**All about pre-empts**

Effective pre-empting and how to optimise our bidding against pre-empts

By Stefan Skorchev

**Effective pre-empting**

 The basic agreement for a pre-empt is to have a hand with a long suit and less than opening values – with 6 cards you jump to the 2 level and with 7 cards you tend to go to the 3 level. It all sounds nice and simple. However, do you think the experts follow the same basic rules?

You got that right – they don’t.

Before setting up a new approach of how to be more effective with our pre-empts, let’s first understand why we pre-empt at all. The aims of a pre-empt are:

* To interrupt the opponents’ bidding by cutting short their bidding space;
* To reach a contract ourselves – either to make it or as a sacrifice.

In Bridge we say ‘a sacrifice’ to describe the situation when one side intentionally bids a contract they know they cannot make but going off, even doubled, will see them lose fewer points compared to defending the opponents’ contract. For example, both sides are vulnerable, the opponents get to 4♥ which can make and give them 620 points, but instead you go to 4♠, get doubled and go two off to only lose 500 points – this is a successful sacrifice. However, if you fail by three, then you will lose 800 points, which is more than their makeable game – therefore an unsuccessful sacrifice.

The good sacrifices are a great way to improve your results at duplicates. That’s why you need an accurate evaluation to know if a sacrifice will be successful or not.

**Evaluating pre-emptive hands**

Counting ‘high card points’ (HCP) might be a good idea if you have a (semi-)balanced hand but with a distributional hand you will get a much more accurate evaluation by counting your losers. Based on this, you will find out the number of ‘playing tricks’ (PTs) you’ve got.

Counting losers is very simple and it is based on the lack of Aces, Kings and Queens in all four suits in our own hand.

Playing tricks are the number of tricks our hand will presumably take if declaring a contract in its longest suit. You can evaluate the number of playing tricks by subtracting the number of losers from the 13 cards you hold in your hand.

Example:

♠ AKQ852 -missing none of the top three cards, therefore no losers in ♠;

♥ 942 -missing all three top cards, therefore 3 losers in ♥;

♦ 73 -missing all three top cards, but we only follow twice, therefore 2 losers in ♦;

♣ T6 -exactly the same as the diamond suit – 2 losers in ♣.

 That is a total of 7 losers.

Now subtract the number of losers from the number of cards in your hand (13) and you will come down to:

13 cards – 7 losers = 6 playing tricks

Here are a few more hands to test your evaluation skills:

Hand A Hand B Hand C Hand D

♠ 72 ♠ 84 ♠ 72 ♠ 84

♥ 83 ♥ AQJ7532 ♥ 8 ♥ AQJ753

♦ KQJ7432 ♦ 852 ♦ KQJ743 ♦ 8

♣ 94 ♣ T ♣ JT63 ♣ T864

Hand A: Spades, hearts and clubs contain two losers each (total of 6) + 1 loser for the missing ♦A is a total of 7 losers, therefore 6 PTs.

Hand B: 2 losers in spades, 1 loser in hearts, 3 losers in diamonds and 1 loser in clubs is again 7 losers and 6 PTs;

Hand C: 2 losers in spades, 1 in hearts, 1 in diamonds and 3 losers in clubs is once again 7 losers and 6 PTs;

Hand D: 2 losers in spades, 1 in hearts, 1 in diamonds and 3 losers in clubs – 7 losers and 6 PTs.

Comparing hand A to hand C and hand B to hand D, we can see that they have the same value in terms of playing tricks, although the length in the main suit is different. This brings us to the conclusion that a 6-4 shape in our longest suits, in terms of playing strength, equals a 7-card suit. How come? When we hold 4 cards in a suit, even without an honour, it is highly probable that we will develop at least one extra trick in that suit – either with a little help from partner or if the suit breaks favourably – for example, if everyone else holds 3 cards in that same suit where you have 4 cards, by playing the suit three times, you will remain with a winning card in the end.

**Strength of the pre-emptor’s main suit and side values**

 Pre-empting on a bad suit may lead to a few problems:

* you may get penalised more easily as the opponents may have the high cards you are missing;
* if you lose the bidding, partner may make a bad lead in your weak suit and give a trick away;
* considering a sacrifice, partner is highly likely to make a wrong evaluation, not only in how many off we are going but also if we can beat their contract (if we have a bad suit, we will have too much defensive value on the side).

To avoid the above, the partnership needs to set an expected strength of the pre-empting suit. As a guideline:

-Pre-empting at the 2 level: have at least 2 of the honours (A, K, Q, J);

-Pre-empting at the 3 level: have 2 out of the top 3 cards (A, K, Q) or only one of them accompanied by JT;

-Pre-empting at the 4 level: on a 7-card suit – 3 out of the top 5 cards; on a 6-card suit – have 4 out of the top 5 cards in the suit – a ‘self-sufficient’ suit.

In terms of side strength – we must not have much value on the side. Aces, Kings and Queens in side suits are considered defensive values and they might be enough to beat the opponent’s contract but partner may go for a sacrifice, not expecting us to help much in defence. A sensible agreement is to hold up to at most one defensive card in all side suits together.

**The Rule of Two, Three, Four**

‘The rule of two, three, four’ is all about selecting the most optimal level at which we should be placing our pre-emptive bid. There are two main factors to be considered – the vulnerabilities and the number of playing tricks our pre-emptive hand has.

There are four kinds of vulnerabilities:

1. We are vulnerable, they are not – also called unfavourable;

2. Both sides are not vulnerable;

3. Both sides are vulnerable;

4. We are not vulnerable, they are – also called favourable.

2. and 3. are considered very similar and should be put into the same category – equal vulnerabilities. This leaves us with three different categories of vulnerabilities, each of which we will act on differently:

1. **Unfavourable** vulnerabilities – **add 2 tricks** to the value of your hand;

2. **Equal** vulnerabilities – **add 3 tricks** to the value of your hand;

3. **Favourable** vulnerabilities – **add 4 tricks** to the value of your hand.

 Now, when we know how many playing tricks we have in our hand, we have to add the extra tricks assigned to the corresponding vulnerability and this will gives us the level at which we should pre-empt.

 For example:

They’ve opened 1♥ in front of us, and we need to bid with:

♠ KQJ9753 ♥ 73 ♦ 852 ♣4 – 1 loser in ♠, 2 losers in ♥, 3 in ♦ and 1 in ♣ - 7 losers – 6 PTs

-in unfavourable vulnerabilities – 6 PTs + 2 added tricks = 8 => overcall 2♠

-in equal vulnerabilities – 6 PTs + 3 added tricks = 9 => overcall 3♠

-in favourable vulnerabilities – 6 PTs + 4 added tricks = 10 => overcall 4♠

**Sacrificing**

Before considering a sacrifice, we need to think first how likely is their contract to make – if we are not confident they will make their contract – do not sacrifice; and if we are confident they will make their contract, we need to evaluate how many tricks is our partnership is likely to make and if it is worth sacrificing.

For a start, we need to know how many points doubled undertricks lose.

Doubled undertricks

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Non-vulnerable | Vulnerable |
| -1 | 100 | 200 |
| -2 | 300 | 500 |
| -3 | 500 | 800 |
| -4 | 800 | 1100 |

\*Add 300 for every extra undertrick

 Considering the table above and the playing strength of partner according to the vulnerabilities, we make a fair estimation of how much we can contribute and we decide how to act. Consider also how many points would they take for making their contract.

 For example:

 The left-hand opponent opened 1♥, partner overcalled with 4♠ with favourable vulnerability, right-hand opponent bid 5♥, and we need to decide what to bid holding:

♠ A82 ♥ A9 ♦ 9763 ♣ 8632

1. Can we beat their contract? Unlikely. We can make ♥A for sure but then we may not make a spade and partner is not likely to help much with defensive power;
2. Should we sacrifice? In favourable vulnerabilities, if they make 5♥, it means they will get 650 points, in the meantime if we go 3 off in 5♠ we will only lose 500 points. To go 3 off we need to take 8 tricks. Partner is expected to have 6 playing tricks (added four for the favourable vulnerabilities to overcall at the 4 level) and we have 2 tricks to help with – this means that we are expected to collect 8 tricks playing in spades and at the 5 level we are going 3 off losing 500 points, therefore go for the sacrifice. (Comparing that hand with partner’s hand from the previous example, we can see how this works in practice)

**Disclaimer**

* Do not pre-empt if partner is not a passed hand and we have 4-card major suit on the side – we may miss finding a game/slam in that 4-card major suit;
* Deciding whether to pre-empt with only 6 cards in the main suit at level 4 – do have a self-sufficient suit (4 out of the top 5 cards) – to guarantee trump control, even opposite a singleton/void in partner’s hand;
* Do not have more than one potential defensive trick in total (A, K or Q) in all side suits;
* Do not pre-empt higher than 4 of a major or 5 of a minor level;
* The pre-emptor doesn’t bid again! (unless asked to – after 2N relay or a cue-bid).

**Optimising our bidding against pre-empts**

 Why does everybody play Stayman? Because it works. Why does everybody play pre-empts? Yes, because they work. Pre-empts are meant to make our lives difficult, accept it! No matter how great a player you are, pre-empts may make you miss your best possible contract.

 To cope with pre-empts, we need to be practical – look for the best game/part-score. Do not think of a slam that much – finding the best game will be already a success.

Pre-empts suggest uneven breaks not only in the pre-emptor’s hand but in all other hands – odd distributions are often the reason we fail in slams, it is not all about keycards.

There are two different situations to look at after a pre-empt:

* they opened with a pre-empt;
* partner opened and the opponent bids a pre-emptive jump overcall.

**They open with a pre-empt**

 *They open at the* ***4 level***

 Our options here are obviously very limited, that’s why we need solid agreements.

* Double is take-out – more balanced you are, more points you need to have to double, however with a shape 4441/5431 (shortage in their suit) – as little as 11-12 points will be enough;
* 4NT is used as a two-suited hand over 4M opener – over 4♥ opening, 4NT will show specifically the both minors, however if the opening bid is 4♠, the bid of 4N will suggest any two suits, therefore the responder needs to be careful with selecting the suit they prefer; for example, if we hold 2 cards in spades, 2 in hearts, 5 in diamonds and 4 in clubs, over bidding of (4♠)-4NT by partner, we must bid 5♣, not 5♦, because partner may have ♣ and ♥.

*They open at the* ***3 level***

* Double is take-out;
* Overcall of a suit at the three level suggests opening values and at least 6 cards in the suit (5 very strong cards will also do)
* If they open 3 of a minor, 4 of their minor promises 5-5 in both majors;
* If they open 3 of a major, 4NT promises the both minors but not a great hand;
* If they open 3 of a major, 4 of their major promises a great hand with at least 5-5 in any two suits;
* 3NT is natural, wide-ranging and not always balanced – it might be based on a good minor suit, for example – ♠ K5 ♥ A83 ♦ A4 ♣ AKQ975 – if they open 3 of a major, you must overcall 3NT on this hand; however to overcall 3NT you may just have a balanced hand with 15+ points and not appropriate shape to double, for example, they open 3♠ and you hold ♠ AJ6 ♥ 52 ♦ AK74 ♣ A752, you need to overcall 3NT; yes, you do need 25 points for a game but you cannot find that out and if you double partner may bid 4♥ which isn’t likely to go well, so just in terms of best chances – 3NT will be successful more often than not. There are different possibilities of how to proceed after 3NT overcall and they strictly depend on the partnership’s agreement, however you can still stick to stayman and transfers as long as you remember that a rebid of 4NT by the 3NT bidder suggests that the bid was based on a long minor suit and your partner is not excited about the majors.
* \*(Non)-Leaping Michaels – this is a convention adopted by some good partnerships; the convention says that if we bid 4 of an unbid minor over their 3 level pre-empt we show 5+ cards in the suit bid and 5 cards in an unbid major; for example if they open 3♠ and we bid 4 of a minor – this shows 5+ cards in that minor and 5 cards in ♥s; some partnerships play the (Non)-Leaping Michaels as a forcing bid and some don’t – it is up to you and your partner to agree that within the partnership; obviously if you decide to play Leaping Michaels, then you cannot overcall 4 of minor when you have a single-suited hand – you will need to then choose between pass, 3NT and 5 of a minor.

\*it is an optional convention and you don’t have to play it; however, if you decide to play it – make sure both players in the partnership have the same understanding in terms of length, strength and is it forcing or not.

*They open at the* ***2 level***

* Double is take-out – some partnerships play a convention called ‘Lebensohl’ as a continuation after the double – it is a helpful convention and regular partnerships dedicated on improving their bidding must strongly consider adopting it; however, if you are not playing with a regular partner it is strongly recommended to avoid any conventions which may bring confusion; to learn more about Lebensohl – search it online, there are countless sources providing detailed explanations;
* Overcall of a suit promises an opening hand with 6 cards (maybe 5 good cards);
* 2NT overcall promises 15-18 HCP, a balanced hand – stayman and transfers apply; if you play puppet stayman after 2NT opener, you can use it here too;
* 3 of their suit is a Michaels bid – after 2♦ pre-empt, a bid of 3♦ promises 5-5 in the majors and after 2 of a major pre-empt, 3 of their major promises 5 cards in the other major and 5 cards in one of the minors;
* (Non)-Leaping Michaels – 4 of a minor can still be 5 cards in a minor and 5 in a major with greater strength than the usual Michaels bid. It should be a forcing bid in this situation;
* 3NT is used as a balanced hand 19-22 HCP or eventually a strong hand with good minor suit, which is too scared to double in case partner bids 4 of a major.

**Partner opened and the opponent bids a pre-emptive jump overcall**

If partner opens a suit at the 1 level and the opponent makes a jump overcall, again, we are short of a bidding space and we can rely on the following options:

* Double is negative – it implies 4 cards in the unbid major and 8+ points at the two level, 10+ points at the three level – the point count can vary according to our shape – an important thing to look at is our holding in partner’s suit – having a singleton/void is a bad thing and then you should double on stronger hands than advised above; honour doubleton or third is great because if partner repeats their suit we can help for sure;
* Bidding a new suit promises at least 5 cards, 10+ HCP and is forcing for one round – if responder rebids that suit, it then promises 6 good cards and about 10-11 HCP, it is not forcing but it is invitational to game; For example:

1♣ - (2♥) - 2♠ - (Pass)

3♣ -(Pass)- 3♠ = the normal expectation is ♠ KQJ763 ♥ 954 ♦ A6 ♣ 52;

* Bidding 2NT/3NT – bid 2NT if you have 10-12 HCP and a stopper in their suit; bid 3NT with the same type of hand and 13+ HCP; do not worry if you don’t have a stopper in one of the unbid suits, that is too much to worry about;
* Bid a cue-bid to show a good raise or better in partner’s suit; for example, your partner opens 1♠, the opponent overcalls with 3♥ and you hold 4 cards in spades and 14 HCP – you must bid 4♥, which says ‘I’ve got a constructive raise, partner’; a direct bid of 4♠ shows a distributional raise – say 5-5 shape and 6-9 HCP; Be aware that the cue-bid does not promise or deny a control in their suit and you should be careful with that if you decide to explore slam;
* 4NT is always a Roman Keycard Blackwood over opener’s suit.

Good luck exploring the world of pre-empts and remember that being consistent is one of the most important keys to win in this game – in a single hand anything can go wrong but in long term using the right approach will bring you good results.

**ENJOY BRIDGE!**