**The Rule of 7-8-9 for Weak-Two Openers in First and Second Seats**

**by Robert L. Losey**

**Introduction**

**Interfering** with opponents’ bidding (**pre-empting**), managing risk, and **communicating** with partner are the most important considerations when making pre-emptive opening bids. **Robert’s Rule of 7-8-9** and its corollary, the **rule of 7-8-9 divided by 2,** provide useful guidelines that strike a balance among pre-emption, risk, and communication when deciding what types of hands should be opened with weak-two bids in first and second seats.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The relative importance of the pre-emptive and communication aspects of weak-two bids varies with the seat in which the bid is made. The pre-emptive value of weak-two bids is greatest in the first seat, next highest in the third seat, somewhat less in the second seat, and virtually nil in the fourth seat.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The discussion that follows explains the rule of 7-8-9 and guidelines for its use. The focus is on weak-two bids, though the principles discussed can also be applied to higher-level pre-empts.

**First and Second Seat Pre-empts**

A weak-two opening bid made in the first seat takes bidding space away from partner and two opponents, while a second-seat weak-two opening bid has less pre-emptive value because the first opponent has already passed. [[3]](#footnote-3) But, along with its greater pre-emptive value, the first-seat weak-two bid comes with greater risk, as a first-seat weak-two bid is more likely to be doubled for penalty than a second or third-seat weak-two bid. This is because the opponents are more likely to have the preponderance of high-card points when a weak-two bid is made in first seat. If a weak-two bid is made in seat one with seven high-card points[[4]](#footnote-4), this leaves thirty-three high-card points distributed among the remaining three hands, on average giving the opponents eleven points each. In contrast, if a weak-two bid is made in second seat, the opponent in the first seat typically has a maximum of eleven or twelve high-card points and an average of just over eight high-card points,[[5]](#footnote-5) leaving each side with approximately the same number of high-card points on average.

Precisely whether the first-seat weak-two bid’s combination of increased pre-emptive power coupled with its increased risk of being doubled and set should cause the pre-emptor to be slightly more or less cautious is a question left for another day, but this note assumes that the two considerations more or less offset each other, and that it is logical to pursue approximately the same strategy in opening the bidding with a weak-two bid whether in the first or the second seat.

**Rules for Hand Quality When Making Weak-Two Bids**

One rather extreme rule for making opening weak-twos would be to open any hand, regardless of distribution, that has five to eleven high card points and a six-card suit in any of the diamond, heart, or spade strains (few pairs bid weak-twos in clubs). There are two drawbacks to an undisciplined approach: 1) An undisciplined approach provides less information than it probably should to partner, making it difficult for partner to determine the appropriate response.

2) Some hands that meet the 5-11 point criteria have meager offensive values, and weak-two bids with weak offensive firepower can too often lead to bad results.

Both of these problems become more manageable if the weak-two bidder follows guidelines that both increase information provided to partner and decrease the chances of being doubled and set. Any rule should consider the potential gains from pre-empting against the risk of losses when set. A useful starting point is to consider what would happen if the opponents are likely to bid and make game unless you pre-empt, but that if you open a weak-two bid the opponents will not bid game, they will instead double you and you will go set. The most important consideration in this case is how many tricks the weak-two bidder can afford to go set and still come out ahead if the opponents could have bid and made game. The following table details the four alternative vulnerability patterns and the maximum number of tricks that a weak-two bidder can afford to go set if the opponents can bid and make game.

**Calculation of Maximum Acceptable Number of Tricks Down if Opponents Can Make Game**

 **Vulnerability Status Maximum Acceptable Set**

M. Most favorable – Bidder not vul/opponents vul three tricks = 500 points

I. Intermediate – Bidder and opponent both not vul two tricks = 300 points

I. Intermediate – Bidder and opponent both vul two tricks = 500 points

L. Least favorable – Bidder vul/opponents not vul one trick = 200 points

The situation in which the weak-two bidder can afford to be most aggressive is “M” above, when the weak-two bidder is **not** vulnerable but the opponents **are** vulnerable. In this case, game for the opponents makes 600 points or more, while a weak-two bidder who goes set three tricks when doubled gives up 500 points. Thus the weak-two bidder comes out ahead when going down three (or fewer) tricks if the weak-two bid kept the opponents out of game.

In either of the intermediate cases of equal vulnerabilities (“I”), the weak-two bidder who keeps the opponents out of a makeable game can afford to go set two tricks, while in the least favorable case (“L”) the weak-two bidder can only afford to go down only one trick doubled and vulnerable if the opponents would have otherwise bid and made game. When you are red and the opponents are green, down two tricks when doubled loses 500 points, while if the opponents bid and make a non-vulnerable game they would have made a maximum of 480 points as long as they take no more than 12 tricks.

**The Rules of 7-8-9 and (7-8-9)/2 In Seats One and Two**

**In the most favorable case (M)** from above, the weak-two bidder can afford to bid more aggressively than in cases I or L. The rule of **7**-8-9 suggests that the weak-two bidder should have seven total high card points, and the corollary to rule of 7-8-9 recommends that the weak-two bidder should have 7/2 = 3.5 points in her six-card suit (at least Q, J, T), where the ten is assigned a ½ point value, a logical assignment when holding a Q, J, T sequence in a six-card suit.

**In case I** from above, where there is equal vulnerability for both sides, the weak-two bidder needs a better hand. The intermediate value (from 7-**8**-9) of 8 high-card points is required and the suit should have at least 8/2 = 4 points, so K, J (or Ace with no other honors) or better.

**In case L** from above, in which the weak-two bidder faces unfavorable vulnerability, even better values are required. The rule of 7-8-**9** requires 9 high-card points in the hand, and the suit should have at least 9/2 = 4.5 points, so K, J, T or better.

**A Summary of the Advantages of Using the Rule of 7-8-9**

Implementation of the rule of 7-8-9 and its (7-8-9)/2 corollary results in a disciplined approach to bidding weak-twos in first and second seat that strikes a balance among three goals,interfering with opponents’ bids, managing the risk of being doubled and set, and communicating with partner so that partner can make an informed decision about further action.

**Want to Be More Aggressive Than Suggested By The Above?**

Are you more aggressive than most and feel that the Rule of 7-8-9 is too conservative? Do you feel that you should be a more aggressive pre-emptor in pairs games than in teams games?[[6]](#footnote-6) Fine, give yourself credit for a high-card point equivalent for the sixth card in your long suit when calculating hand points and your version of the rule of 7-8-9 will allow you to be more aggressive than the one above.

 **Bidding Weak-Twos in the Third Seat**

If you like to be consistent in employing weak twos, then perhaps you’ll want to use the Rule of 7-8-9 when opening weak twos in third seat as well as in seats one and two. **I don’t recommend that.** Third-seat pre-emptive opening bids are much more about interference than about communicating with partner. Partner has already passed, and this means that you rarely have a chance for game if you open with a weak-two bid in third seat. It sounds contradictory, but you need to be more and less aggressive.

**Be less aggressive** in third seat when you don’t have the spade suit: If you open a weak-two without having at least three spades, you may be opening the door for a part score for your opponents.

**Be more aggressive** when green against red, especially when you have few points. My own preference in a pairs game is to open a weak two in third seat with most six-card majors when I have **very few (two to seven) points and good distribution**. My partner’s initial pass usually suggests no more than eleven points, and if, for example, I have four points, the opponents are likely to have game, perhaps slam. My partner understands that I may open light in third seat, and will be reluctant to bid on unless she has great distribution, thus the odds that we will have to play a doubled contract are acceptable. We will make a zero on occasion, but on (hopefully) more occasions we will have kept out opponents out of their optimal spot.

**Other Considerations**

**Team games**: Be more conservative in a team game, especially with unfavorable vulnerability. Yes, it is useful to pre-empt opponents out of bidding makeable games, but while a zero on a board in pairs is something from which you can recover, it’s more difficult to recover in teams play from being doubled and set a bunch.

**Pre-empting at the two level with a seven card suit:** If you have a seven-card suit give yourself another point for the seventh card in the suit and consider opening at the two level if you now are at the low end of your range in meeting the rule of 7-8-9. For instance, if I have a seven-card suit that is QTXXXXX and queens in two other suits, I’ll give myself another point in the suit for the seventh card and treat this hand as qualifying as an opening weak-two bid when we’re green and opponents are red. [[7]](#footnote-7)

**Spades Is your suit**: Be more willing to pre-empt when spades is your suit because you are more likely to deter your opponents from entering the bidding. If your opponents decide to bid a suit, they will have to risk bidding at the three level.

**Side four-card major:** In the first and second seats, be reluctant to open a weak two if you have a four-card major.In third seat, who cares, the name of the game is interfering with opponents’ bids: If your partner did not bid in first seat, it’s unlikely your side is going to get to play in your four card major.

**Pre-empting with a five-card suit in third seat:**

Your risk increases significantly when you pre-empt with only a five-card suit. I do it only when I either have a suit strong enough that I want partner to lead, or I have extra distribution to help offset the risk that I will be doubled for penalty.

**References**

There are lots of good sources on weak twos, but one I especially like. Larry Cohen has an interesting discussion of his play with three partners with widely divergent styles when it came to making pre-empts. The link is **http://www.larryco.com/BridgeArticles/ArticleDetails.aspx?articleID=187**.

The value of pre-empting is highest in seat one. A weak-two bid in seat one potentially interferes with the opening bid of one or both opponents (and your partner as well). A pre-emptive bid in seat two has less pre-emptive value because the opponent in seat one has already had a chance to start the bidding.

In the third seat, as in the second seat, a pre-emptive bid potentially interferes with the opening bid of one opponent, but does not interfere with an opening bid by partner. In the fourth seat, a weak-two bid has very little (if any) pre-emptive value. Moreover, if you open in the fourth seat with a weak hand, the odds are that the opponents have the majority of the points, and that they are more likely than you are to benefit from your weak-two opening.

**Communicating With Partner**

A weak-two bid can provide extremely useful information to your partner, though it may come at a cost. If your partner would have opened the bidding, you and partner may find it more difficult to assess the prospects for game (or slam) because of the limitations that opening at the two level imposes on the exchange of information. When opening with a weak-two bid in first or second seats it is more important to provide quality information to partner than when opening a weak-two bid in third seat. A third-seat weak-two opening comes after partner has passed, hence there is little chance that a legitimate game can be reached, and the primary purpose of the weak-two bid is to obstruct the opponents’ bidding rather than to exchange information with partner.

1. This author has been partial to “undisciplined” pre-emptive bids in the past, asI have appreciated that they keep opponents guessing and sometimes generate salutary effects. But of course undisciplined bids also keep your partner guessing. Moreover, against good players, undisciplined pre-emptive bids are likely to result in more doubled- and-down-two-or-more results than can be rationalized. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It makes almost no sense to open a weak-two in the fourth seat. Since both opponents have failed to open, a fourth-seat “pre-empt” has little pre-emptive value, and it amounts to waving a red flag in front of the opponents that says “Look, you probably have more points than our side does!” There are better ways to define two-level openings in the fourth seat, but that is another story. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One way to look at first and second seat pre-empts is that a weak-two opening bid made in the first seat takes bidding space away from two opponents and only one partner, a two to ratio, while a second-seat weak-two opening bid pre-empts one partner and one opponent, a one to one ratio. Thus the first-seat pre-empt has much greater pre-emptive value. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I use seven high card points in this example because it makes the calculations a bit easier. Eight high card points (the mid-point of the oft-recommended range of five to eleven high card points for making a weak-two bid) probably represents a somewhat better estimate of a typical opening weak-two bid in the first or second seat. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 8+ is the number that resulted when I used a random deal generator, though I used a small sample. A statistician can provide a better estimate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Logically, you should be a more aggressive bidder of games (especially vulnerable games) in teams play than in pairs (see the discussion of teams versus pairs bidding on RLLosey.com for elaboration on this point), but less aggressive in using weak twos in team play. The logic behind the more conservative employment of weak twos in teams play is that you want to decrease the chances of large losses because they can ruin an entire session in teams, but they only give you a zero on one board in pairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. By any logical measure, if the sixth card in a suit is worth one point, the seventh is worth more than an additional one point. For example, if you have the top four cards in a major suit plus the 2,3,4,5, 6, and 7 in that suit along with the deuces in the three other suits, when compared to having AKQJ of a major and XXX in each other suit (ten points?) isn’t it logical to view the fifth through the tenths cards in the ten-cared suit as adding 15-16 points in value to your hand, getting you to the 25-26 points necessary to make game? If so, the 2,3,4,5,6, and 7 were worth at least an additional 2.5 points each on average. We can debate about whether to ascribe the extra value to card length or to shortness in other suits, but the point is that adding the extra cards to a long suit added value to the hand at an incresing rate. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)