



Michelle Brunner

Open 1♣ with 5-5 in the black suits

Two World Champions debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at elena@ebu.co.uk

WHAT is so special about opening a hand which is 5-5 in clubs and spades? Holding any other 5-5 combination it is customary to begin with the higher-ranking suit with a view to bidding one's second suit twice, if space permits. Aye, there's the rub! Every bridge player knows how difficult it can be to describe fully one's assets and while, occasionally, one has to suffer the consequences with some 5-5 combinations when one is weak and forced to conceal the lower-ranking suit, the age-old rule of opening 1♣ with the black suits serves to avoid this fate. Many moons ago, when bridge became part of my national curriculum, this issue was never contentious and, indeed, has become a tradition which has stood the test of time – until now, I hear Heather saying! These days, some modern theorists advise differently and while I agree that on the odd occasion the pre-emptive quality of opening one spade with both black suits will be a successful gambit I aim to explain convincingly why I'm still a creature of habit.

If bridge can be described as an exciting game, then there is definitely a thrill to picking up the spade suit! In owning a suit with which you can outbid your opponents (and partner!) at every level, one has to respect this magical quality. Hence, while nominating the club suit at my first turn allows my opponents plenty of room to overcall, no-one can stop me bidding my spade suit later – and I'll take my chances if the level is a trifle high when I do so! Am I being totally reckless? I think not, but to prove it I need to go back to basics and illustrate my theory with some examples.

You pick up: ♠4 ♥AQ654 ♦43 ♣KQJ76 and sensibly open 1♥. So long as partner responds 1♠ or 1NT, you will be able to

introduce your club suit economically on the next round. Of course, this only indicates a 5-4 distribution and unless partner has a good hand you may not get a chance to confirm your actual shape. Ideally, the auction will progress something like 1♥ – 1♠ – 2♣ – 2♦ (fourth suit forcing) – 3♣ – 3NT. Imagine, now, an initial response of 2♦ and this time you are forced to rebid 2♥ (as you need 16 HCP to effect a reverse) and your beautiful club suit is temporarily, if not forever, buried. Such is bridge life: you will be frequently unable to complete the precise picture of such hands unless either you have 16 or more HCP, or partner is blessed with invitational (or better) values. Notwithstanding, remember too that when you do have the luxury of expressing your 5-5 pattern, you will be doing so at the three level.

Turning our attention back to the black-suited debate and, again, with no opposition bidding, how does one describe: ♠AQ654 ♥4 ♦43 ♣KQJ76, if you start by opening 1♠? Should partner respond in either red suit, your rebid has to be 2♠ which, mercifully, in this example, is a suit of reasonable quality. Try opening 1♣ and you are prepared for anything and everything! Admittedly opponents are not always obliging but given a free run your auction will often allow you to show your five-card spade suit at the two level: 1♣ – 1♥ – 1♠ – and if partner rebids 1NT, 2♣, 2♦ (fourth suit forcing) or 2♥, you can bid your spades again at an economically sound level without promising extra values!

Strengthen the previous examples to house 16 or more HCP, and whereas you may now be able to show your second suit by way of a high-level reverse, you are, as yet, unable to confirm any more than a 5-4

distribution. See what happens when you start by opening 1♣ with the following hand: ♠AQ654 ♥4 ♦A3 ♣KQJ76. The auction proceeds: 1♣ – 1♥ – 1♠ – anything – 3♠, and whilst still below the level of 3NT you have bared all!

I mentioned earlier the possible pre-emptive benefit of selecting an original spade opening, but qualified that with suggesting a refusal to be intimidated and kept out of the auction if I were to stick to my antediluvian methods and open 1♣. Well, now it's my turn to advocate modern trends and ask you to consider the notion of re-entering a competitive auction either via a 'double' or by bidding the spades later. First of all, it's time to wake up the opposition and get some competitive action! Again, you hold ♠AQ654 ♥4 ♦A3 ♣KQJ76 and I know that if I were to make the 'mistake' of opening 1♠ with this collection I would feel very uncomfortable about the prospect of defending against a red-suit contract (either red-suit, doubled or undoubled) if I had concealed my rather useful second suit during the bidding. Surely the beauty of this hand lies in discovering a fit and I have potentially end-played partner in the auction if it remains unmentioned.

Call me old-fashioned and, even, daredevil but if I elect to open 1♣, I do not propose to remain silent even if someone steals my bidding box! 1♣ – (1♥) – 2♦ – (2♥) – ? Do you have any agreement with your partner about the meaning of double or bidding 2♠ in this position? Fortunately I do, and that means I can safely describe the illustrated example hand with a rebid of 2♠, reserving a take-out double for doing battle with just a four-card spade suit.

Perfect! I rest my case. □

Open 1♠ with 5-5 in the black suits

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR).
Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

SPADES is the best suit you can hold. It out-ranks all the other suits, therefore when the auction becomes competitive and your side holds the spade fit, you can out-compete your opponents at the same level in your suit. The importance of finding a spade fit as early as possible in a competitive situation cannot be over-estimated. If the auction allows you to describe the exact length of only one of your two suits, which would you choose? Spades, of course.

Suppose you have a light opening bid, let's say ♠Q8652 ♥4 ♦J6 ♣AQ854, and you foolishly open 1♣. Your next opponent overcalls 4♥ and this is passed back to you. Is it really sound to venture back into this auction with 4♠? I don't think so. For all we know, partner may have a small doubleton in both your suits, and the penalty could be really huge. Opening 1♠ could lose you your club fit, but which would you trade? Obviously you would prefer to lose a club fit than a spade fit.

It doesn't necessarily take a high-level intervention to cause you difficulties in finding your fit. Suppose the auction goes 1♣ – (1♥) – 2♦ – (2♥); does a 2♠ rebid promise five spades? Michelle may argue that you can show a 5-4 hand by reopening with a double, therefore allowing for a 2♠ bid to show five, but I don't buy that. Double is certainly not for penalties when the opponents have bid and raised a suit at the two level; however, it shows a hand that is too strong to pass but has no other convenient call to make. Life would be wonderful if we never picked up awkward hands and we could guarantee four spades with this double, but I must wake up and consider what I am supposed to bid when faced with ♠KJ2 ♥J53 ♦K84 ♣AKQ9? I can't bid 2NT with no stopper, especially

as I know partner will be short in the opponents' suit, so they are almost certain to be able to run five tricks in hearts. I am far too strong to consider passing, so my call is double. There is no other call I can make. This means that if your choice is to open 1♣ with 5-5 in the black suits, a 2♠ rebid in this auction would have to cover the 5-5 distributions, and with a 5-4 shape you have to decide whether your partnership style is going to be to call 2♠, or to double. Either way there is ambiguity.

Even if the opponents do not intervene, you may still lose your spade fit by opening 1♣. Let's take the same weak hand again, but this time the opponents are silent and partner responds 1NT to your 1♣ opening. What can you possibly do now? You are completely stuck. Partner figures to have a club fit, so you could repeat your club suit, but playing a 2♣ contract with a 5-3 spade fit available is hardly likely to score you many match-points at pairs. Playing a four-card major system, bidding and rebidding your spade suit will tell partner you have five. Even rebidding in clubs will tell partner that you hold five spades, therefore the 5-3 fit will always be found (if it exists) on the second round of the auction.

We should also consider the pre-empt-



Heather Dhondy

ive effect of opening 1♠. Your left-hand opponent may have a hand worth a one-level overcall of one of the red suits, but not worth a two-level overcall. A 1♠ opening bid will silence them, whereas a 1♣ opening will allow them in, and it is possible that they could out-compete you if they locate a fit.

Let's move on to developing a constructive auction to the right game or slam with partner. You may think that opening 1♣ will allow you more room, but does it improve your chances of describing your shape accurately? Suppose your auction, against silent opponents, goes: 1♣ – 1♥ – 1♠ – 1NT – 2♠. If you would always open 1♠ with 5-5 in the black suits, this auction guarantees six clubs and five spades. Whenever you show five spades in an auction that has started with 1♣, partner will know that you have shown at least six clubs. If you open 1♣ with 5-5 in the black suits, this auction could show 5-5 or 6-5 – therefore less definition.

To summarise, holding five spades, your number-one priority has to be to share the good news with partner as early as possible. This is especially true when the opponents are active in the auction, but also applies to uninterrupted auctions. □

JOHN SADLER

JOHN SADLER died on 30 October at the age of 74, after a long battle with cancer.

John was a very successful player in the '70s and '80s, in partnership with Doug Smerdon first and later Tony Waterlow. His achievements during that period include reaching the final of the Gold Cup and winning Crockfords. More recently, he reached the semi-finals of the 2000 Gold Cup, and thereafter made a habit of picking up local trophies both in London and Torquay, where he had a second home.

John will be remembered as a very courteous and formidable opponent, and as a most constructive partner and team-mate.