

Responding with three card support

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Last issue, all the hands I discussed had a 4-card or longer fit for the major opened by partner, but responder isn't always so lucky. An opening bid of one of a suit can be made on as few as ten points or as many as 19. In case opener has a good hand, responder keeps the bidding open on as few as six points, since $6 + 19 = 25$ and 25 points will often be enough to make game.

♠ K 7 5 2
♥ 6 4
♦ 8 6
♣ K J 8 5 3

When partner opens 1♥, you are not strong enough to respond in your longest suit, clubs. The correct response is 1♠, planning to pass partner's rebid if it's a spade raise, a heart rebid or 1NT. Really the only time you will bid again on this weak hand is if partner says 2♦. Now it's correct to put partner back to the suit originally opened, by bidding 2♥.

♠ K 7 5
♥ 6 4
♦ 8 6
♣ K 9 8 5 3 2

When partner opens 1♥, you are still not strong enough to bid 2♣ – you should have 9+ points to respond in a new suit at the two level. 1NT, denying four spades and showing about 6-9 points is the best response. But suppose partner opens 1♠ rather than 1♥. You would be unhappy responding 1NT with two small doubletons. A better idea is to raise partner to 2♠, even though you have only 3-card support. Surprisingly, partner will have a 5-card spade suit for the 1♠ opener about three quarters of the time. So there will often be an 8-card fit in spades. When there isn't, partner will have at least 15 points (since 1NT wasn't opened) and your side will have the balance of the points.

♠ K 7 5
♥ 6 4
♦ 10 8 6 2
♣ K 9 5 3

With this hand you would raise 1♣ to 2♣, 1♦ to 2♦ and bid 1NT over 1♥. But again it usually works out best to raise 1♠ to 2♠. Just hope partner can use your trumps to ruff a heart. It wouldn't be wrong to respond 1NT but 2♠ will often work out better and it does stop fourth hand making an overcall at the two level.

Whilst it can be right to raise partner to the two level with only three spades, you should never jump raise spades straightaway. If you are good enough to make a jump raise, you will be strong enough to respond in a new suit first.

♠ K 7 5
♥ 6 4
♦ K J 10 2
♣ A 9 5 3

When partner opens 1♠, you respond 2♣, bidding your lowest 4-card suit first. If partner rebids 2♠, showing about 12-15 points and at least five spades, you should try for game by raising to 3♠. If partner rebids 2♥, you know that partner must have at least five spades and four hearts. Now you can jump to 3♠, showing 3-card spade support and a real try for game. Even if partner rebids 2♦, you should support spades by bidding at least 3♠. In fact with such a good fit for diamonds, it would be acceptable to bid 4♠. Partner will know that a 3♠ bid on the second round shows only three spades – with four spades you would have raised to 3♠ straightaway.

♠ K 7 5
♥ 6 4
♦ A Q 10 2
♣ A 9 5 3

Make the responding hand a bit better. The auction still starts with partner opening 1♠ and you responding 2♣. Whether partner rebids 2♦, 2♥ or 2♠ you will jump to 4♠ as your second bid. You have an opening bid facing partner's opening bid and you should expect to finish in a game contract – spades looks best once you know partner

has a 5-card suit.

Suppose with that last hand, partner rebids 2NT. This shows 15-16 points and with your 13 points, your side must have at least 28 points – more than enough to bid game. You could say 3NT, but just in case partner has a weak heart holding too, it makes sense to show your three cards in spades on the way to 3NT. Now the auction will go

Partner You

1♠ 2♣

2NT 3♠ Your 3♠ bid is 100% forcing, partner must not pass. With only four spades partner will bid 3NT, knowing you hold only three spades. With five spades partner will prefer to play in 4♠.

Here are some hands we played in a practice class recently. Those of you who remember my last article about using Losing Trick count will note how each of the following hands conforms nicely with the advice given about how high to raise with a given number of losers."

♠ A K J 9 5	♠ 4 3 2	Ceri	Dorothy
♥ K 10 9 3	♥ Q J 6 4	1♠	1NT
♦ K Q 2	♦ A 9	2♥	3♥
♣ 9	♣ J 10 5 2	4♥	

Dorothy had to choose between a 1NT and a 2♠ response. With a fairly flat hand and stoppers in all the other suits she decided 1NT was best. It worked well when Ceri rebid 2♥, as 4♥ is a better game than 4♠, though in practice both would have made.

♠ Q J 9	♠ K 8 7 5 2	Mike	Chris
♥ K Q 9 6	♥ A 7 3	1♥	1♠
♦ K Q	♦ 6 3	2NT	3♥
♣ A J 6 5	♣ Q 9 3	3♠	4♠

When Mike showed a balanced 18 point hand by jumping to 2NT, Chris, with nine points, might just have said 3NT, knowing that the combined point count was at least 26. But Chris carefully bid 3♥ in case Mike had five hearts. Mike only had four, but did have three spades, so he bid 3♠ and the good 4♠ game was reached. 3NT goes down on a diamond lead but 4♠ made easily.

♠ A K J 4	♠ 3 2	Gloria	Geoffrey
♥ Q 10 9 3	♥ K J 6	1♥	2♥
♦ K Q 10	♦ 9 8 7	2NT	3NT
♣ K 5	♣ Q J 10 6 2		

With four spades and four hearts, Gloria correctly opened 1♥ – this gives the best chance of finding a major suit fit. Geoffrey might have responded 1NT, but, with a doubleton spade and no diamond stopper, decided 2♥ was a better choice with the strong 3-card heart holding. Gloria was worth a try for game and chose 2NT showing her strong hand with only four cards in hearts. Geoffrey happily bid 3NT, expecting his long clubs to provide tricks and his heart honours to be the entry to cash those winners.