

Pre-empting Today

by Brian Senior

When I first took up bridge, we were taught something called The Rule of 500. What it said was that if you pre-empted and were left to play there doubled, you should not go for more than -500. In other words, a vulnerable three-level opener should have seven tricks and non-vulnerable six tricks.

I don't think I have ever adhered to such a rigid rule, and I suspect that very few other people have done so either, even back then in the mists of time. But the fact that such an idea could exist and be accepted as standard shows how things have changed over the years. Opening pre-empts today are much looser even for the mass of players, while I believe that they should get even looser, and that is what I see from the younger generation of international and strong tournament players.

Let us be clear: the modern trend still takes vulnerability into account, and also position at the table. At whatever level you pre-empt, you need a better hand, and in particular better suit, when vulnerable, and you should be sounder in second seat than in first or third. That is logical - once one opponent has passed the odds have shifted significantly and there is a much enhanced risk that a random-style opening will pre-empt partner rather than the opposition.

But, where most of us were taught that we required seven cards to open at the three level and six at the two level (indeed, the EBU once had a regulation that a weak two opening *had* to contain at least six cards), that conservative approach is long gone for most strong players.

What would you open with these hands, first-in-hand at favourable vulnerability?

1)	♠	K J 10 7 5	2)	♠	Q 8 7 6 3 2	3)	♠	6
	♥	6 3		♥	5 4		♥	Q J 10 9 7 6
	♦	8 7 6 4		♦	Q J 4 2		♦	J 10 9 4
	♣	5 2		♣	7		♣	7 2
4)	♠	7 5	5)	♠	K Q J 10 8 7	6)	♠	K 10 9 8 6 5
	♥	K Q J 9 7 5 4		♥	J 10 4 2		♥	J 10 4 2
	♦	-		♦	7		♦	Q 2
	♣	10 5 3 2		♣	9 3		♣	3

Example 1) is a weak 2♠ opening for me, though it falls far short of traditional requirements for a weak two opening. I would also open hand 2) with a weak two bid, though the main suit is pretty poor, and example 3) I would open a level higher. The key difference with example 3) is the excellent impletion in the trump suit (impletion is a clever word for stuffing). The hand has decent playing strength, which is added to by the side suit, and absolutely no defence - the perfect time to pre-empt to the maximum. I would open this hand at the two level if vulnerable and would be tempted to do the same with example 2), though I think the weak trumps suggest caution.

Example 4) looks like an obvious 4♥ opener and I would even be tempted to do this when vulnerable, though 3♥ might be the wiser choice. Hand 5) and hand 6) go together to illustrate an approach which would have been anathema to the experts of 40 or 50 years ago. I would open 3♠ (for the same reason as example 3)), and 2♠ respectively, not worrying about the four-card major side-suit.

The point of all this is to pre-empt as often as possible. It makes life tough for the opposition. Yes, it can also be tough for partner should he have the strong hand, but there is one of him and two of them, and we should play the odds. The old rules for pre-empting were based on bridge being a two-handed game - so we wanted to give partner a good idea what our hand looked like, and this was almost more important than doing nasty things to the opposition. The new rules are that anything goes because we now understand that bridge is a four-handed game. If we cause problems for the opposition far more often than for partner, and perhaps create new opportunities for him along the way, we may pick up some very bad results which could have been

avoided by a more conservative approach, but we will assuredly pick up a lot more good results as well. For example, the rule about not having a four-card major on the side was in case we had a fit and a making contract in that suit and to pre-empt would see us lose the fit. But most of the time such a fit does not exist, and on that majority of deals the pre-empt doesn't hurt our side at all but does put pressure on our opponents.

I think a weak opening is fine when you hold a maximum for the bid and a decent suit, a traditional pre-empt, or whenever you are minimum, whether the suit is good or bad. The time when the odds become poor are when you have a bad suit but a maximum. I have no problem with opening a non-vulnerable weak two bid on a ten-to-six suit, but only if the whole hand is weak. If there are 9 HCP outside, you risk playing a silly contract, while the chance that the opposition are making something is substantially lower.

There are several different schemes of two-level opening in the modern game, and some of those cater to a desire to pre-empt more often. For example, the Lucas-style two opening allows five-card majors to be opened at the two level as a matter of system so long as there is a second suit on the side (usually a minor). That requires a multi 2♦ to allow the single-suited weak two bids to be shown. A second possibility, which makes life easier for the pre-empting side, is to play constructive weak twos in the majors, 8-11 or so, and open the bad weak twos, including all those based on five-card suits, in a 'trash' multi.

It is how you are comfortable handling the five-card major weak hands, and whether you are in love with some other use for the 2♦ opening, which will decide which scheme you like. Non-vulnerable, the Lucas Twos allow you to open hands containing a weak five-card major with which you would be unhappy to open a simple weak two bid, but hands with a good five-card major can afford to open a simple weak two, with or without a second suit on the side. Is it worth using up the extra bid, 2♦ multi, to allow you to play Lucas, or is it better to just play loose-style weak two bids and perhaps also a natural weak 2♦? I must confess to having a soft spot for the weak 2♦ opener, and have used it on some truly horrible hands, so in several partnerships I just play three natural weak two bids.

Responding to Pre-empts

If we are to pre-empt so much more aggressively than in the past, we should look at our responsive methods. They are all left over from the time when pre-empts were more constructive and so are designed to allow intelligent exploration on the basis that partner has a good long suit but usually no side suit.

If we play constructive weak twos, as mentioned above, we should employ very different methods in response to those required if we play a loose, wide-ranging style with frequent five-card openings. There are partnerships who play 2M - 2NT as asking for a shortage. That is only a good method if we assume that the opener's suit will usually become trumps. If that suit could be K10xxx, I think we need a method that helps us to explore alternative denominations rather than show shortages. With most people, I have always played that a two-level response to a weak two bid was constructive but non-forcing, while a three-level bid in a new suit was forcing. Playing a wide-ranging style, it surely makes more sense for all simple new suit responses to be non-forcing, with only 2NT or a jump as forces.

Because my partner's weak two opening may be anything from a five-card suit and 3 HCP up to a six-card suit and 10 HCP, I play a method where the responses to the 2NT inquiry are split into three ranges instead of the usual two. I'll give brief details of that scheme at the end of the article. An alternative might be to have one response to show a five-card suit, say 2M - 2NT - 3♣ with a 3♦ inquiry at responder's next turn, one to show a minimum with six cards, presumably 3♦, and the rest a maximum with six cards, splitting into only two ranges, but at least getting the important information about opener's suit length across.

If, on the other hand, the weak twos are constructive, with the bad ones going via a multi, you will need a very different style of responses to the 2NT inquiry, one which enables not just game but slam exploration by the responder.

Those who play constructive weak two openings alongside a multi have the option of including a strong option in the multi or playing it as always weak - just a bad weak two bid in a major. Most of us have defences to the multi which assume that we will get a second chance to come in after the opener has unwound and told

us which suit he holds. Imagine, however, if the opposition play a trash, or weak only, multi. When they are non-vulnerable, responder can start passing his partner's 2♦ opening not only when looking at a long diamond suit, but also on other weak hands - who cares if I go five down at 50 a time in 2♦ if the opposition have game on? And suddenly our defence to the multi doesn't look quite as effective as we don't even know which major opener holds. If we have to double 2♦ in pass-out seat, how strong are we? Is it take-out of diamonds or just a hand that intended to make a take-out double of one of the majors? Or are we reopening in case partner has a strong hand and was waiting to make a take-out double at his second turn? Fortunately, not many people are doing this very often, but it is only a matter of time before more start to do so.

Having suggested that we should play all new-suit responses to a weak two bid as non-forcing, what about bidding after partner's three-level pre-empt? Traditionally, a new suit response has been natural and forcing. Perhaps we should have just one forcing artificial response and the rest be constructive but only invitational. For example, partner opens 3♣ and we might play a 3♦ response as artificial, maybe asking initially for a three-card major, with 3♣ - 3♥/♠ constructive but non-forcing. Of course, fitting everything in gets a little more difficult as the opening bid gets higher up the order of suits. Facing a 3♠ opener, you might have to have everything forcing to game, perhaps with 4♣ an artificial slam try for spades, with 4♦/♥ natural? Another idea which has been with us for a very long time is the meaning of a bid in a third suit by the pre-emptor after a new suit response. Traditionally, a bid like 3♣ - 3♥ - 3♠ has shown a spade control in a hand too good for a simple raise to 4♥. But if we are going to open pre-empts on moderate six-card suits with a possible side suit, perhaps 3♠ in the auction above should be at least semi-natural. For example:

(i) ♠ 7 ♡ K 7 6 ♦ 8 4 ♣ A Q 10 7 5 4 3	(ii) ♠ K Q 5 ♡ 2 ♦ 7 5 ♣ K J 10 9 8 6 3	(iii) ♠ 10 8 6 4 ♡ 2 ♦ J 2 ♣ K Q J 10 7 4
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Instead of the traditional meaning, shown in example (i), perhaps the 3♠ bid should show either example (ii) or example (iii), depending on which hand-type you might open with 3♣. This gives up on an occasional heart slam (unless you are willing to go past game yourself), but may help to get to the right denomination more often.

Pre-empting is fun. It is great to watch your opponents squirm. It is also effective. If you are willing to accept the odd disaster, I am convinced that a looser pre-emptive style will pay big dividends in the long term.

My scheme after a 2NT response to a weak two opening

2♦/♥/♠ - 2NT -	3♣	= A normal minimum
	3♦	= A bad hand - I wish I hadn't opened it now I know you are strong
	3♥	= Maximum and descriptive
	3♠	= Maximum and descriptive
	3NT	= Maximum and descriptive

Descriptive means that if you repeat the original suit it is a good one, or you can bid the other major as semi-natural. 3NT denies either a good suit or a good enough holding to show the other major.

2♦ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦ = To play

2♥/♠ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦ = Asking

2♥/♠ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦ - 3♥	= Descriptive, as above
3♠	= Descriptive, as above
3NT	= Descriptive, as above

If responder goes back to three of the original suit after a 3♣ or 3♦ response to 2NT, that is to play. The assumption is that he can play game facing a maximum, so a 3♥/♠/NT response to 2NT is game-forcing. Whatever the response to the 2NT inquiry, a new suit bid below game is forcing to game. Three Hearts or 3♠ would be natural, while a new minor at the four level would usually be a cuebid.

As discussed in the main article, a new suit response to the opening bid, at either two- or three-level, should be constructive but not forcing.