

A Question of Alliance,,,

“pre-empt” 1. Take action in order to prevent (an anticipated event) from happening: forestall.

A critical aspect of winning bridge is the willingness to bid aggressively in a competitive auction. When both sides are bidding, success often depends upon taking space away from the opposition and forcing them to “make the last guess”.

Pre-emptive bidding is our primary tool in this contest. But in order to effectively pre-empt the opponents, it is absolutely necessary to be able to distinguish between calls (bids, passes, doubles, redoubles) that are strong and those that are weak and distributional in nature. The meaning of some calls changes radically when we are in a competitive auction. For example, a jump raise of partner’s opening bid, while often used to show support and an invitation to game when the opponents are silent, takes on a totally different aspect when both sides are bidding.

Last week, we briefly discussed how to use doubles and cue-bids of the opponents’ suit to urge partner to “Do Something Intelligent”. In a competitive auction, we have these bids to suggest stronger holdings, so that frees us to use raises of our partner’s suit (especially those raises that skip one or more levels of bidding) to take away bidding space from the opposition. These immediate raises should now indicate weaker hands that are more distributional in nature, where the partnership holds a great majority of the proposed trump holding and few defensive values. These pre-emptive raises can put immense pressure on the opposition to guess whether to continue to bid, to double, or to pass.

Holding the following (with nobody vulnerable):

S – Q 9 8 6 4

H – 7

D – K 5 4 2

C – 8 6 5

... partner has opened 1S, and your right-hand opponent has doubled (for takeout). If you fail to bid 4S, the opponents will quickly discover if (and where) they have a fit, and will make good ongoing decisions. But if you make a 4S bid immediately, they will have no strong indication if they have the values for a

game or a slam (or where), and they will be forced to make an immediate decision whether to continue or not. Unless partner has a very strong playing hand, you are not making 4S, but this is likely to be a good result for you, and that does not make their decision-making any easier...

What makes this a great candidate for aggressive behavior? Obviously, the exaggerated number of trump cards, the lack of any defensive values, but also very important is the singleton heart... short suits permit your trump holding to turn into tricks on offense, something that does not occur when your outside suits just contain losing cards. For example, I would not bid 4S immediately if my hand were slightly more evenly distributed:

S – Q 9 8 6 4

H – 7 4

D – K 5 2

C – 8 6 5

Instead, I would simply raise to 2S, knowing that I can continue to compete to 3S or beyond, if necessary; but often it is unnecessary to do so.

Of course, we have to consider vulnerability when we pre-emptively raise our partner's suit... we want to create a problem for the opponents, but we do not want to cause such a problem that they simply double us for penalty (and extract a huge score). But we cannot be ruled by that concern; aggressive bidding, especially when we hold an overwhelming majority of trump and possess little defense, is an important tactic. Our reluctance to push the opponents when we have the ability to do so raises the question: "On Whose Side Are You Playing?"