

Pre-empts and 4-Card Majors

(Friday mini-lesson – 12 July 2019)

Should one make a pre-emptive bid while holding a four-card major on the side?

The general “rule” or guideline is **never** to do so – there’s too much risk you’ll pre-empt your partner and your side will miss out on a possible 4-4 major suit fit.

There are a couple of guiding principles to always bear in mind when considering bidding:

1. It’s usually better to be *in* the auction than *out* of the auction.
2. Look for reasons to *bid* before settling for reasons 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 the main question of the day about pre-empts and four-card majors, let’s establish a few points about pre-empts in general. There are always three major factors to consider:

1. Position at the table
2. Vulnerability
3. Partnership style

Position at the table: The *best* time to pre-empt is in first seat before the opponents can begin their exchange of information. There is always a risk of pre-empting your partner, but it is twice as likely that you’ll pre-empt an opponent.

Second seat is the *least* effective time to pre-empt because after RHO passes, your LHO knows their partner doesn’t have an opening bid.

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* in the general requirements for a pre-empt, i.e., a little stronger, a little weaker, a little off-shape, etc.

Of course, there is *no such thing as a pre-empt in fourth seat!* With a weak hand just be grateful to pass the deal in.

Vulnerability: It’s all about risk versus reward.

- Best – not vulnerable versus vulnerable
- Worst – vulnerable versus not-vulnerable

- Neutral – equal vulnerability (though, always be a little more cautious when vulnerable, since the penalties when doubled can mount up)

Partnership style: One could perhaps refer to this as partnership sense of humour! 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, getting back to the original question. **What about pre-empting when holding a side four-card major?**

Holding:

♠ K Q J T 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 ♠ and four or five reasonable ♥s, you can see that ♠s is probably *at least* as good, and probably better, as a trump suit.

On the other hand, consider:

♠ A x x x x x ♥ K x x x ♦ x x ♣ x

Bidding a weak 2♠ with this is a much poorer and riskier proposition. Partner, holding a reasonable hand with a stiff ♠ and four or 5 ♥s, may not be amused.

What would you bid holding the following hand as dealer in first seat?

♠ - ♥ x x x x ♦ Q J T 9 x x ♣ J T x

Pass, 2♦, 3♦?

I would choose a 3♦ opening bid 100% of the time ... my style.

My thoughts would be that holding only 4 HCP leaves 36 to be divided amongst the other three players at the table, making it 2-1 more likely that I am damaging them more than I am damaging partner.

Also, any time I am missing 13 ♠s, I am very nervous. If partner holds ♠s, I certainly don't want to hear about it ... unless he really, really wants to bid them! If the opponents hold ♠s, I want to make it as difficult as possible for them to find their fit and describe their values to each other. Let them start looking at the 3-level!

So, the answer to the original question re pre-empting with a four-card major on the side is - **sometimes**. Consider all the other factors and use your judgement as opposed to being bound by a hard-and fast "rule".

