope for the best. The result may or may not be beautiful.

In return for this imperfect moment, you will be able to handle your balanced hands with 15-18 high card points with a clear conscience. It is a fair tradeoff.

NO ONE VULNERABLE RHO bids 2S. Your call?

S QJ7 H 93 D AKQJ98 C AQ

Bid three notrump. The jump to three notrump over a weak two bid is unusual. It does not show a huge balanced hand. It shows a source of tricks, usually a running minor suit, a stopper in their suit, and a smattering of other high cards.

If you have a big balanced hand, you start out with a takeout double.

Partner makes his bid and you follow, usually, by bidding three notrump.

By doubling first and then bidding three no trump, you tell partner you have a balanced hand that is bigger than a two notrump overcall.

When you bid three notrump directly over a weak two bid, you are showing a good hand that did not want to make a takeout double first. The hand you have here: Over 2S

S QJ7 H 93 D AKQJ98 C AQ

bids three notrump rather than double. You would not want your partner to insist on hearts with your two small ones. That might happen if you double two spades.

NOTE that three notrump is not a shutout bid. You are saying you have a good hand with a long solid suit (usually a minor), a stopper, and something on the side. Since you are showing a hand that expects to make three notrump, you are obviously showing a good hand. If he has a bad hand he should pass three notrump and take his chances.

One other bid to avoid with the above hand is three diamonds. It is not strong enough.

N-S (you) VULNERABLE. RHO bids 2D. Your call?

S AK H KQJ872 D 3 C KJ92

Don't forget to bid the value of your hand. Jump to three hearts. When you jump to three hearts, you tell partner you can make game if he has a few useful points.

NOTE this distinction

If you make a simple overcall, you are telling partner that if he has seven points, he should view it as normal and he ought to pass.

If you make a JUMP overcall, you are telling partner that if he has seven points, he should bid.

A big difference which your partnership must become aware of. If partner has something, he can bid and if he does not, you will stay in three hearts.

Don't be lazy. Say you have a bigger hand yet.

NO ONE VULNERABLE. RHO bids 2D. Your call?

S AK H AQJ10874 D 3 C A104

With this mountain you must bid four hearts. Don't just bid three on a hand that is so good it will make game opposite virtually nothing.

BIDDING WHEN THEY OPEN WITH A THREE BID

Bidding after a three level preempt is tougher because the bidding is higher and therefore more dangerous. The Rule of Seven will help you some of the time. Judgment will remain a necessary ingredient. I beg of you that you do one thing for me. DO NOT get caught up in the spirit of the moment. Follow the guidelines for bidding and not your heart. You no doubt have been stolen from more than once. Allow it to happen again. There is no dishonor in letting an opponent steal from you.

There is, however, a dishonor of a different sort if you try too hard. Do you know what down four, doubled, is vulnerable? It is -1100. That is the kind of price that you do not want to pay, but will pay if you refuse to be patient.

BOTH VULNERABLE. RHO bids 3H. Your call?

S AQ976 H 53 D A1043 C Q5

Not a three spade bid over 3H. The level of the bidding makes all the difference in the world. Many demerits to anyone who doubled with this hand. You surely would not do this, but if you know someone who might, you can give them some good advice. Doubling will be a disaster if partner bids clubs. Your hand will not be good enough to save you.

BOTH VULNERABLE. RHO bids 3H. Your call?

S 86 H A8 D AJ3 C AQ10975

This is a scary hand. If you don't like it, join the rest of us who are also shivering in our respective boots. The Rule of Seven suggests that this hand should pass. This is one of the cases where you can be extra optimistic. The bid I suggest is three notrump. Lovely? Not at all. The key to doing this is that if you make it you get a healthy reward. If you get doubled, you can reconsider, a scary enough decision to have to make.

The trouble with bidding four clubs is that you may find that you COULD have made three notrump. Better to bid three notrump and worry about clubs later if you have to. Remember that you can't get from four clubs into three notrump. Not in any of the bridge clubs I've played in. There is a name for this three notrump and it is not named "stupid". It really does have a name.

THE NOTRUMP OPTION

The "Notrump" Option refers to the situation where your RHO has made a three level preempt. You have a hand that feels like it is worth bidding with. If you are thinking of bidding four of a minor, stop and consider if it might be better to bid three notrump. This guideline stems from Bob Hamman's often quoted observation that "if three notrump is a sane bid, it is probably the right bid". Using this guideline, you would, or should, bid three notrump over three hearts with all of these hands. If you bid three notrump on some hand and it doesn't work, call Bob, not me.

NO ONE VULNERABLE. RHO bids 3H.

S AQ H K43 D A843 C KQJ9

With just two spades.

NO ONE VULNERABLE. RHO bids 3H.

S J H Q83 D AKQJ83 C AQ7

Partner is allowed to have a spade stopper and a few points. This is a much wiser bid than bidding four diamonds or doubling. Three notrump gets you that game bonus. Four diamonds may not do that. You should keep this hand in mind for future reference.

NO ONE VULNERABLE. RHO bids 3H.

S J3 H AQ98 D AQJ8 C KQ8

Bid three notrump. If you don't bid, who will? If you pass, you rate to end up defending three hearts, getting a small reward for your silence.

RULE - If you are thinking about competing with a double or a simple overcall, use the Rule of Seven. If you are thinking about bidding a game, you may be a little more aggressive. The rewards make this extra risk worthwhile.

OUR LAST HAND

BOTH VULNERABLE. RHO bids 2D. Your call?

S AQJ86 H QJ953 D A8 C 5

Bid three diamonds. This is a cue bid showing something special. It says you have both major suits and the values to be bidding. If you already play the Michaels cue bid you know about this bid. You can use it over a preempt too.

IMPORTANT NOTE - This discussion only applies when they open with two or three diamonds or three clubs. If they open with a major suit preempt, a cue bid by you has a different meaning which I will talk about some other day. This is a fine tool to have because hands with 5-5 in the majors are hands you need to be able to show before the opponents take away your bidding room. Look how awkwardly placed you will be if you are not using this cue bid. You can use it over a preempt too.

BE SURE, if you use this bid you have a suitably good hand. If you have 5-5 and just nine or ten points and they open with 2D, you have to pass.

NO ONE VULNERABLE. RHO bids 2D. Your call?

S Q9873 H AQ832 D Q7 C 9

Pass. Do not bid three diamonds. You are too weak to start a war at the three level.

Discipline is all important when it comes to using conventions.

Conventions are important, but the judgment behind them is more important yet.

Final Note: Jumps over a preempt need to be stronger, because LHO has more info than you do.

In balancing seat, the reopening bidder can open with a bit less than it would take to make the same bid in the immediate seat. Much like bidding one spade over a one bid. You can reopen with one spade on less than you need to OVERCALL one spade.