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This Week in Bridge

(328) Opening Leads into Preemptive Opening Bids

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Level: 2

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General

Opening leads are difficult. Becoming good at this aspect of the game requires us to make use of a large amount of information all at one time. We must make use of the information from the past (the auction), the present (our holdings in each suit), and the future (predicting what will happen during the play). When declarer initially preempted the bidding (opened a 2-level or higher preempt), we have additional knowledge about their hand that can help us make a much better opening lead if we can properly make use of it. Let's take a look at how we might make an opening lead into a preemptive opening bid.

Length Leads

When the declarer has preempted the bidding, they have shown a hand with a long suit, usually 6+cards. They also usually have a single-suited hand (only occasionally having a mediocre 4-card outside suit). This means that they have distributions like:

- 6322
- 6331
- 6421
- 6430
- 7222, etc.

Declarer's losers (our potential tricks) are likely mostly located in their side suits (since when they preempt, they often have most of their honors located in their long suit). Notice that on these hand shapes above, the side suits of the declarer are relatively short. Generally, we are searching for declarer's 3-card side suit, as those are the suits where we can take some tricks before declarer can ruff our honors away.

As a statistical rule, the longer we are in a suit, the shorter declarer is likely to be in that suit. Of course, this is not always true, but when we have a long suit that leaves fewer cards in the suit to be in the declarer's hand. Normally (especially in notrump) we like to lead 4th best from our longest and strongest suit (assuming that we do not have a lot of touching honor cards), but against a preempt this is often not the best idea.



Example 1

Consider the following suits to lead from against a preemptive opening bid.

- Qxxxx – Extremely unlikely that preemptor is going to have 3 cards in this suit.
- Qxxxx - Unlikely that preemptor is going to have 3 cards in this suit.
- Qxxx – Possible, but still not a great chance that preemptor has 3 cards in this suit.
- Qxx – More likely to be a suit where the preemptor has 3 cards.

When leading into a preempt, leading from a shorter suit often gives us a better chance of developing our tricks into winners (before the declarer can find a way to discard their losers). It is usually better to lead from a 3-card or 4-card suit (3-card suit often being the best, if we have no other useful information) when leading into a preemptive opener.

Leads from Different Strengths

When we are choosing from different honor holdings to lead from against a preempting declarer, we still generally prefer to lead from touching honors.

Example 2

Which suit would you prefer to lead from against a preemptive opening bid?

- KQJxxxx
- KQJxx
- KQJ

The 3-card suit (KQJ only) is a better choice as we are more likely to get 2-3 tricks in this suit than from a longer holding.

When considering leading low from suits headed by different honors A, K, Q, or J we often must balance the risk and reward of each lead. On a random hand (say if the declarer originally opened 1NT), leading from a high honor, like a King, is often riskier than leading from a Queen. But when the declarer is a preemptive hand, then the chance that we lead into a holding that could cost us a trick (like AQ) is lower.

Example 3

♠ 95

♥ K53

♦ Q864

♣ K765

Consider making an opening lead from this hand against two different auctions:

Auction 1

1♠ 3♠

4♠

Auction 2

2♠ 4♠



Against auction 1, a ♥, ♦, or ♣ (or even a trump) could be the right lead. Often, we might try to lead from the safer honor (the ♦Q) or the longest suit with the King (♣). But against auction 2, a ♥ lead is more likely to be a winning action. Clearly this is not always going to be true, but the stronger honor and shorter suit are a more likely place for us to build tricks against a 4♠ contract.

Another way we may apply this aggressive opening lead concept is when considering leading away from a tenace.

Example 4 – Tenaces

Consider an opening lead from this hand against the two different auctions above (in *Example 3*).

♠ 97

♥ 74

♦ KJ2

♣ JT9643

Against auction 1, the ♣ lead seems clear. But against auction 2, both a passive ♣ lead and an active ♦ lead should be considered. It is not completely clear which lead is best (other values like vulnerability, etc.) should be taken into account, but I would likely lead a ♦ before a ♣ when leading into a preemptive opening bid.

Trump and Other Leads to Consider

We could go on and on considering many different auctions and holdings, but when leading against a preempt, a trump lead can be useful when we think that the dummy will have some ruffing values.

Example 5

♠ A6

♥ T654

♦ AQ6

♣ KJ64

2♠ X 4♠ All Pass

Against this auction we could guess which of the other three suits to lead or we could start with the ♠A, see the dummy, and then decide whether to continue passively with another ♠ (or continue ♠ to attack dummy's ruffing values) or get aggressive and shift to a ♣ or ♦.

There are many times where we may choose a far more aggressive opening lead than normal when the declarer is a preemptive hand. This may even include laying down an unsupported Ace (in any suit, not just the trump suit) if the auction suggests that we need to take our tricks before they disappear.



Conclusion

In general, opening leads are an artful balance of risk and reward. But when we are leading into a weaker land (like a preempt) then the risk of leading a way from a strong holding is much less than when we lead into a stronger hand (like a 1NT Opener). The bottom line is that when the declarer originally opened the bidding with a preempt, you should tend to lead more often from your stronger and shorter suits than in other auctions.