

Random pre-empts are best

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR). Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

AN average player who watched me play would probably conclude that my pre-emptive style was random. For example, playing in my regular partnership, I would open 3♣ in first seat at Love All on both:

♠ 7 ♥ 862 ♦ 85 ♣ AQJ9752
♠ 7 ♥ 862 ♦ J985 ♣ Q9752

'But how is partner supposed to judge what to do?' is probably the immediate reaction that many of you will have. And, therein lies the major difference in philosophy between random and disciplined pre-emptive styles.

The point is that bridge is a percentage game, and opening a pre-empt is essentially a gamble: your pre-empt is likely to force the player with the good hand to guess. When you are the dealer, though, the odds are hugely in your favour as it is a 2:1 bet that an opponent holds the strong hand rather than your partner.

The most likely result of opening 3♣ on the second hand above is that an opponent with a balanced 20-count will bid 3NT. Of course, he may make it, but the upsides to this auction are huge... Think about the times when your partner opens 2NT. How often do you just raise to game? I doubt it is as often as a quarter of the time. More likely, you either use Stayman or transfer to a major before one of you decides which game to play. When the auction begins (3♣) – 3NT – (Pass), you have no such options.

Occasionally, too, you pass partner's opening 2NT (and often even that is too high) and, of course, sometimes you make a slam try. With something like a balanced 8-14 count facing a 2NT opening bid, it will usually be obvious whether to raise to game, invite slam with a quantitative raise, or drive

to slam. Your decision will be fairly straightforward facing a partner who has shown 20-22 points (or some similar narrow range). When the auction starts (3♣) – 3NT – (Pass), partner could have anywhere from a good 16-count to a 26-count. Slam could be cold when you hold an 8-count, or 4NT could be too high facing a 16-count. How strong a hand do you need for a quantitative raise to 4NT when partner overcalls 3NT? Are you sure that you and your regular partner would give the same answer to this question? If not, how does the overcaller know when he has enough to accept the invitation? It all sounds like an awful lot of guessing, doesn't it?

Let's recap the possible plusses of opening 3♣: the opponents will sometimes bid the wrong game, sometimes overbid to game when their partner is broke, and will have a tough time judging when they are in the slam zone; sometimes they will play in 3NT or 4NT with twelve easy tricks and sometimes they will bid a hopeless slam. All of these will provide significant swings to your side, particularly if the opponents are vulnerable.

What about the downsides? Yes, partner might hold the good hand. If he decides to take a shot at 3NT, it may well go down when your hand is poor. If he passes, you may miss a game that would have made when you have the good hand. Don't forget, though, that you are non-vulnerable, so scoring +110 rather than +400 or going down in 50s when you could make +110 are not disasters. Ah, but what about those huge penalties you're bound to concede, I hear you say. Of course, that will happen occasionally, but far less frequently than you might think. Besides, losing 800 when the opponents can make anything from 620 to 1440 is no disaster.



Marc Smith

THE DEBATE

Let me stress again that my argument is largely based on the assumption that you are non-vulnerable as dealer. This is the position when the odds most favour opening with random pre-empts. If you are in second seat, for example, then your 2:1 as dealer odds have now become an even-money shot – if someone has a good hand, it is either LHO or partner. You should still be aggressive, but rule out opening on hands such as ♠ Jxxxx ♥ xx ♦ xxx ♣ xxx. Essentially, up the lower limit of your range just a little. Pre-empting when vulnerable is a different ball game, and I suspect that I would then agree more closely with Frances's view of what a pre-empt looks like.

The point about random pre-empts is that they are only 'random' within the agreed parameters, which should be dependent on position and vulnerability. It is a bit like opening 1NT on a 1-4-4-4 10-count. To anyone watching, this might look like a random action, and it is unless your agreed method is a mini no-trump that may include a singleton. If that is your system, then the opening bid becomes quite normal. Similarly, if your agreement is that non-vulnerable in first seat an opening 2♠ shows thirteen cards, some of which are black, then you are at liberty to open any hand that takes your fancy since partner will know to tread warily. If, however, you have agreed that a 2♠ opening shows 6-10 HCP and a six-card suit including two of the top three honours, and you then open a hand that does not meet these criteria, that is random.

In summary, you should be very disciplined within the confines of your agreed system. But when deciding what those confines are, you should stretch the boundaries as much as possible in certain favourable positions. □



Frances Hinden

Disciplined pre-empts are best

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WHAT is the point of a pre-empt? Is it to improve the score you expect to get on the hand, or is it just to make the result more random? Randomness is only desirable if you would expect to do badly without it, but as most bridge players like to believe themselves better than their opponents, very few should want to increase the volatility of their results.

A perfect pre-empt does a number of things. It tells partner what your hand looks like, allowing him to make a decision based on your combined assets, while forcing the opponents to start exchanging information at a higher level. For this to work, a pre-empt needs to be all of: weak in high cards (so taking away opponents' space is a good thing), a well-defined hand (so that partner can make an informed decision) and a hand with some playing strength (so the right contract is not two levels lower). It should not have a strong side-suit, as a pre-emptor expects to have his suit as trumps. How can partner know what to do if your 3♥ opening may be any one of the following?

♠ 2 ♥ J109432 ♦ 32 ♣ KQ32
 ♠ Void ♥ AJ105432 ♦ A83 ♣ 742
 ♠ J3 ♥ KJ109632 ♦ 843 ♣ 7

In first seat non-vulnerable, the first of these should be a normal pass, the second is an Acol light 1♥ opening and only the third is a disciplined 3♥ opening.

It's true that keeping your pre-empts disciplined has disadvantages. The first is

that your opponents also know a lot about your hand, and the second is that overall you may pre-empt less often. I believe that helping partner do the right thing is more important than hiding information from the opponents: even if they know what you have, they are still guessing as they have to describe their hands at a higher level. As for having to pass more frequently, that is true to an extent, but often it is better to learn more about the deal's potential at a lower level than by guessing immediately. If you really don't like passing, you can always play a very light style of pre-empts and opening bids; just follow the same requirement of clear definition. As long as partner knows what playing strength you promise for a pre-empt he can decide whether it is right to pass, to double for penalties or to save. If you can have anything, then he cannot make a useful contribution to the auction.

Discipline is completely different to conservatism. A conservative style would be the classical 'Rule of Two and Three' – expecting to be three off non-vulnerable or two off vulnerable opposite nothing useful in partner's hand. In *The Complete Book of Bridge* (1973), Terence Reese and Albert Dormer mandate a pass, vulnerable, with ♠ 72 ♥ KQ109832 ♦ 104 ♣ J5. I doubt anyone would pass on this hand today. Discipline means having a clear agreement about what constitutes a pre-empt, and sticking to it. If partner opens 3♠ in first seat non-vul. against vul. on:
 ♠ Q109xxx ♥ x ♦ Jxxx ♣ xx,

that is perfectly disciplined, because it is exactly the type of hand I expect, neither:
 ♠ KQ109xx ♥ x ♦ Jxx ♣ xxx
 (a 2♠ opening), nor:

♠ AQ10xxx ♥ x ♦ Kxxx ♣ xx
 (a 1♠ opening). Similarly, if partner opens 1♠ in first seat and the next hand doubles, it is perfectly disciplined to bid 4♠ on:
 ♠ 765432 ♥ 2 ♦ 5432 ♣ 32,
 because that is what we have agreed the bid shows: a lot of spades and no defence. What I can't do is also bid 4♠ with:
 ♠ KQxx ♥ AQxxx ♦ xxx ♣ x.
 With that I must show a hand worth game on strength.

A disciplined pre-emptor looks carefully at both position and vulnerability before bidding. Just as even the most undisciplined player restrains themselves when opening in fourth seat when there is no strong hand to pre-empt, so the disciplined player loosens up in other positions. Non-vulnerable vs vulnerable with a passed partner, a preemptive opening or overcall can be wide range. Now you know that it is the opponents' hand; you also know that partner does not have a pre-empt of his own so there is little point in treading carefully. The only consideration is the size of the possibly penalty compared to their game or slam. After a pass from partner and a strong 1♣ opening on my right (Precision or similar) then anything from ♠ KQJx ♥ x ♦ xxxx ♣ xxxx to ♠ 10xxxxxx ♥ xx ♦ xx ♣ xx looks like a 2♠ overcall to me.

To conclude, a repetition of the most important point. If your opponents come up with all sorts of undisciplined pre-empts, that means they are trying to randomise the results and hence that otherwise they must expect to lose. Remember that makes you better players. □

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