

WHAT IS AN OPENING BID?

The requirements for an opening bid of one in a suit are a matter of personal preference for natural bidders. Some will open light, some will not--it is not a matter of system. In my experience, however, the super-light opening with trashy suits does not work out well in a system of natural bidding. It seems like a contradiction of the word "natural" to open the bidding with a weak hand and a suit like J842. The opening lead benefits that normally arise from natural bidding are undermined by such openings, and it is difficult for partner to judge many hands when he must allow for both a bad hand and a bad suit.

Light opening bids with balanced hands have an affect on other bids, too. The 1NT rebid range must be reduced to 12-14 HCP, leading to a 15-17 HCP notrump opening, an 18-19 HCP jump rebid of 2NT, and a 20-21 HCP 2NT opening. The last three range changes are overbids that often lead to a bad result.

The sort of light openings that work well with natural bidding are those based on good suits, especially good major suits, and distributional strength. It is easy to stop bidding in this system, even after a two-over-one response. Other systems find it difficult to stop at a low level after a two-over-one response, because their bidding sequences roll along with a momentum that is difficult to brake. That is why some players will pass with a promising hand such as ♠AQ1097 ♥KJ87 ♦3 ♣942, but will open 1♣ with a worthless collection such as ♠Q87 ♥Q83 ♦AK2 ♣J642, hoping they can slow things down by rebidding 1NT.

We often hear statements of this sort in the duplicate club: "I open all twelve (or eleven!) point hands." No qualifications, no exceptions, just a flat statement that shows an abysmal ignorance of what bidding is all about. It also reveals a pathetic dependence on the 4-3-2-1 point count, a notrump evaluation system that must be all fudged up with "adjustments" to have any validity in suit bidding (for which a 3-2-1-1/2 count would be more accurate).

All bridge writers are agreed on this subject of hand evaluation with the 4-3-2-1 count, but there are many otherwise fine bridge players who will or will not make a certain call because they have or have not the point count prescribed for that call (e.g., a Precision 1♣ opening requiring 16 HCP). They give no consideration to the fact that honors are worth more in combination with other honors than when standing alone, or that it is better to have high cards in long suits rather than in short suits. Wasn't it Culbertson who accused such people of knowing "the price of everything and the value of nothing"?

Instead of making categorical statements about the point count requirements for an opening bid, bidders should vary their minimum point count for opening in accordance with these considerations:

-- Opening lead support. If you can open the bidding with a suit headed by AK or KQJ, there is good reason to stretch for an opening bid, especially in a matchpoint game.

-- Suit solidity (e.g., QJ1097) provides a measure of safety for the light opener. A suit like Q8642 is not likely to provide a haven in a storm of doubling.

-- Major suit holdings are important. With 5-5 or 5-4 in the majors you have a better chance of reaching a reasonable but light game or of outbidding the opponents. Light minor suit openings do not have such potential.

-- Major suit openings have preemptive value. The opponents must usually come in at the two level, and may not be able to come in at all when the hand actually belongs to them.

-- The quality of the opposition is a consideration. This factor must not be over-emphasized, because even bad players can take tricks if they have lots of high cards. The main advantage arises from the fact that weak bidders have a difficult time when the other side opens the bidding. They can manage well enough when their side opens, but they do not have the skill or judgment required for accuracy in overcalling, doubling for takeout, and other defensive actions. Also, they defend poorly.

-- Partner's tendencies and skill must be taken into account. To open the bidding light opposite an aggressive or unskilled partner is bad strategy.

-- Ease of rebid often enters into the opening bid decision. If there is a fair chance that you will have to make a bad rebid, it is better to pass a doubtful hand. A 1♠ response leaves you in a poor position when you have opened 1♣ with ♠3 ♥Q873 ♦AK5 ♣Q8762. It is better to pass such a hand.

-- Honors in combination are worth more than isolated honors. Pass with ♠Q62 ♥K8763 ♦K54 ♣A5, but open 1♥ with ♠863 ♥KQ763 ♦AK5 ♣42.

-- It is better to have high cards in long suits than in short suits. Pass with ♠AQ ♥1087632 ♦A3 ♣543, open 1♥ with ♠76 ♥AQ10632 ♦A3 ♣543.

-- Vulnerability can be a factor, especially in an IMP or total point game. Not vulnerable open 1♥ with ♠3 ♥Q8762 ♦KJ7 ♣AQ83, but such an opening could result in a large adverse swing when vulnerable.

-- Light openings of one in a suit in first or second seat with a defensive sort of hand (e.g., ♠AJ ♥Q932 ♦Q975 ♣A109) are best made when no one is vulnerable. Going down two tricks (or one doubled) may be okay, while passing and beating the opponents two tricks (or one doubled) may not be okay. Going down two (or one doubled) when vulnerable is not okay, while passing and beating them two tricks (or one doubled) when they are vulnerable is okay, so tend to pass this sort of doubtful hand when either side is vulnerable. Besides, a 1♥ bid is unappetizing with the example hand. If playing weak notrumps, a 1NT bid describes the hand so well that it should not be eschewed at any vulnerability.

-- It is often better to pass a marginal opening with 4-4-4-1 distribution. Such hands are difficult to describe after opening, but are perfect for a takeout double if the opposing side bids the singleton suit. If the opposing side bids one or more of the four-card suits, it is likely that either side is going to get bad breaks in a suit contract (or languish in a misfit). Better them than you!

-- An opening hand in any seat should include at least two defensive tricks (QJ=1/2, K=1/2, A=1, KQ=1, AK=2).