Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

I have been taught that if you bid a preemptive bid, you should have an outside ace. My mother, who has taken many of your classes, tells me this is ridiculous. She also says you can preempt with only 6 points. Can you clear this up for me?

Cathy

Hi Cathy,

In this instance, Momma knows best! A normal preemptive opening bid rarely contains an outside ace. I concur with Momma that a preempt with 6 high-card points (or even less) is an option.

When your side has game or slam values, sound constructive bidding should be your goal. When the opponents have game or slam values, obstructive actions become desirable. In their quest for the best denomination and correct level, problems created by taking away bidding space may contribute to better results for your side. When opponents preempt my auctions, outwardly I smile, but inwardly … I feel like slapping them, because their actions inhibit my constructive alternatives.

Major factors governing preemptive decisions:

1. Position at the table

The best time to preempt is first seat, before the opponents begin to exchange information. Next best is third seat. Although the opponents have exchanged information by their inaction or action, you have gained information by virtue of your partner's failure to open, minimizing your need to be constructive. In fourth seat, there really is no such thing as a true preempt: With a long suit and a bad hand, pass quickly.

2. Vulnerability

The best scenario is when your side is not vulnerable and the opponents are vulnerable, *i.e.*, favorable. The worst is unfavorable (you are vulnerable, they are not). Somewhat neutral is equal vulnerability. Think of it as risk versus reward.

3. Partnership style and partner's sense of humor!

It is important to be consistent — consistently aggressive or consistently conservative. It is difficult to read a partner who swings from the trees on one deal, while on others is Mr. Rock Solid. While I have never knowingly created a poor result via one of my preempts, I have on more than one occasion secured a far less than desirable result due to an overly aggressive action … or at least that's what my partners think when I go for a "phone number" and the opponents at best had a partscore. As long as partner understands you are doing what you think is best, you have the freedom to do as you please.

First seat, favorable vulnerability, with a tolerant partner: the best of the best. You hold:

♠2 ♥8 4 ♦Q J 10 9 6 5 3 ♣9 7 2.

By my standards, this is a normal 3♦ bid. No outside ace, fewer than 6 HCP. You have two opponents plus a partner, and you're missing 37 HCP. If each of the other players holds a third of those, it is the opponents who hold the balance of power. Partner is warned to tread carefully, as your action takes away 11 levels of bidding the opponents may have needed.

Second seat, unfavorable, with a less understanding partner: the worst of the worst. You hold:

♠A K J 10 9 5 4 ♥8 ♦9 2 ♣10 5 3

A perfectly normal 3♠ bid.

Third seat, favorable vulnerability, a reasonable partner. You hold:

♠9 ♥8 7 6 2 ♦7 6 ♣K Q J 10 8 3

Open 3♣! You've probably heard, "Never preempt with a side four-card major" or "Three-level preempts guarantee seven-card suits." Poppycock! Balderdash! At this point in the auction, even if partner has passed a near-opening bid, the opponents rate to have near-game values. The singleton spade should make you nervous. You do not wish to hear partner bid spades, nor are you thrilled should the opponents be able to find spades. You almost have a seven-card suit, and you clearly have a need to be more obstructive than constructive. Yes, it is possible your side might miss a superior heart fit, but in that case the opponents are likely to outbid you in spades anyway. If the opponents do end up declaring, any idea of what suit you would like partner to lead?

Third seat, unfavorable, you hold: ➤