

## 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).

## CHOICE OF SUIT

When your distribution is:

4-3-3-3

If the four-card suit is clubs, open 1♣. Otherwise, open the four-card suit only if it is a good suit and the hand has no rebid problem. With ♠K63 ♥AQ85 ♦986 ♣KQJ open 1♥, raise a 2♣ response, and rebid 2NT if partner responds 2♦. Raise a 1♠ response rather than rebid 1NT, choosing the stronger rebid because of the 15 HCP. If the hearts were weaker, or the hand weaker, a 1♣ opening would be correct.

If the four-card suit is diamonds, a 1♦ opening is usually right, but if the diamonds are weak and the clubs strong, a 1♣ opening is preferable when the hand is minimum. After opening 1♦ with a minimum such as ♠Axx ♥Kxx ♦AQ10x ♣xxx, the rebid has to be 2♦ if partner responds 2♣, since a 2NT rebid requires more strength. That is why a 1♣ opening is preferable with ♠Axx ♥Kxx ♦10xxx ♣AQx.

Sometimes a three-card diamond suit may be opened: ♠Q874 ♥AQJ ♦KQJ ♣983. The spades are weak, and it is unwise to open 1♣ with a suit weaker than Qxx (which is bad enough). After opening 1♦, the hand is good enough for a 2NT rebid if the response is 2♣. Substitute a small card for the Queen of spades and you have a real problem. What to do? Just pass! Thirteen HCP do not always make for a mandatory opening. Or you can open 1♦ with the plan of rebidding 2♦ if partner bids 2♣. Better to lie about a suit than lie about the strength of the whole hand, as Goren used to say.

4-4-3-2

Open the higher ranking of touching suits, but with both minors a 1♣ opening is sometimes preferable if the diamonds are weak and the clubs strong. For this purpose spades-clubs are not treated as "touching."

With four spades and four diamonds it is usual to open the suit below the short suit (spades are "below" clubs): Bid 1♠ with ♠AK43 ♥1075 ♦A943 ♣K2. Raise a 2♥ or 2♦ response, rebid 2♦ over a 2♣ response, pass 1NT. With the hearts and clubs reversed, however, open 1♦. If partner bids 2♣ you can make a stretched 2NT rebid (not 2♠!). With some hands it may be necessary to rebid a four-card diamond suit with a minimum hand (e.g., ♠AQ102 ♥83 ♦AQ103 ♣432).

With weak spade-diamond suits and a strong three-card club holding, a 1♣ opening is the least of evils: ♠J852 ♥KQ ♦J653 ♣AK3. You must rebid 1NT after a 1♥ response, however, to avoid the trap of a jump preference in clubs after a 1♠ rebid (which you would have to pass with this minimum). The rule is this: If you open a minimum hand with a three-card suit, you must not rebid one of a suit. Why? Because responder's invitational jump in the three-card suit must be passed with a minimum hand. Using Checkback Stayman (see section 4-8, Checkback Stayman by Responder), a 3♣ jump rebid by responder is forcing after opener's 1NT rebid, so the three-card club suit is not a problem in that sequence.

With four hearts and four clubs the usual call is 1♣, but there are exceptions. With ♠84 ♥AKJ2 ♦1043 ♣AK85 open 1♥ and raise a response in either minor. If you open 1♣ and the response is 1♠, you lack the 4-5 distribution implied by a 2♥ reverse, and a 1NT rebid is undesirable with this suit-oriented hand. In addition you hide the best feature of the hand: a strong four-card heart suit.

With 4-4 in the majors the general rule is to open 1♠, but if the spades are weak it is usually better to find another call:

1) ♠Q832 ♥AK104 ♦A3 ♣Q32

2) ♠J853 ♥Q874 ♦AQ ♣KQ3

3) ♠10873 ♥K1084 ♦KQJ ♣A4

With hand 1) open 1♥, rebid 2NT after a minor suit response. With a weaker hand it may be necessary to rebid a strong four-card heart suit. To avoid that, don't open a light hand of this type with 1♥ unless the hearts are strong.

With hand 2) open 1♣, rebid 1NT after a 1♦ response. A one-over-one rebid of 1♥ promises at least four clubs, or a stronger hand. Why? Because an invitational jump to 3♣ must be passed with a minimum hand. Change the queen of diamonds to the king and a 1♥ rebid is okay because over 3♣ you can bid 3NT.

With hand 3) open 1♥ (or pass), bid 2♦ (!) after a 2♣ response.

4-4-4-1

These hands require judgment. The usual practice is to open the suit below the singleton, but there are plenty of exceptions. If that suit is "unbiddable," open the next lower biddable suit, but a weak club suit is okay:

1) ♠AKJ8 ♥J932 ♦A943 ♣6

2) ♠J932 ♥AKJ8 ♦A943 ♣6

3) ♠J932 ♥Q943 ♦AKQ4 ♣6

4) ♠A943 ♥6 ♦J932 ♣AKJ8

5) ♠AKJ8 ♥A943 ♦3 ♣J932

With hand 1) open 1♠, the suit "below" the singleton.

With hand 2) open 1♥.

With hand 3) open 1♦, rebid 2♦ after a 2♣ response.

With hand 4) and 5), open 1♣.

It is often better to pass light hands of this shape, which are difficult to describe after opening. If the opposing side bids the singleton, a takeout double will describe the hand perfectly. If they bid other suits, they may end up in a misfit.

5-4-3-1 or 5-4-2-2

The five-card suit is usually opened, but there are certain minimum hands that require opening the four-card suit, especially when the five-card suit is weak.

First, when the suits are touching and the lower ranking is a weak five-card suit, open the four-card suit if it is strong:

1) ♠AKJ3 ♥Q8764 ♦K76 ♣3

2) ♠K1032 ♥AQJ87 ♦Q76 ♣3

With hand 1) open 1♠, but open 1♥ with hand 2). Neither hand is strong enough for a reverse, so rebid 2♥ with hand 2) if the response is 2♣ or 2♦ (not strong enough for a diamond raise either). After a 1NT response a 2♥ rebid normally shows six, but it must be chanced (but pass 1NT with a 4=5=2=2 hand).

When the suits are not touching and the five-card suit is very weak, it is usually right to treat the five-carder as a four-card suit. Open 1♦ with ♠108643 ♥A ♦AKJ6 ♣976, planning to rebid 2♦ if partner bids 2♣. You wouldn't want to open 1♠ and then rebid 2♠ if the response is 2♥, and any other rebid is out of the question.

5-5

Generally open the higher ranking suit, but open 1♣ with strong clubs and weak spades: ♠Q8763 ♥K2 ♦8 ♣AK876. If the two suits are switched, open 1♠, planning to rebid 2♠ after a red suit response. If the hand is strong enough to rebid 3♣ after a red suit response, however, a 1♠ opening is okay when the spades are not strong: ♠Q8763 ♥AK ♦8 ♣AK876. If you open 1♣ it will be difficult to show the five-card spade length. Besides, a 1♠ opening has preemptive value.

With 5-5 in other suits, open the higher ranking of touching suits. With non-touching suits it is generally right to treat the higher ranking suit as a four-card suit if it is very weak. Open 1♣ with ♠A7 ♥107654 ♦5 ♣AKJ82, since a 2♦ response to 1♥ would be embarrassing. Change the clubs to diamonds, however, and a 1♥ opening would be right.

6-5

Open the longer suit generally, but if the suits are 5-6 and touching then the shorter suit should be opened if it is much stronger and the hand is minimum. Bid 1♠ with ♠AKJ83 ♥Q108742 ♦6 ♣9. If the nine of clubs were the ace the hand would have good values for a reverse, so a 1♥ opening would be correct.

### **Ignoring the Rules**

A new suit response by a passed hand is not forcing, so the rules for suit selection, which are mainly aimed at providing a convenient rebid, can be violated freely in third or fourth seat.

The rules can also be ignored when the hand strength is such that no forcing response will be inconvenient. Open 1♠ with ♠AK93 ♥65 ♦J765 ♣AQJ, because the hand is good enough to bid 2NT after a 2♥ response, or to raise a minor suit response. Avoid bidding bad suits (which include any three-card minor) with good hands.

## CHOICE OF SUIT SUMMARY

The following are generalizations about the proper action with various shapes, not to be taken too literally, especially by a passed hand. Avoid bidding a weak suit or a three-card suit if there is no likely rebid problem connected with bidding a better suit.

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| 4=3=3=3<br>3=4=3=3                       | With a near minimum or no biddable major, bid 1♣. With extras (i.e., 15 HCP), bid the four-card major unless it is weak.   |
| 3=3=4=3                                  | Open 1♦ unless the diamonds are weak and the clubs are strong.   |
| 4=4=2=3<br>4=4=3=2                       | Bid 1♠, unless the spades are weak.  |
| 4=3=4=2                                  | Bid 1♠, unless the spades are weak.  |
| 4=2=4=3                                  | Bid 1♦, sometimes 1♣ (weak diamonds, strong clubs).  |
| 4=2=3=4<br>4=3=2=4                       | Bid 1♣.  |
| 3=4=4=2<br>2=4=4=3                       | Bid 1♥ unless the hearts are weak.   |
| 3=4=2=4<br>2=4=3=4                       | Bid 1♣.  |
| 3=2=4=4<br>2=3=4=4                       | Bid 1♦ unless the diamonds are weak.   |
| 4=4=4=1<br>4=4=1=4<br>4=1=4=4<br>1=4=4=4 | Bid 1♠ if spades are biddable, otherwise 1♥ if hearts are biddable, otherwise 1♦.<br>Bid 1♣, always.<br>Bid 1♦ if diamonds are biddable, otherwise 1♣.<br>Bid 1♥ if hearts are biddable, otherwise 1♦.     |
| 4=5                                      | If touching suits, bid the five-card suit if the hand is strong enough to reverse, or if the suit is strong. With a strong four-card suit and weak five, treat them as equals and open the four-card suit. |
| 5-5                                      | Bid the higher ranking suit, but with weak spades and a weak to moderate hand, bid 1♣ when 5-5 in the black suits. Bid 1♠ if either the hand or spades are strong.   |
| 5=6                                      | If touching and the hand lacks reversing values, bid the five-card suit if it is strong and the six-carder weak.   |

## THIRD SEAT OPENINGS

There are four reasons for opening light in third position:

- 1) To direct an opening lead
- 2) To crowd the opponents, interfering with their bidding
- 3) To put your side in a good position to compete for the hand
- 4) To prevent the hand from being passed out

A safety factor is that you usually don't have to rebid with a weak hand. Except for a 1♦ response to 1♣, you may pass any non-jump response, and may even pass a jump raise or jump to 2NT. This factor can affect your choice of suit even when the opening is full strength but minimum. With ♠AK83 ♥763 ♦KJ ♣Q842 you can open 1♠ instead of 1♣, because you can pass any two-level response. First or second seat you would open 1♣, of course, to provide a convenient rebid. The 1♠ bid in third (or fourth) seat is lead directing, preemptive, and safe.

A third seat opening in a weak four-card suit is to be avoided, even with a full opening bid. Bid 1♥ in first or second seat with ♠AJ ♥Q1065 ♦AQ108 ♣732, but 1♦ in third seat.

You can thus open some hands light, some hands differently, because partner's takeout can be passed. You do not open all 10-12 HCP hands, however. You need a reason to open, and an "out." With ♠AJ432 ♥6 ♦KJ3 ♣8754 you should pass in third seat. You have a reason to open, but no "out" if partner responds 2♥ or doubles a 2♥ overcall for business. If you must open, make it a weak two bid.

Similarly, with ♠42 ♥J8432 ♦KQ8 ♣KQJ you should pass in third seat. You will not be embarrassed by any response, but there is little reason to bid. You do not want a heart lead, and the hand has little merit. If you are straining for points, open 1♣ as a lead-directing tactic.

Examples of reasonable third seat openings:

- 1) ♦AKJ10 ♥832 ♦754 ♣Q65
- 2) ♠86532 ♥432 ♦J8 ♣AKQ
- 3) ♠A864 ♥KQ1076 ♦43 ♣J7
- 4) ♠AJ108 ♥95 ♦AJ106 ♣J83

Open hand 1) with 1♠, 2) with 1♣, 3) with 1♥, and 4) with 1♠. With 4) you choose spades over diamonds for preemptive reasons.

A passed hand may have to make a single or double raise of a major suit opening with less than normal trump support, which is another reason (other than lead direction) for not opening a weak four-card major in third position.

See section 4-12, Stoplight, which is a method of stopping at the three level when partner inelegantly responds 2NT to your weak distributional third-seat opening.

## FOURTH SEAT OPENINGS

In a duplicate game, you may open light in fourth position, but there is only one reason: to obtain a plus score rather than settle for a draw.

What are the requirements? Just this: a 51% chance or better of getting a plus score. With more than your share of high cards (10 HCP), or more than your share of major suit length, the chances of a plus score begin to outweigh those of a minus.

A hand with 11 HCP will often qualify for a fourth seat opening in a suit, but with a hand this weak you should have either 1) four or more spades, or 2) at least three cards in each major. With no spade suit, or few cards in the majors, the hand should be nearer to an opening bid. A full opening is rarely passed out, although one might pass a borderline hand with a singleton or void in spades.

Choice of suit will sometimes be a problem. With ♠KQ103 ♥J65 ♦AJ83 ♣64, you should open 1♦. In third seat 1♠ would be right, for both lead direction and preemptive reasons. In fourth seat these considerations are less important (both opponents having passed), and the main objective is to avoid getting too high. A 1♠ opening with this hand might provoke a dangerous jump raise or 2NT response from partner. After a 1♦ opening she is less likely to jump, and you can perhaps get out of the bidding at a low level by passing a major suit response. Of course you pass a 2♣ response.

Fairly strong opening preemptive openings are acceptable in fourth seat, since partner can't have much. Open 3♦ with ♠4 ♥63 ♦QJ109765 ♣AKQ, which is normally a 1♦ opening.

Fourth seat weak two bids need not adhere to the usual requirements for suit quality, but will be near-maximum for HCP, perhaps with opening-bid strength.

Fourth seat openings should be fairly decent in IMP or rubber bridge games, but you can open a little light with a good spade suit.

Also see section 5-1, Weak Notrump - Fourth Seat Only.