

In our exciting new Wednesday series, I will be featuring 36 carefully chosen topics, each spread over four weeks and aimed at intermediate and well beyond.

Taking your bridge to...

The Next Level

1. Balanced or Unbalanced

(i) Open INT with a five-card major

When you can open the bidding, first see whether your hand is balanced or unbalanced — your whole bidding strategy depends upon the answer. The three balanced shapes are 4432, 4333 and 5332. With those, you should plan to bid notrumps with either your first or second bid.

♠ AJ3	♠ KJ92	♠ KJ42
♥ KJ962	♥ K102	♥ K32
♦ K4	♦ Q10	♦ QJ
♣ J62	♣ AQ93	♣ AJ53

With the first, open INT, showing 12-14 balanced and avoiding the need for a rebid. If you open 1♥, what are you going to rebid after, say, 1♠?

The main advantage of opening INT with all 5332 shapes is that shape-inferences become much stronger when you *don't* open INT. For example, the sequence 1♥-1♠-2♥ guarantees six or more cards. The 5332 shapes are opened INT (as above) and with the 5-4 shapes, you rebid the four-card suit.

With the second hand, open one-of-a-suit and rebid notrumps at the lowest level, showing a hand a little too strong to open INT (traditionally 15-16, but preferably 15-17).

Regarding which black suit to open, I've heard players say, "Why not open 1♣, so I can rebid 1♠?" But that would show an unbalanced hand so even if you do open

1♣, you should rebid INT over (say) 1♥ to show your balanced hand. However, the risk of rebidding INT is missing a 4-4 spade fit. That is why you're better opening 1♠ in the first place. I recommend opening the major suit when you have a major and a minor.

The third hand is similar to the second — but the lack of intermediates and the downgraded ♦QJ doubleton mean it's really worth just 12-14 points. Open INT. I have heard players say, "But that's cheating." Not at all. If you decide your hand is worth 12-14, open INT, whether it's a good 11, a poor 15 or 12-14.

Dealer: South	♠ J3
	♥ 752
Vul: Neither	♦ A8532
	♣ AKQ

♠ Q1082	N	♠ 95
♥ Q1043	W	♥ KJ9
♦ 64	E	♦ KQ109
♣ 873	S	♣ 10952
♠ AK764		
♥ A86		
♦ J7		
♣ J64		

S	W	N	E
1NT(1)	Pass	3NT	End

(1) Not 1♠ — to avoid the need for a rebid.

If South had opened 1♠, West would not have led a spade, the only lead to allow 3NT to make. When West led ♠2, his stronger major, declarer could rise with ♠J and, knowing West began with only four spades (his fourth highest was ♠2), crossed to ♠AK and led ♠6 to ♠Q. He won West's ♥3 switch with ♥A, cashed ♠7 and followed swiftly with ♣AKQ and ♦A. Nine tricks and game made. andrew.robson@thetimes.co.uk