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Talking with your partner – what bidding is all about

You pick up your hand and sort your cards and are pleased to see you have enough to open the bidding. What should you be thinking about? Most importantly, you should be thinking about how partner and you can get the best score on this hand? And you get the best score by talking to partner about the hands you hold and together finding the best contract for your side.

First you need to work out what sort of hand you have got. There are two main things to identify.

Shape. Of course all hands have 13 cards, but the 13 cards can be made up in many different ways. A 4-3-3-3 shape means you have one 4-card suit and three 3-card suits. 4-4-3-2 means two 4-card suits, one 3-card suit and a doubleton. These two shapes are called ‘balanced’. They have no voids or singletons, no more than one doubleton. A 5-3-3-2 shape is balanced too, but we don’t open it 1NT when the 5-card suit is a major.

Hands with long and short suits are called unbalanced. Some unbalanced shapes are 5-4-3-1, 5-4-2-2, 6-3-2-2, 6-4-2-1, 6-3-3-1, 5-5-2-1 and 4-4-4-1 but there are some very extreme shapes too, like 7-6-0-0, which occur about once in a million years.

Point Count. Is used to evaluate how good a hand you have. Using the point count you put a numerical value on the hand. Hands with less than 12 HCP are not worth an opening bid unless they have exceptional shape

Hands with 12-14 HCP are minimum opening bids.

Hands with about 15-16 HCP are medium strength openings.

Hands with 17-19 HCP are stronger openings.

Hands with 20 or more points have at least half the high cards in the pack. They are extra strong and must be given special treatment.

Opening the bidding with a balanced hand. When you make an opening bid, you start to describe your hand to partner and you ask partner to describe his hand to you. The aim is for the two of you to arrive at the best contract. Let’s look at some balanced hands first.

♠ A 8 6
♥ K Q 10 9
♦ K J 10 9
♣ 7 5

By opening 1NT, you say ‘Good news partner, I have a better than average hand. It is a balanced 12-14 hand.’. 1NT is called a limit bid, since it describes your hand within close limits and your partner has to decide what to do with that information – maybe pass with less than 12 points, maybe bid game with rather more.

♠ A K 6
♥ K Q 10 9
♦ K J 10 9
♣ 7 5

With a balanced 16 count you are too strong to open 1NT. Start by telling partner something useful with 1♥. This says ‘I have four or more hearts and enough to open. My next bid will give you more information’. You prefer to open hearts rather than diamonds, since if partner has hearts too, your side will play the hand in a heart contract, but if he has diamonds you may prefer to play the higher

scoring no trump contract. If partner replies 1♠, he says he hasn’t got 4+ hearts but he has at least four spades and 6+ HCP. Now you continue describing your hand with 1NT, saying ‘I have not got four spades, but I have 15-16 HCP and a fairly balanced hand’. This 1NT rebid is also a limit bid, but a stronger one than opening 1NT. If partner replies to your opening bid at the two level, you will have to rebid 2NT to send the same message.

♠ A K 6
♥ K Q 10 9
♦ K J 10 9
♣ Q 7

With this hand you are too strong to rebid 1NT and must jump to 2NT to show your 17-18 HCP. Make that ♣Q into the ♣K and you will jump all the way to 3NT to show 19 HCP. Both the 2NT and 3NT rebids are limit bids; they just limit your hand to one of the stronger point ranges.

Remember. To tell partner you have a balanced hand, you either open 1NT or rebid in no trumps at your next bid. Any no trump bid is a limit bid, telling partner that your hand is limited to a given shape and strength. Partner can then decide the final contract.

Open 1NT with 12-14.

Open one of your longest suit, or with 2 four-card suits your higher suit, with a balanced 15+ HCP. Rebid 1NT with 15-16 HCP, jump rebid no trumps with 17-18 HCP and bid game with 19 HCP.

Opening the bidding with an unbalanced hand. Start by opening one of your longest suit. To show the hand is unbalanced rebid in a suit rather than in no trumps. Open your longest suit or the higher ranking if you have two suits of equal length. For example:

♠ A 8
♥ K Q 10 9 2
♦ 9 5
♣ K J 10 9

Open 1♥. When partner replies 1♠, rebid 2♣. This says I have an unbalanced hand with at least five hearts and four clubs and not four spades. Because you rebid 2♣ rather than 3♣, you do not have a very strong opening, probably at most 17 HCP.

Let's look at some complete conversations that came up with my new class of beginners.

♠ A 8	♠ K 10 6 3 2
♥ K Q 10 9 2	♥ J 4
♦ 9 5	♦ J 10 7 5
♣ K J 10 9	♣ Q 8

Olivia said 1♥ and Pippa responded 1♠, which said that Pippa did not have four hearts but that she had at least four spades and six or more points. Olivia knew she had to find a second bid over 1♠ even though she had a minimum opener, so she rebid 2♣, showing an unbalanced hand. Pippa thought about passing, as her

clubs were better than her hearts. Then she thought of 2NT as she had diamonds stopped, but she knew her hand wasn't strong enough to go that high. In the end she bid 2♥ as Olivia had shown that her hearts were at least a 5-card suit. This 2♥ bid says, 'I don't have many points, I am putting you back to your first suit but that doesn't mean I like it very much.' Olivia got the message and passed.

♠ A 8	♠ K 10 6 3
♥ K J 10 9	♥ Q 4
♦ 9 5 2	♦ Q J 10 7
♣ A K 3 2	♣ Q J 4

Frank opened 1♥ and Betty bid 1♠. Frank sent the message with his 1NT rebid. 'I don't have four spades but I do have 15-16 HCP and a fairly balanced hand.' Betty added her 11 to Frank's 15 and got 26, enough points to be in game. So she took the decision about where the partnership was going to play and bid 3NT.

♠ A 8 6 3	♠ K Q 7 4
♥ Q 10 9 2	♥ J 4
♦ J 5	♦ A 10 7 5
♣ A K Q	♣ 8 6 4

With a balanced 16 count, Sally was too good for 1NT. She did well to remember to open 1♥. Holding four cards in each major is the one exception to the rule about opening the higher-ranking suit, since opening 1♥ gives the best chance of finding a major suit fit. When Roy responded 1♠, she changed her mind about rebidding no trumps

and raised him to 3♠. Roy had a bit extra and went on to 4♠, which made ten tricks, losing only two hearts and one diamond.

Remember Tell partner you have an unbalanced hand by opening with one of a suit and rebidding either in a different suit or with two of the same suit.

Open your longest suit if one is longer than the others.

Open the higher-ranking suit with two equal length suits.

Unbalanced with three 4-card suits is very rare, we will look at this another time!

In bridge we talk to partner in coded messages, you must both be on the same wavelength.