

My last three articles have been about how to start and stop a bidding conversation with your partner by using limit bids. When we are bidding, we try to describe our hand to partner, so that one of us can make a limit bid and we both share in the decision about where we play. Look at this hand

♠ Q J 7 5 3
♥ A K 8 6 4
♦ 2
♣ A 3

What we really want to tell partner is that we have two good 5-card major suits but that our hand is not particularly strong. We want partner's help in deciding which suit at which level we should play. The conversation starts with the opening bid. But what should it be?

I gave the hand to some of my students – I won't give their names, as I didn't like their answers! The first person opened 1♥. When asked why, she said the hearts were better than the spades so it must be right to bid them first.

The second person also opened 1♥, but gave a different reason – 'If I open 1♥, I leave room for my partner to bid 1♠, so 1♥ is a more economical bid. You always tell us that with four spades and four hearts we should open 1♥.'

Yes – but that was with 4-4 in the two suits, not 5-5. With a balanced hand that is too good for 1NT, we have to open one of a suit. Over a 1♥ opening, partner will bid 1♠ with four or more spades, so we should find a major suit fit if it exists. If partner doesn't bid 1♠, we will rebid in no trumps to show our 15+ point count.

But with 5-5 in the majors we have no intention of rebidding in no trumps. We want to play in one of our long suits, so we start with 1♠ and rebid 2♥ and if we get another chance, we will rebid hearts again to show at least 5-5 in the two suits.

When you have two equal-length 5-card suits, open the higher-ranking. Rebid the second suit and bid it again if you get the chance.
---

Here are the two hands and the way I think the auction should have gone.

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

If you open this hand with 1♠ and partner responds 1NT, 2♣ or 2♦, you have an easy rebid of 2♥. Initially that shows at least five spades and at least four hearts. But when partner continues with 2NT you can now bid 3♥, showing your fifth heart and offering a choice of contracts.

My next question to the two students was 'What will you rebid when partner responds 2♣?' and both of them said 2♠. If you open 1♥ and rebid 2♠ over the 2♣ response, you are misleading partner in two ways. 2♠ would be what is called 'a reverse', you are not only showing extra high card strength but also you are saying that your hearts are longer than your spades. Whilst opening 1♠ might seem to take up a bit more bidding space initially, that is recovered on the next round when you can rebid 2♥. With a minimum hand partner can put you back to 2♠ and you stop at the two level. If you open 1♥ and rebid 2♠, you force the bidding to the three level when partner gives preference to hearts.

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

This hand with a 4-5 distribution in the majors would open 1♥ and rebid 2♠ to show not only its shape but also its strength.

West	East
1♥	2♣
2♠	4♥

If ♠A is a small spade, West only has 13 points and West's rebid would be 2♥ not 2♠.

### The Rule of Twenty

Look at these three hands, would you open the bidding on any of them?

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

All three have 11 points, but they certainly don't look the same strength. How can you evaluate whether that extra distribution turns the clear-cut pass on the first hand into an

opening bid on either of the other two.

The Rule of Twenty can help you decide.

Add together the number of cards in your two longest suits and add to this the number of high card points in the hand. If the total is twenty or more, the hand is worth opening.

The first hand has 4 Spades + 3 Hearts + 11 points, a total of 18.

The second has 5 Spades + 5 Diamonds + 11 points, a total of 21.

The third has 6 Spades + 5 Hearts + 11 points, giving a total of 22.

So according to the Rule of Twenty, you have a clear opening bid on the third hand, a good opening bid on the middle one, but you should pass on the first.

### Which suit to open?

If your hand has long suits and Rule of Twenty says it is worth an opening bid, then we need to know which suit to open. What do you open on the following hands?

♠ A 10 9 8 3 2
♥ A K 10 6 4
♦ 4
♣ 4

**Open your longest suit.** You must open 1♠ and, unless partner raises spades, you will bid hearts next round. It is possible that one of your opponents will overcall in a minor, but that should not stop you bidding your hearts, even if you have to do so at the three or four level.

♠ 2
♥ A Q J 10 3
♦ K Q J 9 8 5
♣ 7

**Open your longest suit.** On the Rule of Twenty this scores 24 – a strong opening. Open 1♦ and rebid 2♥. Don't open 1♥ and rebid diamonds as partner will give you preference to hearts with, say, two small hearts and three small diamonds. Tell partner your diamonds are longer. To bid diamonds then hearts is a reverse bid. Whilst this hand is only 13 HCP, the 6-5 distribution makes it much stronger and it's worth a reverse.

♠ A 10 5 4 3
♥ 10 2
♦ A K 8 5 4
♣ 4

**Open the higher ranking with two equal length suits.** On this hand open 1♠. Rebid 2♦ if partner responds 1NT or 2♣, but if partner responds 2♥, you will have to rebid 2♠. Your distribution and high cards are not strong enough to find a 3♦ rebid.

♠ A K J 4 3
♥ 10 2
♦ A K Q 5 4
♣ 4

**Open the higher ranking with two equal length suits.** Open 1♠. Rebid 2♦ if partner responds 1NT, but jump with a game forcing 3♦ if partner is strong enough to respond 2♣. If partner responds 2♥, rebid a game forcing 3♦. You have the strength needed to force to game.

♠ A 10 5 4 3
♥ 10 2
♦ 4
♣ A K 8 5 4

**Open the higher ranking with two equal length suits.** Players used to open 1♣ on this hand, but that makes it hard to get across a 5-card spade suit. It is far more likely that you will want to play in spades than clubs. Also opening 1♠ stops the opponents making a one level overcall. After 1♠, you can bid 2♣ if partner responds 1NT but you will have to rebid 2♠ over 2♦ or 2♥.

Here are a couple of hands I tried out on my class.

♠ –	♠ 10 6 4	Jan	Sylvia
♥ A Q J 4 3 2	♥ 8	1♥	2♣
♦ K Q J 10 5 4	♦ A 9 8	3♦	4♣
♣ 7	♣ K Q J 4 3 2	4♦	5♦

6-6 is like 5-5 only with an even stronger distribution worth two tricks more. Jan opened 1♥ and jumped to 3♦. 3♦ is forcing to game. Others chose to rebid 2♦ and not everybody reached the 5♦ game, which only loses one club and one heart.

♠ –	♠ 10 6 4	Jan	Peter	Sylvia	Janet
♥ A Q J 4 3	♥ 8	1♦	1♠	2♣	2♠
♦ K Q J 10 5 4	♦ A 9 8	3♥	4♠	5♦	
♣ 7 6	♣ K Q J 4 3 2	Barbara's bidding boots were on when this hand arrived.			

She is a bit weak in high cards for a reverse bid into hearts, but with 5-6 in the red suits and the spade void, the distribution is far too strong to pass 2♠.

♠ A 9	♠ K 8 7 6 4 2	Gill	Jean
♥ A K 7 2	♥ 9	1♦	1♠
♦ K Q J 9 8 5	♦ 10 7 2	2♥	2♠
♣ 3	♣ K 9 2	3♦	5♦

West's 2♥ bid shows a strong hand with diamonds as the longest suit. After 2♠, the 3♦ rebid shows 6 diamonds and 4 hearts and East has suitable cards to bid 5♦. If West's hearts had been ♥Q J 7 2, West would not be able to show the 6-4 shape and would have had to rebid 2♦.