

Learning Points – Preempting and the Law of Total Tricks

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N Deals	♠ 10	
NS Vul	♥ KQ104	
	♦ KQJ9764	
Mike	♣ 3	Steve
♠ J95	N	♠ K842
♥ A652	W 21 E	♥ J7
♦ -	S	♦ 1083
♣ KQJ1072		♣ 9854
	♠ AQ763	<u>Duplimate:</u>
	♥ 983	NS: 6♦, 2♠,
	♦ A52	4♥, 4N
	♣ A6	E: 3♣ W: 2♣

North	East	South	West
1♦	Pass	1♠	3♣
3♦	4♣	Passed Out	
North led the ♦K			

Here's another hand from the recent Independence Ohio Regional January 2008 Open Pairs Flight B.

Preempts are an important tool in the defensive bidding arsenal. There has been much written about tactics and approach to deploying these obstructive bids. The Law of Total Tricks has impacted how these bids are used (some say misused), and can be a useful guide to helping defenders decide how high and how quickly to bid with typical preemptive hands. Psychological considerations include whether your opponent will bid beyond your side's pre-empt in any case, or are they cautious and likely to allow you to buy the hand at a lower level. The intent is to cause your opponents to make the last decision on less information – heightening risk and anxiety, and giving our opponents a chance to make a mistake.

Here's an example where preempting got in the way of opponents finding a thin but making slam.

The Bidding

North's opening is standard as is South's response. West can choose a number of actions. Double would show the unbid suits and the approximate playing strength but misstates the value of the club suit. 2♣ would represent the club suit well and might hide any heart fit from EW. 3♣ is obstructive and twice flawed (strength and side 4 card major). Since we overcall aggressively, West knows NS owns the auction and obstruction will be more valuable here than finding a speculative heart fit. NS appear to own spades so we will be outbid.

East counts 11 clubs, but has no count on a trump suit for NS (no fit agreed yet). Given favorable vulnerability and North's pass, East decides 4♣ is sufficient. There is some merit to jumping to 5♣, but here the lack of shortness in opponent's suits augurs for the lower call. Besides, the ♠K is likely not working. NS pass us out at 4♣. Arguably, South's pass was conservative, and wrong on a hand with so many tricks for both sides.

The Play

West made short work of the hand after North's ♦K lead. Declarer ruffed and led trumps. South won and returned a ♦. East ruffed, drew the last trump and led the ♠J, smothering North's ♠10, ducked to South's ♠Q. South returned the last ♦, ruffed by West. West cleared the ♠'s then lost only one heart (pitching two on dummy's good spades). Down 1 for -50 was worth 10 of 11 Match Points.

In the bidding, the South hand is worth a 4♦ bid (or 3N if you're aggressive) over the 3♣ preempt if only to warn South off spades. Note how 3N would limit slam exploration. South can then raise diamonds over the 4♣ bid by East. South's prime values (6 controls) make slam a possibility if partner has the right cover cards. North should have led the ♠10 in an attempt to score the ♣3 ruffing a spade.

The Law (of Total Tricks of Course)

This looks like a 19 trick hand (10 Clubs + 9 Diamonds = 19 Trumps). If we can make 8 tricks opponents should be able to make 11. Notice that we made 9 tricks, and the opponents can make 12 (in diamonds) for a total of 21 tricks. This deviation from the Law troubles many, though most all hands fall within ± 2 tricks. Wirgren and Lawrence's evaluation would point to 12 tricks for NS based on strength (25 HCP

combined) and 2 useful singletons. Larry Cohen would offer adjustments to the Law calculation that would get us close too (though too complex to add here). Net, the Law is a useful guide to get you close, but bridge judgment is necessary to get it right.

Preemptive Bids - Agreements

In general we expect a preempt to return a score no worse than the value of the game opponents will make. We are disciplined in 1st or 2nd seat, but take some liberties when we are not vulnerable against vulnerable opponents. Disciplined means length, texture, and tricks are within agreed limits:

- 1) **Suit Length:** 3 bids-7 cards; 4 bids-8 cards 5 bids-9.5 cards, 6 bids -11 cards.
- 2) **Defense:** Rarely as many as 2 defensive tricks, never 2 Aces.
- 3) **Texture:** Most HCP strength in suit bid – therefore the suit is usually a good suit. 2 top honors or better. The more strength we hold the more likely we are to double our opponents, not preempt them.
- 4) **Distribution:** devalue 7222 (consider bidding only 2), upvalue singletons and voids in opponent's know suit(s). Caution when holding a void in an unbid suit (it might be partner's suit). Not act on hands with 4 card majors – could get in the way of our best fit. Two suited hands OK but only at the 2 level (Weak Two Bid or preempt).
- 5) **Expected Score:** **-500** when sacrificing against Vulnerable opponents' game. **-200/300** when sacrificing against nonvulnerable opponents' game. Against slams we sacrifice if the field is likely to reach the slam, and if the score is likely equal or less than the value of the game the opponents just bypassed. If the defensive tricks are positioned poorly for defense, then sacrificing against a slam makes sense as long as the trump length and distribution tricks favor a sacrifice.
- 6) **Sacrifice early** – bid to the highest level appropriate immediately. This forces the opponents to make the last decision with much less information (and much more anxiety). Play to let them make mistakes.
- 7) **Preempter never bids again unless forced by PARTNER.** The only forcing bids we have are new suit bids and jump shifts where these bids are not game bids in their own right.
- 8) After partner's original pass we will preempt with one or two flaws in an otherwise suitable hand. Some play light preempts with fewer tricks and shorter suits. Ask!