

There are many bidding rules to assist you when you have an in-between decision to make. Take the Rule of 20, for example, designed to help you decide if your hand qualifies as an opening bid. Add your high-card points to the length of your two longest suits and, if the answer is 20 or more, you have an opening bid. Like many of these rules, it is really more of a guide than a hard-and-fast rule. Consider these two hands :

xx	AQ
AQxxx	xxxxx
KQxx	xxxx
xx	KQ

Both hands have 11 high-card points with 9 cards in their two longest suits, so both obey the Rule of 20. However, whereas the first hand is an acceptable, if borderline, opening One Heart bid, the second hand is not. With zero high-card points in the longest two suits, hand two is desperately short of playing strength compared to hand one.

One lesser known rule is the Rule of 15, applicable when you are fourth-in-hand after three Passes and have to decide whether to open the bidding or Pass the hand out. In such circumstances, you can be sure the high-card points are fairly evenly divided with both sides having 18-22 high-card points between them. If you decide to Pass, you will beat all the other pairs sitting your way who go minus on the board. You will lose out to the pairs who manage a plus score. So how can the Rule of 15 help in your decision ?

Here is a recent deal from Shoreham where South found himself in this Rule of 15 situation :

J4
AQ972
J875
A6

Do you open the bidding with One Heart or do you Pass ?

You have 12 points and a decent five-card heart suit so you open One Heart. What's the problem ?

The chances of you bidding and making a game contract, facing a partner who could not open the bidding, are pretty small. So it's very likely to be a part-score hand. The problem with opening the bidding is that the opponents might discover they have a fit in spades. What you *don't* want is for the auction to proceed : One Heart - One Spade (overcall) - Two Hearts - Two Spades - ? Now you will wish you hadn't opened the bidding at all because the opponents have discovered a spade fit at a low level and you really don't want to compete with Three Hearts with this minimum hand.

The American player, Mike Lawrence, has a rule-of-thumb for this fourth-in-hand situation. You add the number of your high-card points to the number of *spades* you hold. If the answer is less than 15, you do best to Pass and throw the hand in.

Here, you have 12 high-card points and only a doubleton spade, giving a total of 14 ... so you Pass. That was my decision (and it scored 9/16). Every other South opened the bidding One Heart. As the cards were lying, you could have made eight tricks in hearts but the opponents had a nine-card fit in spades and could make 8 or 9 tricks, depending on the opening lead.

One example proves nothing but it's something for you to bear in mind. The Rule of 15 recognises the importance of the spade suit in a competitive auction. It is often the side holding length in the spade suit that wins the contract because the other side has to advance one level higher in order to outbid them. If your Jack of spades had been the Jack of clubs (so you'd have a singleton spade) it's even more likely that the opponents would have a fit in spades, so an opening Pass would be an even more obvious move.

Enjoy your bridge.