



Sally Brock

# With 4-4 in a major and a minor, open the major

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at [elena@ebu.co.uk](mailto:elena@ebu.co.uk)

WITH 4-4 in a major and a minor and a hand too strong for a weak no-trump it is best to open the major. That is a sentiment with which I most heartily concur.

## As few bids as possible

When I played bridge twenty or so years ago I tried to bid every hand scientifically, aiming for the best contract every time. I now think that is an impractical aim and losing philosophy. My thinking is more in line with that often quoted by Michael Rosenberg, that when you get to declare a hand you want to have arrived there in as few bids as possible.

In my view many players lose sight of basic bidding theory. If you have game values or thereabouts, investigate eight-card major-suit fits and if you don't have one, bid 3NT. Only rarely are you interested in minor-suit games, especially in uncontested auctions.

If I open the major with my 4-4 balanced hand, there is a good chance the bidding will go 1♠ – 3♠ – 4♠. Or 1♠ – 2♠ – 2NT – 4♠. Or 1♠ – 2♠ – 2NT – 3NT. We have arrived at our game in the suit opened or no-trumps without telling the opponents anything about any other suits.

However, if, with 4-4 in spades and, say, clubs, you open 1♣, and partner responds 1♥, what now? 1♠ or 1NT? Modern theory opts for 1NT, and I would agree that this is the better option, but you will miss a 4-4 spade fit when partner does not have the values to move. It also means that when you do rebid 1NT and partner does have the values to bid on, he needs to investigate a spade fit, therefore revealing more about both hands to the opposition. Suppose opener is 3-3-3-4 and responder is 4-4-3-2, my auction would be: 1♣ – 1♥ – 1NT – 3NT. The alternative would be: 1♣ – 1♥ –

1NT – 2♣ (Checkback) – 2♥ – 2♠ – 2NT – 3NT. Ouch! If there's a winning defence to find, you would expect them to find it!

## Making it dangerous

I don't much mind if I play a five-card major or a four-card major system. But it seems to me that if you are playing four-card majors, then to get full advantage you should open one as often as possible.

If I open 1♠ when I am 4-4 with clubs or diamonds, my opponent has to introduce his heart suit at the two level or not at all. If he wishes to make a weak jump overcall, he has to do so at the three level.

A particularly favourite auction is when it goes, for example, 1♠ – (Pass) – 2♠ – (Pass) – Pass – ? Where the 1♠ is always or usually a five-card suit, there will usually be an eight-card fit for both sides, making it pretty safe for the opposition to balance. However, playing a four-card major system, where you raise freely with three-card support, then someone balancing in that 'standard' sequence may have a nasty shock coming.

## The positional element

For me the best argument that the 'open the minor' brigade have is that of *positionality*. They will tell you that if it is a hand on which strong no-trumpers would bid 1NT – 3NT, or 1NT – 2♣ – 2 any – 3NT, or even 1NT – 2NT – 3NT, then they will bid 1 minor – 1 major – 1NT etc. and the stronger hand will be declarer. Whereas my auction will go 1 major – 1NT – 2NT – 3NT, or some such, leaving the responding hand at the helm.

I admit that they have a point. But remember that when opener has 15 or 16 points, for game to be on responder needs

9 or so and would respond at the two level anyway, allowing opener to rebid 2NT. So at game level at least, declarer would be the stronger hand.

At part-score level I admit it would be better for the stronger hand to be declarer and in my methods he probably won't be, but this can be overrated. I once developed a strong club system which had one little flaw and in a big pairs field I found myself declaring 3NT with J-x-x in diamonds and nothing else, and a balanced 26-count in the dummy. However, the opening lead was a diamond from Q-10-x-x-x and I was the only player in the room to make 3NT!

Of course, when there is a 4-4 major fit I will gain in the declaring stakes because I will bid 1♥ – 2♥ – 2NT – 3♥/4♥ or 1♥ – 3♥ – 4♥. They, on the other hand, will bid 1♣/1♦ – 1♥ – 2♥/3♥, and the weaker hand will be declarer. And that brings me to another point . . .

## What does it mean when opener raises responder's major?

Take a straightforward sequence: 1♣ – 1♥ – 2♥. For me, opener can't have a balanced hand or he would have opened 1NT. So he either has four-card support, or three-card support and a singleton, but in either case he'd be fairly minimum in terms of high-card values. However, the 'open-the-minor' brigade surely have to encompass the above, as well as a 4-4-3-2 hand in the 15–16 range. Or do they bid 3♥ with those hands (in which case they are getting a level higher than necessary when partner is minimum)? If they bid 2♥, then how does responder know whether to make a game try when opener has a range of 11–16 points?

Overall, to my mind, it is not even close! The practical action for practical players is to open the major. □

# With 4-4 in a major and a minor, open the minor



Chris Jagger

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

IN the February 2008 debate about weak no-trump or strong no-trump, one of the horrors Tom Townsend recounted was this. The bidding starts: 1♠ – (3♦) – Double – (Pass) – ? What do you do now holding the hand below?

♠ K Q 10 3 ♥ A 10 ♦ J 4 3 ♣ A Q 7 6

Tom had no idea, and neither did I! But fortunately I would not have to face this problem: I would have opened 1♣ on the hand, and now if opponents come in with 2♦ or 3♦, I can introduce the spades comfortably.

For the purpose of this debate I will assume that you are playing a weak no-trump, and will therefore be considering balanced hands with 4-4 in two suits and 15-19 points.

## Pre-empting the opponents – or pre-empting partner and yourself?

The first key is to understand that opening a major is more pre-emptive than opening a minor. Opening 1♠ with a 4-2-4-3 shape means that the opponents have to bid at the two level to show hearts, whereas over 1♦ they can make a one-level overcall. You have pre-empted them out of their 1♥ overcall. However, it also makes life more difficult for partner, who may have to respond 1NT rather than bidding a heart suit; you are pre-empting him as well as opponents. This could be bad in two ways: you might miss the heart fit, and you may play no-trumps by the weak hand.

So is it better to pre-empt opponents, or should you be more worried about pre-empting partner? Generally with a weak hand we are happy to pre-empt opponents, but with strong hands it is critical not to pre-empt partner, to give yourself the maximum chance of finding the right contract.

Take this deal:

♠ A 7 5 2		♠ 3
♥ K 8 4	W N E	♥ A Q 6 5 2
♦ K Q 6 3	S	♦ J 8 7 5 4
♣ K 9		♣ 6 3

Most people nowadays would not regard the East hand as being worth a two-level response, so the auction would go 1♠ – 1NT, perhaps going off in no-trumps when in fact you have a good fit in both diamonds and hearts, and will probably make 4♥! I am sure that if you open 1♦ you are going to be able to find at least one of your fits! There are always hands that work well one way rather than another because you happen to open partner's suit, but in this case it is not just the luck of the draw. If you opened 1♦ on the hand, and partner instead had:

♠ J 8 6 4 3 ♥ A Q 6 5 2 ♦ 4 ♣ 6 3

You would still manage to find your spade fit.

Responding hands with five hearts are generally easier to bid over a minor-suit opening than over 1♠. If the auction starts 1♠ – 1NT – 2NT, responder can rebid 3♥, but is this showing five hearts or six? Is it forcing? Either way round, it is much more comfortable to be able to bid hearts at the one level. I have seen people miss games as they don't ever find the heart fit, or bid games when they should have played at a lower level, as they have to introduce hearts at the three level.

Some of you may not care about making partner's life harder, but you also pre-empt yourself! What do you rebid if you open 1♠ with a 4-3-2-4 shape and partner responds 2♣? You would like to show your

club fit, but you would also like to bid no-trumps, and you are too strong to simply raise to 3♣ anyway. Presumably you bid no-trumps, and hope that it is not critical to play in clubs. If you are weak in your doubleton, then you still have to rebid no-trumps. Wouldn't you have preferred to open the hand 1♣? Over this, partner can raise clubs, and then we can happily bid no-trumps, or with a weakness bid one of our other suits. I remember scoring up with team-mates who had just this problem, and ended up going down in 3NT with 6♣ on!

## Advantages and disadvantages

There is another benefit of opening the minor. In the contested auction 1♥ – (2♠) – Double – (Pass) – 3♣, my partner knows that I have five hearts, as with 4-4 I would have opened 1♣. But those that open the higher of two suits are left guessing – with three-card support they would like to put you back to 3♥ or even 4♥, but this could be a silly contract.

We have seen that there are big advantages to opening the minor suit, but I shall also be open about its main disadvantage: you may not find the 4-4 major-suit fit. Like any system, there will always be some hands that are bad for it. However, playing the weak no-trump, it is less likely that this will happen, as with 15+ points you are likely to be strong enough to carry on and find the major-suit fit.

The key here is not that there are examples where opening the lower works better, it is more that there are many inherent difficulties with opening the major rather than the minor – you give yourself problems even when opponents are silent throughout the auction! □