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This Week in Bridge

(301) Hand Evaluation Opposite Partner's Preemptive Opening

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Level: 2

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General

When partner opens the bidding in a suit at the 1-level then our picture of the strength and distribution of their hand is still somewhat blurry. Their values are wide ranging (12 to 20+ points) and little about their entire shape is known (balanced vs. unbalanced – 1-suiter, 2-suiter, very long suit?) In contrast, when partner opens the bidding with a preemptive opening bid (2-level or higher) we know their HCP range relatively well (usually they have about a 5 HCP range) and we expect their hand to be a 1-suiter (though occasionally they will have a 4-card suit on the side). With this better understanding of partner's hand, we are better able to predict the value of our cards for partner. Let's look at how our hand evaluation process and thoughts change when partner opens the bidding with a preempt.

Having a Fit

The most valuable asset we can have opposite a preemptive opening from partner is a fit for their suit. Having a fit means that our side is not likely to get into too much trouble. It also allows us to apply the Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) and extend the preempt (to the 3-level with a 9-card fit and the 4-level with a 10-card fit). The size of our fit is important, but so are our honor holdings in partner's suit. Any honor in partner's suit will be a good card (with the possible exception of a Jack or Queen when we have very large fits).

When we have a large Major suit fit, we can extend the preempt to game with a good hand or poor one - as long as we have a fit, game sometimes makes even when we have only a decent hand. But when partner preempts in a minor suit, things are more complicated. With a good hand we cannot just jump to game in their suit - we should consider whether 3NT is a playable contract as well.



Support Points

After partner makes a Major suit preempt and we have a fit for their suit, then we know that we are likely to play in that strain as the final contract. If we have both a fit for their suit and some outside shortness (a singleton or void) then we can add support points to our hand and re-evaluate. The number of support points that we had to our hand varies based on the size of our fit.

Example 1

Partner opens the bidding 2♠ and we hold

♠ Kx
♥ x
♦ Axxxx
♣ Axxxx

Here our singleton ♥ is not worth much because we will run out of trump before partner can ruff many ♥ losers.

Example 2

♠ Kxx
♥ x
♦ Axxx
♣ Axxxx

Here our singleton ♥ is worth more than in example 1.

Example 3

♠ Kxxx
♥ x
♦ Axx
♣ Axxxx

With this hand our singleton ♥ is worth a lot – we will be certain to lose at most one ♥ trick!

Cover Cards and Wasted Values

When partner has 6+ cards in a suit that leaves them at most 7 cards in the other suits. This means that if they have a 1-suited hand, we expect them to have 1-3 cards in each of the other suits (0 or 4 are possible for a preempt, but less common). Taking this into consideration can help us evaluate our hand more effectively. Expecting partner to have a doubleton on average in each outside suit allows us to understand what outside honor cards are likely to be useful for them:

- Ace is an excellent card! Expected to be a useful cover card.
- King is likely to be helpful for partner (likely cover).
- Queen will often not be helpful for partner (often wasted).
- Jack usually not helpful opposite partner's preempt (wasted).



Most Aces and Kings are good cards opposite a preempt. Queens & Jacks are not likely to be helpful to partner in their outside suits. Queens & Jacks are useful cards in partner's long suit (preempt suit) or in another suit where partner has 4-cards, but it can be difficult to determine where their 4-card side suit is located after a preempt.

Sources of Tricks

A time when outside Queens & Jacks can be extremely useful opposite a preempt is when they are part of an outside source of tricks that can be used to discard a significant number of preempt losers.

- AKQJx
- AKJTxx

Sometimes a source of tricks does not have to be a solid suit to produce discards. With enough outside entries a weaker suit, especially one headed by the Ace, can be ruffed out (establishing by trumping) and turned into a source of discards.

- Axxxxx
- AQxxxx
- AKJxx

Counting Winners

The traditional way of evaluating a hand in a suit contract is to count (or approximate) losers; this is what partner is likely to do when they see dummy. Often when partner has a long suit (their preempt suit) and we have a long suit of our own with many outside controls, then we can determine if game (or slam) is possible by counting winners instead of losers.

Example 4

♠ Axx
♥ x
♦ Axx
♣ AKxxxx

If partner opens the bidding 2♠ vulnerable, we expect them to have a decent ♠ suit. If partner has something like ♠KQxxxx, then slam is likely to be a good contract – we project 6♠, 1♦, and 5♣ tricks (possible a ♥ ruff as well).

Sometimes we can count 10 (or 12) winners but end up not making our contract because we have too many losers before we can collect our winners. To prevent this, we need to have controls in the other suits. So combining winners and controls (as in the example above) can allow us to bid game (or slam) with tricks and not many HCP.



Conclusion

Hand evaluation is a large and difficult concept. When partner preempts the bidding (showing a long suit, minimum values, and not many HCP outside their suit) this can actually help you better evaluate your hand. Your honors in partner's long suit are generally useful, but honors in the other three suits vary in helpfulness – partner likes Aces & Kings, dislikes Queens, and hates Jacks. Think about how your hand can be helpful for partner and try to determine if you have the right cards to make game (or slam) a good possibility.