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CONVENTIONS by JEREMY DHONDI
DEFENCE TO PRE-EMPTS

Opponents like pre-empting because they get to bid on relatively few points and, with luck, cause you considerable inconvenience. Forty years ago, the convention card was awash with exotic names like Fishbein, Herbert, Halsall, Lower Minor, FILMX and many more which described how either side defended against a three level pre-empt. They all had one thing in common which was that they didn't work all that well, but they were beloved by their proponents who believed firmly that you must punish a pre-empt and, unless you played a penalty double, you couldn't do so. Even then, you could defend pre-empts any way you chose, so one player invented his own system in which a double asked how many points partner held. In the sequence:

West	North	East	South
	3♥	Dbl	Pass
4♦			

4♦ showed 10-12 points. Now you could try to sort out where you had a fit. It was such a lamentable convention that it died a death and indeed most of the names above have disappeared into the history bin. If you look at a top player's system card, his basic agreement will be double for take-out. Are there pitfalls to this method? Yes. Can the old methods work? Yes. It's all just a matter of frequency. And, of course, there are some new toys as well. Time for a principle: when the opponents pre-empt, accept that you won't always emerge from an auction, doing exactly the right thing. What you should seek to do is get as many hands as possible right or as nearly right as you can. Suppose the auction starts:

West	North	East	South
1♥	Dbl	4♥	4♠
?			

You are forced to decide whether to defend and, if so, doubled or undoubled, whether to go to the five level or whether to try for slam. Deciding about the five level is tough and many players, including top ones, get it wrong at least some of the time. The same applies to auctions which start with a three level pre-empt. Let's start with some easy hands where the opponent's pre-empt does not inconvenience you very much, if at all. In all the following, your RHO opens 3♦.

♠ A Q J 9 8 7 6	
♥ K Q 5	
♦ 4	
♣ K 9	

You have a good suit and sufficient values to make game a good prospect so just bid 4♠.

♠ A 4	
♥ K Q 5	
♦ K J 9 7 3	
♣ 8 3 2	

You pass smoothly and hope partner re-opens with a double. You haven't enough to make 3NT a good proposition. More on what partner should reopen with later.

♠ K J 8 4	
♥ A Q 7 6	
♦ 4	
♣ A K 6 5	

You double for take-out. Here, you not only have support for all the other suits, but will also be happy if partner can bid 3NT or pass for penalties. Double is a flexible call and will give you your best chance of solving as many problems as possible. It won't always work. Sometimes, your left hand opponent will hold a good hand and be prepared to double your final contract. If you never call for fear of this, then you will be destined to record hands where you pick up +150 or +300 by beating their pre-empt by three tricks, but miss a number of making games or the ability to take a penalty. If they double your contract and you go four down for -800 when they can score +130, it is 12 IMPs out, but +150 from beating them three when you can score +650 in your game is 11 IMPs out. It's just -800 feels worse.

Double is the most flexible call but sometimes your hand is not suitable for this. Suppose you hold:

♠ K J 9 7 5 4	
♥ A Q 3	
♦ K 7 6	
♣ 4	

Over any three level pre-empt, you are not good enough to bid 4♠ and not suitable to make a take-out double, so you bid a simple 3♠. If your suit was hearts, you could make a simple 3♥ call. Both of these allow partner to pass, raise or bid 3NT. It is slightly different if you hold clubs as you will go beyond 3NT and it is possible that there are better meanings for 4♣. Suppose your opponent opens 3♦ and you hold:

♠ AQ5
 ♥ J3
 ♦ AQ4
 ♣ KQJ76

You are too strong to pass. It's possible that 4♣ is the right contract, but doubling will likely result in partner bidding hearts. If you bid 4♣, then you have missed 3NT (the most likely making contract). I would bid 3NT and hope that, if they choose to lead a heart, partner has something in the suit. It won't always work, but it stands more chance of success than 4♣ does. Suppose your opponent opens 3♣ and you hold:

♠ AKJ75
 ♥ AQJ65
 ♦ 3
 ♣ K8

Whilst you could double and remove diamond bids to a major, this would have the twin problem that partner won't know you have five of the other major and he also may not think you are as strong as you are. Therefore, making a cue bid (4♣) to show a decent hand with at least 5-5 in the majors, rather like a Michaels cue bid but stronger, is the traditional meaning for this bid. Some players have taken this a step further and use four-level suit bids to show all 5-5 hand types. They always show decent strength. A standard rule is never to pre-empt over a pre-empt. Suppose an opponent opens 3♥ and you hold:

♠ AKJ75
 ♥ 3
 ♦ AQJ65
 ♣ K8

If you bid 3♣, then there is a risk of partner passing when you have game on. If you double, then which suit will you show when partner bids 3NT or 4♣? If you bid 4♣ then you may play the 5-1 fit with a 5-4 fit in diamonds available. The solution is to make what is known as a non-leaping Michaels bid. Over the 3♥ pre-empt, 4♣ shows clubs and spades and 4♦ shows diamonds and spades. Although not 100% forcing they do show good hands and always at least 5-5. The scheme is:

Opponent opens	You bid
3♣	4♣ = majors 4♦ = diamonds + a major
3♦	4♣ = clubs + a major 4♦ = majors
3♥	4♣ = clubs + spades 4♦ = diamonds + spades
3♠	4♣ = clubs + hearts 4♦ = diamonds + hearts

Suppose you are in fourth position. If partner has bid, you should probably show him a little latitude. Suppose the auction had started:

West	North	East	South
?	3♦	3♣	Pass

♠ Q95
 ♥ KJ5
 ♦ K93
 ♣ J765

You should pass. Partner may well have a 13 count with 5 or 6 spades. Even if he has a little more, your ♦K is of dubious value and, of course, trumps are more likely to break badly if the opponents have pre-empted. Now it goes:

West	North	East	South
?	3♦	Pass	Pass

♠ K76
 ♥ A1052
 ♦ 3
 ♣ AK753

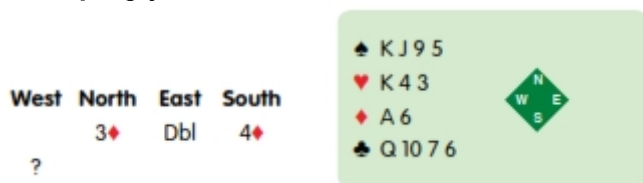
It's right to double. First of all, you have a fairly suitable shape. It's possible you will land in a 4-3 spade fit but that's no reason to pass it out, because an appreciable proportion of the time partner will have a diamond holding. This is more likely because South has not raised diamonds. If, given the same auction, your hand was:



I would still double. The chances of something going wrong are a bit higher, for example, partner jumping to game in a major and we neither have quite the values nor a good fit, but if we pass we may miss a penalty or a decent contract of our own. Partner, having seen you pass and miss a penalty, will be more inclined to bid 3NT next time on something not all that suitable. You can hear him saying, 'I had to take my chances as I am playing with a Trappist monk.' When you double in fourth seat, part of you is hoping that partner has something like:



With the West in Hand A, you have combined values short of game but there is a very real chance of taking 3♦ several off when you can only make a part score. Thus far, the opponents have been mostly cooperative except for their opening bid, but sometimes they will raise. If they raise a pre-empt by one level, then they are hoping you will misguess. Suppose the auction goes:



If you pass, you may well miss game. If you bid 4♠, you may find you have missed your heart fit when partner has a 3-5-1-4 shape. If you double to show values and no clear bid, then you give your side its best chance of finding the right contract, which could be 4♦ doubled. Sometimes, particularly if they are not vulnerable, they will raise to the five level and, here, you should bid a suit if you have some values and length. You will almost never have a penalty double based on trumps, but you can double to seek to persuade partner to defend if you don't think a five level contract is likely for your side. Will you be right? Not all of the time, which is why people pre-empt.

Summary

- **Accept you can't always get to the right contract when the opponents pre-empt and concentrate on getting as many hands right as possible.**
- **Allow some leeway to partner who has been handed a tricky situation and doesn't need you to punish him (but don't be too much of a mouse).**
- **Play double for take-out over pre-empts and give up the old conventions if you are in the minority still playing them.**
- **Consider how you will play 4♠ and 4♦ after a pre-empt.**
- **If the opponents raise a pre-empt when partner has doubled or bid, then use double as a flexible weapon saying, 'I have values but nothing clear to bid.'**