



Issue 11: December 2007 BridgeHands Newsletter
Preemptive Bidding **December 2007**

Dear Bridge Friend,

Welcome to *Bridgehands* eMag Newsletter, Issue 11. In this issue, we will begin a multi-part discussion devoted to preemptive bidding. As the saying goes, Bridge is a bidder's game. In upcoming issues, we will turn our attention to responder bids and beyond. Before we begin, we should warn our black-white thinkers that many preemptive bidders often see the preemptive bidding sport as more of an art form than a science. As we will learn, preempts are a balance between risks and rewards, akin to a highly speculative stock market where primary emotions are greed and fear. But our partners and opponents will still make preemptive bids, so like them or not, obstructive bidding is here to stay. Come to think of it, making a proactive preempt may actually help you earn respect among your peers. While opponents love easily bidding game or slam in unobstructed auctions, these days it's unlikely they will extend the same luxury. Let's say your Left Hand Opponent opens 3 Spades and the bidding passes to you with 17 points and four or five Hearts - you have a good chance for game, but where? And reflecting back on situations when opponents make preemptive bids, armed with new knowledge, you'll be in a better position to know how to proceed (bid, double, or pass).

Counting up the numbers, our next stop is the Rule of 9 in our "Rules of ..." tips. Actually, the Rule of 9 is more of a general guide to help us evaluate when to finesse opponents trump Queen when holding either an eight or nine card trump suit ("8 ever, 9 never").

Note: Viewing the hands below requires your EMAIL reader to use "fixed fonts" (not proportional). If you have problems reading this document, please view our [online web-based copy](#) or [Adobe Acrobat PDF file](#) suitable for printing.

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Preemptive Bidding - Take that, opponent!

Early in our Bridge career we learned the value of honor cards, 10 High Card Points (HCP) per suit, 40 HCP in the deck. So on balance each player holds 10 points. Opening the bidding assumes a hand better than average, typically 12-13 points. We've also learned how long suits can develop extra tricks by promoting the suit. Imagine holding an eight card suit headed with the Ace-King-Queen-Jack; except with the worst trump split (8-5-0-0), we are assured to make 5 tricks even though we only hold 10 HCP. Thus, we've learned to reassess hands containing suits longer than four cards on length. This realization is doubly beneficial, allowing us to:

1. Open marginal hand with less than normal values
2. Invoke a preemptive "first strike" bid when holding a substandard hand with extra length and strength in one suit

Depending on partnership agreements, preemptive bids come in various sizes and shapes. Certainly 3 level opening preempts have been around for some time. When Charles Goren initially wrote "Goren's Bridge Complete," 2 level bids promised 23 or more points. But times have changed - in Goren's 1985 book rewrite, his "new" method advocated weak two bids, preemptively opening 2 Diamonds, 2 Hearts, or 2 Spades. Similar to the 3 level preemptive opening bid with a seven card suit, the weak two opening bid (or overcall) shows a six card suit with 6-12 points including distribution (except 2 Clubs, which becomes the catch-all strong opening bid).

In addition to weak two and weak three bids, other preempts include weak jump overcalls, weak double- jump game raises, and perhaps weak jump shifts. How about you and your partner? Are your preempts "heavenly" or do you find jump bids more like a boomerang, missing the intended target and heading back to whack you? In our series, we will take a look at preempt strategies, environmental factors, hand evaluation consideration, risk-reward factors, and what to do after you or partner has "cast a preemptive spell."

Let's begin this lesson by asking the obvious question: why should we make preemptive bids? A preemptive bid has several benefits:

1. Communicate to partner both the length and strength attributes in preemptive suit, where we would otherwise had to pass the bidding.
2. Consume bidding space to inhibit accurate bidding by opponents - if we have a long suit, it stands to reason others will also have offsetting length and strength in a suit of their own.
3. Provide lead direction to our partner should opponents ultimately win the contract.
4. Potentially provide partner the opportunity to raise the preempt suit when opponents enter the auction bidding another suit.

Before delving into the dark side of preemptive bids, we should set the record straight - like other aspects of Bridge bidding and play, preemptive bids are not guaranteed to get the best results in all situations. Bridge is a game full of variables. Our results are influenced by factors including the placement of the cards (honors and suit distribution), the partnership and opponent vulnerability, the attitude of the players on a given hand, the interpretation bidding around the table, perceived bidding and play ability, and numerous other considerations.

We should also stress that our failure to make a contract is not always a dishonorable event. Bridge scoring only allows one side to enter a positive or negative score (excepting honor bonuses in Contract Rubber Bridge). So if your partner makes a preemptive bid that ultimately goes down one trick, that result is certainly better than if partner passed and the opponents made game or slam. Yet perhaps you have had some unpleasant experiences getting set in a contract and are a bit hesitant making a preemptive call. Fair enough, in this lesson we will examine the "good, bad, and the ugly" in assessing the time is ripe to make a preemptive bid. But right off the bat, we profess there are at least two situations where making a preemptive bid is unwise:

1. When you're playing with (or against) your future in-laws!
2. When you're playing a high-stakes money game and can't cover possible losses!

In our discussion, we will focus on sound preemptive bidding theory that balances the risk/reward relationship of preemptive bidding, i.e., bids that should work well most of the time. Additionally, our partner is entitled to have a reasonable assurance of our length and strength holding when we make a preemptive bid - after all, Bridge is a partnership game so our preempts should be disciplined. Otherwise, our poor partner will be clueless when to pass or bid onward to game and beyond. And just because we have made a preemptive call, it's not unreasonable to envision our partner holding a strong hand with interest in making either a game or slam contract. Further, when the opponents make an overcall after our preemptive bid, our partner may wish to make a penalty double. So our preemptive bidding should provide partner a good assessment of our holding.

So what constitutes a good preempt hand and when should we make a preemptive bid? As we would expect, a preemptive hand is one that generally has less than the 12-13 points required to make a normal opening bid. Disciplined preempts promise we have both strength and length limited to the preempt suit. Most players consider two of the top three honors (A-K-Q) a prerequisite for a preemptive bid or at least hold 5 HCPs in the suit (K-Q or A-J-10). However some players stretch a bit, opening preemptively holding only the Q-J-10-9 in the preempt suit; later, we will discuss other factors to consider when making a preemptive bid. Why do we emphasize the trump quality of the top three trump honors? A fair question - because we do not expect to lose the

fourth trick or beyond when we hold a long suit; it's the first three tricks that deserve attention. Here are some hands to illustrate the point (assuming partner has not made a bid):

A great suit, six tricks seems certain:

A K Q x x x

We anticipate 5-6 tricks:

A K J x x x
A Q J x x x

We hope for 5 tricks on a good day:

A K x x x x
A Q 10 x x x
A J 10 x x x
K Q 10 x x x

We realize the hand will only take 4-5 tricks without help from partner:

A Q x x x x
A J 9 x x x
K Q x x x x
K J 10 x x x

Finally, here are some marginal 4 trick suits reserved for the bold and desperate:

A 10 9 x x x
K J x x x x
K 10 9 x x x
Q J 10 x x x
Q J 9 x x x

When we make a preemptive call, we advise partner that we envision taking most of the tricks in the preempt suit. Further, our preemptive call implies our hand does not contain more than one trick in our side suits. If we hold two or more defensive tricks and a long trump suit, we should either make a normal opening bid or pass knowing we have enough tricks to keep the opponents out of game. Thus, our disciplined preemptive hand is essentially valuable to make offensive tricks in the preempt suit, with little trick-taking opportunity in the side suits. Of course, in some situations preemptive bids may be made with an opening hand. Let's say our partner has passed the bidding and we can judge from our values that game is very unlikely. Or perhaps we see a benefit making a jump overcall after one or both opponents have bid. Some advanced players even go so far as to play responder's jump-shift bid in a new suit as weak (typically after an opponent has made an

overall). But at our level, let's avoid those sexy advanced bids and master the basics of preemptive bidding.

Before we continue, let's review how to evaluate our effective points in the preempt suit. Perhaps you have already been exposed to the concept of "length points" in addition to traditional HCP. When we hold a 5 card suit, we add an extra length point since the hand should enjoy extra tricks once the preempt suit has been promoted. Holding a seven card suit, we add 3 length points to our effective point count: seven cards minus a 4 card baseline equals 3 extra distribution points. If we play 2 level preempts, we add two points ($6 - 4 = +2$ points), and so on.

Holding a seven card suit, we typically preempt at the 3 level. Playing the modern Bridge bidding style, we may also preempt at the 2 level holding a six card suit (2 Diamonds, 2 Hearts, or 2 Spades), also known as 2 level preemptive bids. Since 2 Clubs is reserved as our all purpose strong bid with 22 points or more, holding a weak six card Club suit we must pass or aggressively make a preempt call of 3 Clubs. Okay, off to the table to discuss some hands:

```
A K x x x x x
x
x x x
x x
```

An ideal hand to open 3 Spades with a nice 7 card suit.

```
x
J x
x x x
K J 10 9 x x x
```

3 Clubs is fine with our fair suit and no defensive tricks.

```
Q x x
A K Q x x x x
x x x
--
```

Open 1 Heart with 11 HCP plus 3 length points. Game is still within sight.

```
A K Q x x x
x x
x x x
x x
```

Playing preemptive weak two bids, we would proudly open 2 Spades. But what if partner only plays weak three bids as preempts? With such solid values, we recommend opening 3 Spades as though the suit held seven cards - without much help the suit will take six tricks. And on a bad day

when your side goes down, you can feign ignorance, claiming you could have sworn you saw 7 Spades. Perhaps a Club was mixed in with all those Spades - after all, the lighting is a bit dark where you are seated!

So if 3 level bids show weak hands and most 2 level bids are also preemptive, what does it mean when a player opens the bidding at the 4 or 5 level? If you said an eight card suit or longer, great - you have a good grasp of opening preempts. Still, let's explore some of the subtleties of these bids. As our regular BridgeHands readers will attest, whenever we look at our hand we should consider the "[Rule of Anticipation](#)." This rule advocates we consider other players will likely hold the compliment of our hand (strength and suit shape). So when we hold an eight or nine card suit, it's likely other players will either hold a suit of similar length or the opponent's combined suit length will be very long. The implication here is that holding either an eight or nine card minor suit, we should strive to open the suit 5 Clubs or 5 Diamonds. The opponents are likely to be bidding a major suit game with length and strength; so a 4 level weak bid in a minor suit is much less effective compared to a preemptive 5 level opening call. Of course, from time to time the opponents may make a penalty double so, as always, we should consider possible defensive tricks, vulnerability and other environmental factors. More on this later.

Okay, are you ready for a trick question? What should you open when you're lucky enough to hold a nine card major suit? Actually, 4 Hearts or 4 Spades is already a game bid. Since its unlikely most sane opponents will make an overcall, bid your major suit game at the 4 level. Some advanced players have fancy methods for rare calls at the 5 level, but they seldom come up. And since it's unlikely we will remember the agreements at that time, let's forgo discussing such obtuse bids.

Next let's talk about your shape. Of course we are talking about the card length in each suit! As you might guess, we have the "good, bad, and the ugly" hand shapes in Bridge. In essence, a "flatter" hand is less likely to take tricks. So a more balanced hand shape like a 6-3-2-2 hand will take far less tricks than a 6-5-2-0 shape. Bottom line - do not preempt two-suited hands that have a strong potential to make a major suit game (i.e., don't preempt the rare hand). Statistically speaking, here are the possible holdings of various hand patterns associated with preemptive bids.

Six card suit:

6-3-2-2	5.6 percent
6-4-2-1	4.7 percent
6-3-3-1	3.5 percent
6-4-3-0	1.3 percent
6-5-1-1	0.71 percent
6-5-2-0	0.65 percent
6-6-1-0	slim!

Seven card suit:

7-3-2-1	1.9 percent
7-2-2-2	0.51 percent
7-4-1-1	0.39 percent
7-4-2-0	0.36 percent
7-3-3-0	0.27 percent
7-5-1-0	0.10 percent
7-6-0-0	almost nil!

Did you notice the combined percentage of possible preemptive six card suits? The total of 6-3 and 6-4 hands is $5.6 + 4.7 + 3.5 + 1.3 = 15.1$ percent of total Bridge hands (remember, we avoid preempting two-suited 6-5 hands). No wonder 2 level preempts with a six card suit are so popular! Assuming you will not have opening points about half the time yet hold decent honors in your long suit, you can enjoy entering the auction with a preemptive bid. And as we know, all red-blooded Bridge players simply love to bid something.

Now let's cover some additional guidelines associated with preemptive bids. While we'd like to call them rules, the fact of the matter is that there are not many universal agreements by Bridge players - yes, we are such a fickle group. Here's some friendly advice when preempting in the first and second seat:

As previously discussed:

1. Strive to hold at least 5+ HCP in your preempt suit (or at least Q-J-10).
2. Do not open preemptively with a two-suited hand. In fact, there's even a poignant saying, "With 6-5, come alive" (meaning strive to bid game).
3. Do not open preemptively with more than one useful outside honor (likely defensive tricks).

Here are some additional recommendations:

4. Never mix preempts with your opponents - if they make a preemptive bid, you should pass with preemptive values. If you directly make an overcall, your partner is entitled to assume you have an opening hand and will probably bid on to game or slam. Holding a substandard hand after an opponent preempts, relax and let your partner decide the best action.
5. Two-level preempts are acceptable with an Ace in an outside side suit, provided the hand evaluates to less than 12 points (including 2 distribution points for a six card suit).

6. Three-level preempts should not hold an outside Ace. That hand would include 4 points for an Ace, 3 length points for a seven card suit, plus our trump honors - rather than preempting, we should make a normal opening bid.

7. Side suit voids are okay (some would disagree), although we profess such a hand is indeed shapely.

8. Preempting with a weak two bid and a four card side suit is questionable, especially if the side suit is Hearts or Spades. Most good players certainly would not open with a weak two bid if the side suit major contained a useful honor.

9. Never preempt when you're having a bad day or your partner will subsequently punish you. Of course we are jesting! Yet all frequent Bridge players certainly will have some stories to share regarding the emotional side of our game!

Okay, now let's consider some of the [environmental factors](#) - when the stars are in the right position to make our preemptive call. Here are some primary considerations:

1. Vulnerability
2. Relative seat position (how many players have previously passed)
3. Prior bids by others (opponent/s, partner)
4. Table presence
5. Fourth seat bidding

1. Vulnerability - When our side is vulnerable, the good news is that we obtain a premium score for making game or slam; ditto for the opponents making game or slam. Of course, the downside is that when we fail to make our contract the [penalty for undertricks](#) is higher ([also see Duplicate scoring](#)) - significantly higher when the opponents double our final contract. Generally speaking, we have three scenarios from a preemptive bidding perspective:

- a. Favorable vulnerability - opponents vulnerable, we are non-vulnerable
- b. Neutral vulnerability - both sides vulnerable or both sides non-vulnerable
- c. Unfavorable vulnerability - we are vulnerable, opponents are non-vulnerable

From a risk-reward basis, we feel a greater sense of impunity with favorable vulnerability. A good analogy is the green light - go ahead with reasonable preempts. With neutral vulnerability (yellow light), we proceed with caution. Thus, with adverse/unfavorable vulnerability, we'd better look both ways (figuratively speaking) before making a preemptive bid - here's a good time to double-check the quality of your preempt suit.

Here's a twist on preemptive bidding used by some players. We try to avoid burdening you with lots of arithmetic formulas, but it's probably worth at least acquainting our frisky bidders with the Rule of 2-3-4. Here's how it works - we open preemptively at a varying level (2 level, 3 level or 4 level) based on the vulnerability. Indeed, that's certainly different than what we've been advocating elsewhere. By the way, some limit this approach to the Rule of 2-3, believing you should always restrict your losses to 500 points. But for the sake of completeness, let's review the complete 2-3-4 method to witness how it works.

With favorable vulnerability, open preemptively to the level you'll lose 4 tricks.

With neutral vulnerability, open preemptively to the level you'll lose 3 tricks.

With adverse vulnerability, open preemptively to the level you'll lose 2 tricks.

The notion here is that when you have a weak hand, on average partner will have at least two playing tricks. This is a reasonable proposition, provided you can properly evaluate the likely losers you hold when making a preemptive bid. Here's a few hands:

Favorable vulnerability = 4 losers:

```
Q J 10 9 x x x
x x x
x x
x
```

Assume 5 Spade tricks 5 tricks plus 4 losers equals 9 tricks, so we bid 3 Spades

Neutral vulnerability = 3 losers:

```
x x x
x
Q J 10 9 x x x
K Q
```

Assume 5 Diamonds and 1 Club 5+1 tricks plus 3 losers equals 9 tricks, so we bid 3 Diamonds

Unfavorable vulnerability = 2 losers:

x x
x
Q J 10 9 x x x
K Q x

Assume 5 Diamonds and 2 Clubs

Wait a minute! With two defensive Club tricks, we should pass.

Unfavorable vulnerability = 2 losers:

x x x
x
Q J 10 9 x x x
K Q

Assume 5 Diamonds and 1 Club (reprint of prior hand) 5+1 tricks plus 2 losers equals 8 tricks, so we cautiously bid 2 Diamonds

Let's stress one important point before we proceed. When we make a preemptive call, we must not bid again unless instructed to do so through partner's forcing bid (see upcoming newsletter). Once we've cast our preemptive spell, we turn over captaincy to our partner to pass, bid onward or perhaps penalize the opponents. In Bridge as in life the saying goes, "Speak now or forever hold your peace."

2. Relative seat position - here again, we have three basic scenarios:

- a. Preempting in third seat (two passes so far)
- b. Preempting in first seat (no one has bid)
- c. Preempting in second seat (only Right Hand Opponent has passed)

Did we trip you up ordering preempts in this sequence? For a moment, let's look at preempts from our partner's perspective. When are we least likely to make a preemptive bid that will influence partner holding a good hand? That's right, it's the third seat - our partner has already passed so the only person we can affect with our preemptive bid is the unfortunate opponent in the fourth seat. Sitting in the first seat as dealer, three players have the opportunity to bid: two opponents and one partner. So the odds are one in three (33 percent) that our preemptive bid will stress our partner. Now do you see why we show second seat preempt at the bottom? With two remaining bidders, the odds are one in two (50 percent) that we will preempt our partner's ability to accurately bid. So does this mean that we should not preempt in second seat? No, not at all. But when considering all the various factors of making a preemptive bid, be sure to at least give some weighting to the relative seat when bidding. Naturally we are much more comfortable preempting with great trump honors in third seat with favorable vulnerability as opposed to a poor trump suit in second seat with unfavorable vulnerability. Here's an

interesting hand to illustrate our point:

x
K x
K x x
Q 10 9 8 x x x

We would pass in 1st and 2nd seat with two useful honors in side suits, but consider opening 3 Clubs in third seat. However, please watch your vulnerability - your mileage may vary!

Now let's tackle the featured hand pictured at the beginning of this newsletter - what's your bid?

2
K Q 10 9 4 3 2
2
A 4 3 2

Hopefully you said, "it depends on the relative seat!" In first or second seat we'd be inclined to open 1 Heart with 9 HCP plus 3 distribution points for an acceptable suit with working honors. But what if you held this hand in the third seat? That's a more difficult decision. If partner holds 2 Hearts and an Ace and King, a 4 Heart game should be in the bag. On the other hand, it's conceivable the opponents might make a 4 Spade game if we do not make an obstructive call. So we will be happy to support your third seat decision to open 1 Heart or 3 Hearts. And for our patient black-white thinkers that have hung in here, we have a treat for you! Since we were not sure of this hand ourselves, we entered the hand into [Dealmaster Pro](#), a Bridge simulator that additionally performs double-dummy analysis. For the criteria, we assigned North and East holding less than 12 points and our above hand to South. We then instructed Dealmaster Pro to randomly deal 1,000 hands - all three hands could hold any values except our given cards, and North-South will be assigned passing hand strength. And the results are:

Heart tricks by South: 12 = 1%, 11+ = 10%, 10+ = 35%, 9+ = 68%
Spade tricks by E/W: 12 = 5%, 11+ = 17%, 10+ = 36%, 9+ = 57%

So what does this mean? First off, regardless of partner's hand, making 3 Hearts is fairly safe, likely to make two-thirds of the time (68 percent). Game is possible about one-third of the time (35 percent). At game levels and above (10 tricks), the odds are slightly better for East-West to make a Spade contract than our Heart game. Yet at the 3 level, our 3 Heart contract is 11 percent more likely to win 9 tricks than East-West playing in 3 Spades. In summary, if you are trying to "buy the auction" then opening 3 Hearts is probably your bid of choice. On the downside, making the tactical preemptive bid inhibits our opportunity to enjoy a game contract. So in balance, here's a situation where we should consider the likelihood of opponents to enter the auction based on our

various bids. Don't say we didn't warn you in our introduction - preemptive bidding is sometimes more of an art than a science!

There are numerous scenarios where opponent bidding influences our action - more than we can discuss here but let's consider one provocative situation. Let's say you are sitting in the third seat with a very poor hand and the bidding has gone: Pass - Pass - ? What do you know? Assuming your partner and RHO are not sleepy, neither player has 12+ points. What would you bid holding this hand?

Q J 10 x x
x
x x x
Q J x x

Of course, we would never admit our dirty little secret that in third seat we love opening 2 Spades with such a trashy hand. But certainly we know our LHO holds a very big hand with 15+ points, correct? So depending on your sense for adventure making frisky bids, let your conscience be your guide (and partnership trust).

3. Prior bids by others - in prior newsletters, we have discussed finesses. Suit promotion, ruffing (usually in dummy) and finessing serve as our three fundamental techniques to develop extra tricks. Let's say an opponent opens in a major suit showing 5+ cards in the suit with 12+ points, and you hold a King and two small cards in the suit.

A Q 10 x x x
K x x
x x x
x

Are you more likely to win a trick in the suit when your RHO or LHO bid Hearts? Correct, when your Right Hand Opponent opened 1 Heart. Holding most of the cards in the suit and likely holding the Ace, we hope to play a low card from the dummy through RHO and win a trick with our King. So when one or both of our opponents have been bidding, we should double-check our honors and re-evaluate the opportunity to score extra tricks by finessing. Are you ready to think outside the box? Okay, let's hold the same cards but swap a few suits:

x x x
x
A Q 10 x x x
K x x

As far as the Heart suit goes, our partner is more likely to take tricks when our LHO bid the suit - that will be partner's RHO. Unfortunately, our King may now be poorly placed and lose the finesse. The point here is that we should vigilantly reevaluate our hand as the bidding

progresses. And you can always impress your Bridge buddies throwing around terms like elastic hand evaluation.

4. Table presence - For a variety of reasons, some folks live life more boldly than others and they usually bring such attributes to the Bridge table (assuming Bridge isn't their alter ego). This influences their willingness to bid and make overcalls, as well as their decision to double a preemptive bid by you or your partner. Or perhaps they would like to penalize you but are afraid their partner will interpret their double as a "takeout" bid, forcing their partner to make ill-advised call. For better or worse, intimidation is another factor - if we judge our opponent to be a better player, we are probably not as likely to make a penalty double. Then again, after spectacular results on a prior hand, both sides may feel some form of mysterious energy compels them to make an out of the ordinary bid. Welcome to our fascinating game of Bridge.

5. Fourth seat bidding - After three passes, preemptive bidding is a moot point (we can simply pass), so a 2 level preemptive bid should serve another purpose. And what might that be, you ask? Well, here's another specialized bid used by advanced players but we will throw it in should you and your partner wish to play it. Of course, never make a conventional bid unless your partner clearly understands the meaning of the call. For these players, opening 2 Hearts or 2 Spades in the fourth seat actually shows an opening hand with a very nice suit (usually 6 card suit with one loser), and two defensive tricks. Here's are some examples:

```
A K J x x x
x
Q x x
A x x
```

Classic 4th seat 2 Spade opener for those who play it.

```
A Q J x x x
x
K Q x
x x x
```

2 Spades here. Incidentally, in third seat we would open 1 Spade - even though partner is a passed hand, three honors in the minors could score a game contract.

```
A K J 10 x x
x x
Q x x
x x
```

Open 1 Spade with only one defensive trick. Rebid 2 Spades next time

around.

x
A K J 10 x x
x x x
x x x

Pass (same as above w/o Diamond Queen). In any other seat we would preempt but that doesn't work here. Don't open Pandora's box bidding 1 Heart - the opponents will certainly outbid you in Spades.

Finally, for the curious players, opening at the 3 level in the fourth seat is a "shutout" bid with unspecified values. Obviously, this is a gambling bid anticipating the opener will make the contract, bidding so high the opponents will not find their contract. But do they feel lucky, ask you? See item 4 above!

Stay tuned - in upcoming newsletters we will dig into responder forcing and non-forcing bids after opener's preempts, opener rebids, overcalls, and more.

The Rule of 9 - Eight never, nine never (or sometimes?)

[Rule of 9](#) - You know the usual scenario - we win the contract with an eight card major holding something like this in our respective hands (declarer and dummy cards):

A K J x x

x x x

We play the Ace and on our lucky day the singleton Queen drops, as we gleefully take 5 tricks in the suit. Usually we are not so lucky and must attempt finessing the Queen. After winning the Ace, we come around to the South hand in another suit and then play up to the Jack, hoping to pin the Queen in the West hand for 5 tricks. It turns out with this holding we can make five tricks 34 percent and make four tricks 85 percent of the time.

Should we use the same tactic when we hold a nine card suit, again missing the Queen? Enter the dubious Rule of 9. Here are the two hands - it doesn't matter if the Ace and King are in the same hands:

A J 10 x x

K x x x

Assuming we play for the Queen to drop with each opponent holding a doubleton, the odds are 53 percent to make five tricks and 95 percent to make four tricks. Huh? So dropping the Queen doubleton is hardly better than a 50-50 break. These odds seem, well, odd! However, when we realize that when opponents have an even number of cards those cards tend to break unevenly between them, then it begins to make sense. Here's the breakdown with four cards outstanding:

2-2 = 40.7 percent
3-1 or 1-3 = 49.7 percent
4-0 or 0-4 = 9.6 percent

As above with our combined eight cards, occasionally the opponents' Queen will drop as a singleton - otherwise, as we can see the odds would actually be less than 50 percent.

So what does all of this mean? Basically, except over the long haul we don't gain much benefit adhering to the Queen finesse guideline, "8 ever, 9 never." One situation where we would forget the Rule of 9 would be when one opponent doubled your contract for penalty. Here you would play that opponent to hold 3 or 4 trump cards and play the marked finesse.

Let's close with a bit of levity. When it's the opponent's contract and they hold a 9 card trump suit, remember what Mom said, "A peek is as good as two finesses!" Remember to keep your cards near your chest. Even though an opponent should never deliberately look at your hand, if you or partner inadvertently exposes cards, the declarer is allowed to capitalize on the indiscretion.

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[Issue 6 - Trumps are wild - Part 2](#)

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