

WARREN WATSON

PREEMPTS





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Preface

What are the best memories from bridge? Certainly they are not all the times the pass card was pulled out — although sometimes ‘pass’ not ‘sorry’ is the hardest word (to say). Jumping to the five-level with a huge fit for partner’s preempt and no defense, just to watch the opponents squirm, not knowing what to do, could be a candidate. How about sacrificing over a cold slam, and giving the opponents less than their game is worth, not to mention their slam? Probably the worst is having a ton of high cards and seeing the opponents preempt the auction so high that getting to the right spot is near impossible.

Preempts and sacrifices potentially reap the biggest rewards in the game of bridge. Nowadays, bidding systems are so well designed that, in an uncontested auction, most players can get to the correct spot. They are not often so successful in competitive auctions. Taking away as much bidding space as you safely can makes the auction difficult even for an expert player. Grand slams are incredibly hard to bid accurately in a preemptive auction. Even a simple overcall may present a challenge to the opposition, and at the very least, will get partner off to a good lead.

It is important to preempt the opponents, but not partner, as much as you can. When partner has little defense and can raise the preempt, a difficult situation for the opponents has become even more challenging. High-level contracts are not the most common aspect of bridge. That distinction belongs to partscore contracts. However, high-level contracts are certainly the most memorable part of bridge and often the most enjoyable.

This book is divided into three parts:

- 1) Basic Preempts
- 2) Advanced Preempts
- 3) High-Level Competition

This book will make your game of bridge much more successful, and that much more enjoyable. My joy is achieved by passing my knowledge on to you.

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PART 1

BASIC PREEMPTS



Chapter One

Preempts Work

The examples in this chapter show how preempts make it more difficult for the opponents to get to the correct spot than in an uncontested auction.

Example 1.1 High-level Decisions Involve Guesswork

The following deal was played ninety-four times during an ACBL IMP speedball tourney on BBO (Bridge Base Online). The results on this deal ranged from +920 for 6♦ making to -1700 for 5♣ and 5♥ doubled down seven. Nineteen scores were -500 or worse. The range of defense and declarer play was enormous because, if properly defended, the contracts that make are 4♠ East-West and 4♦ North-South.

Neither vul.

	♠ 8 7		
	♥ A Q 9 7 3		
	♦ J 9 7 6 5 3		
	♣ —		
♠ 5 4 2	♠ A K Q J 10 9 3		
♥ K 10 6 4 2	♥ J		
♦ —	♦ 10 4 2		
♣ K Q 10 9 4	♣ J 5		
	♠ 6		
	♥ 8 5		
	♦ A K Q 8		
	♣ A 8 7 6 3 2		

West	North	East	South
pass	pass	4♠	5♣
pass	??		

Because his partner is a passed hand, East should make things difficult for the opponents with a 4♠ opening. As it happens, here he is himself instantly in the correct spot, as he can make at least ten tricks in spades.

This example is very important because East must bid 4♠, not 3♠. Opposite a passed hand, slam is likely out of reach and if he opens 3♠, partner might not recognize he has enough for 4♠ (not the case here). Furthermore, 4♠ is much more an effective impediment to the opponents' bidding. One of the opponents likely has spade shortness and therefore it is probable that the opponents want to bid.

South cannot pass, or the opponents will rob him blind, so he must do something. South tries 5♣ and hopes it is better than defending 4♠. West's second pass is the best bid of the whole sequence. North cannot run from 5♣ if West passes, but if West doubles, North or South may find 5♦. A player should never double the only contract he can defeat, because that may push the opponents to their correct spot. Of course, letting 5♣ play undoubled does not recoup the score 4♠ obtains, but the real point is that 5♦ is cold, and North-South are going to find it hard to bid it after the 4♠ opening.

The bottom line is that preempts add guesswork to the auction. A player can take solace because the next time the opportunity arrives, he will do the same thing to the opponents.

Let's look at what happens when East is in first seat. It's risky to preempt to 4♠ because his partner may have a good hand, so he opens 1♠. He then jumps to 4♠, and leaves South with a similar problem to the one we saw before.

West	North	East	South
		1♠	2♣
2♠	pass	4♠	??

Will South find the winning call of 4NT, suggesting diamonds as a possible strain, now? Maybe, but maybe not. The point is to present him with a problem. He won't solve it correctly every time.

Example 1.2 A Preempt Causes the Opponents to Miss a Slam

E-W vul.

	♠ 7 2											
	♥ A K Q 8 7 5 2											
	♦ 5 4											
	♣ A J											
<p>♠ 10 5</p> <p>♥ 10 4 3</p> <p>♦ K Q J 10 6 3 2</p> <p>♣ 9</p>	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		<p>♠ A J 9 8 3</p> <p>♥ J 6</p> <p>♦ 7</p> <p>♣ 10 8 6 5 4</p>	
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	♠ K Q 6 4											
	♥ 9											
	♦ A 9 8											
	♣ K Q 7 3 2											

West	North	East	South
3♦	3♥	pass	3NT
all pass			

I watched self-proclaimed experts on this deal in the BBO partnership bidding room. This is a clear example of how a preempt makes bidding a slam much more difficult. Perhaps 3♥ is something of an underbid, but the point is that the preempt presented North with a problem, and he failed to solve it. Therefore, you must preempt as much as possible.

If West passes initially, it should not be hard to get to slam.

Example 1.3 Bid the Limit of the Hand, Then Be Silent

This hand occurred in the top bracket of a KO at a Victoria regional tournament.

Neither vul.

	♠ A Q 10 3 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K 7 6 ♣ K 9 4 2											
♠ 9 5 ♥ A K J 6 5 ♦ Q J 9 2 ♣ A 7	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td style="text-align: center;"> </td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ J 2 ♥ Q 10 7 4 3 2 ♦ 5 4 3 ♣ 10 3	
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	♠ K 8 7 6 4 ♥ — ♦ A 10 8 ♣ Q J 8 6 5											

West	North	East	South
1♥	dbl	pass 5♥	pass 5♠
all pass			

East knows he is eventually going to have to save over 4♠, so it makes sense to bid 5♥ right away. *Make the opponents take the last guess.* South must have thought about a slam because of his heart void, but in the end did not want to risk the game bonus. At the other table, the bidding went as follows.

West	North	East	South
1♥	dbl	pass 5♥	pass 5♠
pass	pass	6♥	6♠
all pass			

Here East makes the mistake of bidding his hand twice: he should hold his peace having bid 5♥. Our teammate, a very strong player, broke a cardinal rule by making a preempt and then bidding again, and South was given a second chance to make the winning bid. Here, 5♥ doubled is down three for -500 when the opponents can get 980. That is not bad as it is a loss of 1

IMP compared to 480. At matchpoints and equal vulnerability, East will be more conservative, and probably bids only 4♥. At IMPs, 5♥ is a very good bid, taking away a lot of room, including ace-asking bids; it is as equally good as the 6♥ bid is bad.

Example 1.4 Did Choosing Not to Preempt Give Away an Advantage?

The following was the last board of the last match of the Sunday team game in a Vernon sectional.

Both vul.

♠ 10 7	♠ 6 4 3	♠ —
♥ A 6 4	♥ Q 9 3	♥ KJ 10 8 7 5 2
♦ J 10 9 8 6 4	♦ A 2	♦ K Q 3
♣ J 8	♣ K Q 9 7 4	♣ 10 6 5

N
W E
S

♠ A K Q J 9 8 5 2
♥ —
♦ 7 5
♣ A 3 2

At our table, the bidding went:

West	North	East	South
	pass	3♥	4♠
5♥	dbl	pass	5♠
all pass			

At the other table, East passed because of his spade void, and the bidding went:

West	North	East	South
	pass	pass	2♣
pass	3♣	3♥	3♠
4♥	4♠	5♥	6♠
all pass			

We gained 13 IMPs for +1460 versus +710. After the preempt, the opponents would have been gambling to bid 7♠, and can never rightfully get there. Personally, I would not preempt with a void and a maximum, so will the opponents find the grand against me? No, because after an initial pass I would bid 4♥, not 3♥, over 3♣. Bidding 4♥ takes away Exclusion Blackwood, which must be a jump, and 5♥ takes away 4NT. However, 5♥ cannot be bid unilaterally. A jump to 5♥ is like a sitting duck, as the opponents almost always sit for a double. Do people bid grands at teams? Of course they do if thirteen tricks are there, because team games reward good bridge.

Example 1.5 A Preempt Induces a Mistake

E-W vul.	♠ A 10 7 3 ♥ 8 7 6 2 ♦ J ♣ A 8 7 4											
♠ 6 5 4 ♥ K ♦ A 9 6 5 2 ♣ K 10 9 5	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 8 ♥ A Q J 10 9 5 3 ♦ 10 3 ♣ J 6 2	
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	♠ K Q J 9 2 ♥ 4 ♦ K Q 8 7 4 ♣ Q 3											
West	North	East	South									
	pass	3♥	3♠									
all pass												

This example occurred during an ACBL IMP speedball tourney on BBO. East has a minimum vulnerable preempt, but he has an excellent suit with good intermediates and spade shortness. There is no doubt that East was correct to evaluate his hand as worth a vulnerable 3♥ because preempts can induce a mistake. West has enough that 4♥ makes, but cannot bid it because it would push the opponents to a making 4♠ contract.

In an unimpeded auction, South will open 1♠ and accept partner's limit raise for +420. East preempts, and North mistakenly decides to pass 3♠. Preempts take a player out of his comfort zone.

Example 1.6 Cool Grand Luke

Neither vul.

	♠ A K J 9 8 7 2 ♥ K 8 4 ♦ K 10 2 ♣ —											
♠ 4 ♥ J 5 ♦ J 4 ♣ A K Q J 9 7 6 3	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 5 3 ♥ 10 7 2 ♦ 9 7 6 3 ♣ 10 8 5 2	♠ Q 10 6 ♥ A Q 9 6 3 ♦ A Q 8 5 ♣ 4
	N											
W		E										
	S											

West	North	East	South
5♣	5♥	pass	1♥
all pass		pass	6♥

This deal occurred at matchpoints. West has a 12-count and an eight-card suit, but his partner is a passed hand, and he is extremely short in the majors. Making 3NT is well-nigh impossible opposite a passed hand so the preempt makes sense. South, after hearing 5♥, is pretty sure a small slam is there, and North suspects a grand may be possible, but bidding a grand would be a gamble. South settles for a small slam, which is usually a decent score, while going down in a grand is usually a zero.

Suppose, on a different layout, East-West stay out of the auction. Clearly, without a preempt a grand can be bid, although it may not be reached. However, when there is a preempt it often does not matter what slam bidding is theoretically possible. The examples in this chapter illustrate how preempts compromise the bidding; most players will not gamble, but bid only what they can be reasonably sure of making. However, if you have been put in this situation, remember to return the favor and do the same to the opponents when you can. Disciplined preempts, as discussed in the next chapter, allow partner to do the right thing when he has high cards.

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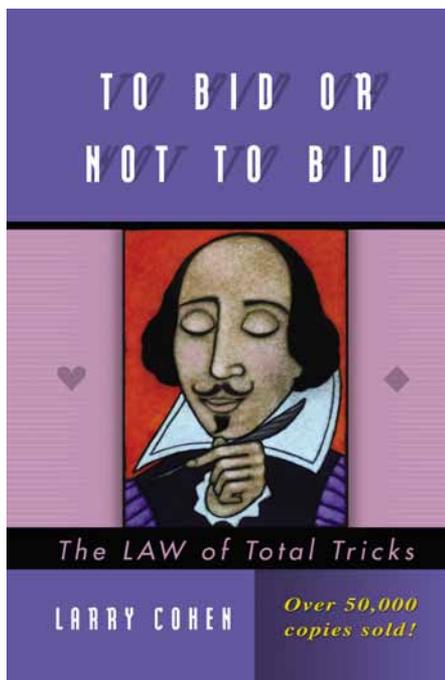
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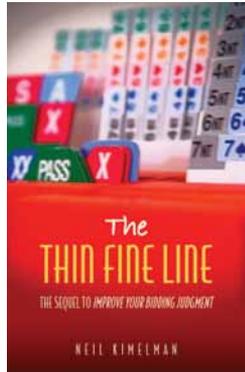
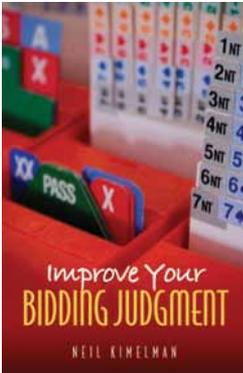
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INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED

It has been many years since any bridge author attempted a comprehensive description of preemptive bidding, and much has changed in the interim. Modern players open the bidding on lighter values, and preempts, formerly based in at least a semblance of sanity, are now made on the flimsiest of excuses. This is a comprehensive treatment of preemptive bidding — not just when to open and with what, but the issues surrounding constructive and obstructive bidding in the subsequent auction.



WARREN WATSON (Canada) is a professional artist and an avid bridge player. He is an ACBL Sapphire Life Master, an ACBL accredited teacher, a bridge columnist for the *Trail Times*, an ACBL director, and the Kootenay Jewel Bridge Club manager. He currently resides in Trail, BC, and in the winter can be found skiing around the back of Grey Mountain.

