When partner pre-empts

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When partner opens with a pre-empt and you have a strong hand, you have to choose your bid carefully. This is the focus of one of the chapters in *100 Bridge Tips for Club Players* and the ideas in that are directly relevant to this deal from Monday 23 November:

BD: 13	♠Q5 ♥Q83 ♦AQT9874 ♣7	**Dlr: N** **Vul: ALL**
♠KJT97 ♥7 ♦653 ♣J953		♠32 ♥K6542 ♦KJ ♣QT42
	♠A864 ♥AJT9 ♦2 ♣AK86	

	♣	♦	♥	♠	NT
N	2	5	4	2	3
S	2	5	4	2	3
E					
W					

	10
5	9
	16

In second seat, with both sides vulnerable, it's quite reasonable for North to open 3D. Yes, this is a "heavy" pre-empt with 10 hcp, so you might wonder whether it's worth upgrading to a 1D opening. My rule of thumb is that you need to have 2 "quick tricks" to justify upgrading. How do you count "quick tricks"? Ax is 1, AK is 2, AQ is 1.5, KQ is 1, Kx is 0.5 and nothing else matters.

So on this deal, with a good-quality diamond suit and only 1.5 quick tricks, a 3D opening makes sense.

What should South do after that? There's a temptation to bid 3NT with stoppers in all the other suits. However, with only a singleton diamond, a 3NT bid would be most unwise. Why? Because whatever values North holds will be in the diamond suit, but unless it's headed by AKQ you might never be able to cash diamond tricks when playing in notrumps.

Here's an important generalisation to remember: a weak hand always plays better in its long suit. South should only consider bidding 3NT with a diamond fit i.e. at least 2, preferably 3 small cards in the suit – that's when will it be possible to reach dummy.

Otherwise the only consideration for South should be whether to pass or to hope for the best and bid 5D.

Because a "textbook" pre-empt with both sides vulnerable should be within 3 tricks of the level of the bid i.e. worth about 6 tricks, South has a borderline hand with about 4.5 tricks, depending on how things work out in the heart suit. Taking a "glass half full" view means bidding 5D, which is what my partner did.

It turns out that the lie of the cards is favourable and 5D cannot be beaten. On the likely spade lead, declarer rises with the ace and cashes ♣AK to discard a losing spade. Now the diamond finesse fails, but declarer ruffs the spade return and plays ♦A, dropping the other top honour, which means he can draw the last trump with ♦10. When the heart finesse also succeeds, 12 tricks roll in!

Those who erred by bidding 3NT had cause for regret, because the contract fails. Those who opened 1D also had cause for regret, because the partnership ended up in 4H and encountered a 5-1 break in trumps.

Incidentally you may have noticed that the table of makeable contracts indicates that 5D should only just make i.e. no overtrick. How does that work? Well, it's an unrealistic double-dummy outcome. If East leads a heart and upon winning a diamond trick returns another heart, West can ruff. That will never happen in real life. Just another reminder of why you shouldn't put your faith in that table when assessing what you or your partner did!

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