



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

My partner tells me that I should not open with a preempt when holding a side four-card major. What do you think?

Michael

Hi Michael,

I have a couple of “isms” which apply to this question.

It's usually better to be in the auction than out of the auction.

Look for reasons to bid before settling for excuses to pass.

Fundamentally, I believe that if you allow your opponents a free auction, reasonably competent players will most often reach reasonable contracts.

Before dealing with your question, let's establish a few points about preempts in general. The three major factors:

- ❶ **Position at the table**
- ❷ **Vulnerability**
- ❸ **Partnership style**

Position at the table: The best time to preempt is in first seat before the opponents can begin their exchange of information. I have heard comments like, “I didn't want to preempt my partner.” I don't like preempting my partner either, but I certainly like preempting the opponents.

Second seat is the least effective time to preempt because after right-hand opponent passes, your LHO knows that

their partner does not have an opening bid. Often, this can be useful.

Third seat is almost as good as first seat, because while your LHO knows partner does not have an opening bid, you also know your partner does not have an opening bid. This allows you to be looser, i.e., a little stronger, a little weaker, a little off-shape, etc.

There is no such thing as a weak preempt in fourth seat.

Vulnerability: It's all about risk versus reward.

Best:
not vulnerable versus vulnerable

Worst:
vulnerable versus not vulnerable

Neutral:
equal vulnerability

Partnership style: I sometimes refer to this as partnership sense of humor. It is important to be consistent. Either tend toward conservative, or tend toward aggressive, but don't mix it up so that partner has no clue which of the two styles you are opting for on any particular deal.

Now, to answer your question.

Holding:

♠ K Q J 10 x x ♥ x x x x ♦ x x ♣ x,

how could you possibly fail to open with a weak 2♠ in any seat, at any vulnerability? Even if your partner has a singleton spade and four or five hearts, spades is probably at least as good, and likely better, as a trump suit.

♠ A x x x x x ♥ K x x x ♦ x x ♣ x

A weak 2♠ with this hand is a much riskier proposition. Partner, holding a reasonable hand with a stiff spade and four or five hearts, may not be amused.

A decision on a hand like this is more about partnership style:

♠ — ♥ x x x x ♦ Q J 10 9 x x ♣ J 10 x.

As dealer in first seat, I would choose a 3♦ opening bid 100 percent of the time ... my style. My thoughts would be that holding only 4 HCP leaves 36 points to be divided by the other three players at the table, making it 2–1 more likely that I am damaging them more than I am damaging partner.

Any time I am missing 13 spades, I am nervous. If partner holds spades, I don't want to hear about it ... unless he really, really wants to bid them! If the opponents hold spades, I want to make it as difficult as possible for them to find their fit and bracket their values.

I like to bring in sports analogies when I can. My son, Jake, played basketball for Bobby Jones, a University of North Carolina All-American and NBA All-Star. Jones stressed playing with a high degree of sportsmanship – no dirty play ever permitted – but to play hard. He liked to quote David Robinson, a highly educated Naval Academy graduate, who, at 7 feet 2 inches tall, had an illustrious career as an NBA player: “You must not allow the opponents to drive the lane with impunity.”

At the table, do not allow your opponents to bid with impunity! ■