

TO OPEN OR NOT TO OPEN

24 Oct 2017

Put yourself in first or second seat. You must decide whether or not to open the bidding. What factors go into that decision? One is obviously:

Factor 1: High Card Points

There's much more to opening than just counting up HCP's, but for a moment let's suppose that points are all that matter. Question: Have you passed a 13-count in your entire life? Answer: Probably not! We could construct some really awful 13-counts if we had to, hands that might make your hair stand on end. Nonetheless, for the sake of simplicity, let's say that we open all 13-counts.

How about opening with 12 HCP's? Or 11 HCP's? Even 10 HCP's? Now the number of HCP's is insufficient information. We need to look at the distribution, too. The more distribution we have, the more likely we are to say something.

Factor 2: Distribution

There's a useful device called the Rule of 20. Giving it the lofty title of 'Rule' is an exaggeration, perhaps they should have called it the Useful Guideline of 20. Anyway, here's how it works:

Add your HCP's to the combined lengths of your two longest suits. If the total is 20 or more then you have an opening bid.

This is a better measure than HCP's alone because it also accounts for distribution.

A. ♠ A Q 4; ♥ Q 7 5 3; ♦ Q 3 2; ♣ Q 3 2

Does this 12-point hand follow the Rule of 20? Actually, 'No!' 12 HCP's plus only 7 suit-length points (4+3) comes to just 19. Not only that, the hand is truly awful in other ways, which we'll come to shortly. Anyway, we suggest you do not open this hand.

B. ♠ K Q J; ♥ Q 9 3 2; ♦ Q; ♣ Q 5 4 3 2

This 12-count does pass the Rule of 20 test. In fact, 12+5+4 even exceeds the magic number. But let's not kid ourselves, this is a truly awful 12-count. We suggest that you think twice before opening this garbage.

Hands A and B have an alarming absence of our third factor:

Factor 3: Intermediates

Yes, we are talking about Tens, and to a lesser extent Nines. Look how much better Hand A would be if it were actually Hand C:

C. ♠ A Q 4; ♥ Q 10 5 3; ♦ Q 10 5; ♣ Q 10 3

Here we have taken Hand A and added three Tens. Each Ten makes a decided improvement to the hand, because QTx is so much stronger than Q32. Hand C still fails the Rule of 20 test, but we'd open 1♣ anyway.

On to our final factor, the most interesting of all.

Factor 4: Texture

Texture? What's that? Just a word that sounds suitable as a bucket for everything which is not HCP's or Distribution or Intermediates. Let's revisit Hand B, which is a poster-child for absolutely awful Texture.

♠ K Q J
♥ Q 9 3 2
♦ Q
♣ Q 5 4 3 2



♠ K Q J
♥ Q 10 9 3
♦ Q
♣ Q 10 4 3 2



♠ K Q J
♥ A 10 9 3
♦ 2
♣ Q 10 4 3 2



♠ K Q J 3
♥ A 10 9
♦ 2
♣ Q 10 4 3 2



♠ K Q J 3
♥ 10 9 5
♦ 2
♣ A Q 10 4 3

This is Hand B in its original awful form. It passes the Rule of 20, but it has many flaws. We don't like having half our points in a 3-card suit, we don't like that singleton ♦Q, we don't like don't like that isolated ♥Q, and we are not sure we want to encourage a Club lead.

Thanks to those well-placed Tens, it looks better already! Now, let's do something about that ♦Q. True, if Partner has ♦AKJxx, we'll like the ♦Q a lot, but more often it will be a wasted value. So, we'll use those two HCP's to upgrade the Hearts ...

Starting to look like a real hand! But we are not crazy about those Spades. All that concentration of values in a short suit. Let's change one of those Hearts into a small Spade ...

That was a miniscule change, but it has further strengthened the hand. Those Spades are now a force to be reckoned with. Remember, lots of stuff in short suits is a negative. One more change ...

The ♥A has become the ♣A. What a difference! Now the high cards are in the long suits. And, as we'll open 1♣, and as Partner will probably lead our suit if she's on lead, how nice that we have strong Clubs to receive that lead.

Hand B, old and new, have the same HCP's and shape, but the new Hand B has come a long way in terms of playing strength. To see how well it plays, we'll pair it up with a random hand for Partner. OK, not quite random, actually hand-picked.

Original Hand B

| | | |
|--------------|--|-------------|
| ♠ A 3 2 | | |
| ♥ A 4 | | |
| ♦ 8 7 5 | | |
| ♣ K J 9 8 7 | | |
| <i>North</i> | | |
| <i>West</i> | | <i>East</i> |
| <i>South</i> | | |
| ♠ K Q J | | |
| ♥ Q 9 3 2 | | |
| ♦ Q | | |
| ♣ Q 5 4 3 2 | | |

The original Hand B is no fun at all! Far from it. If South decides to open that junk, then N-S will no doubt blunder their way to 3NT (down 2) or 5♣ (down 1).

South does better to pass initially, that way N-S can stop in a part-score and go plus.

'Textured' Hand B

| | | |
|--------------|--|-------------|
| ♠ A 3 2 | | |
| ♥ A 4 | | |
| ♦ 8 7 5 | | |
| ♣ K J 9 8 7 | | |
| <i>North</i> | | |
| <i>West</i> | | <i>East</i> |
| <i>South</i> | | |
| ♠ K Q J 3 | | |
| ♥ 10 9 5 | | |
| ♦ 2 | | |
| ♣ A Q 10 4 3 | | |

| <i>South</i> | <i>West</i> | <i>North</i> | <i>East</i> |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1♣ | Pass | 2♣ | Pass |
| 3♦ | Pass | 4♣ | Pass |
| 4♦ | Pass | 6♣ | All Pass |

An auction for enthusiasts of Inverted Minors. That 3♦ was a Splinter, and it shows something extra. Showing extras with just 12 HCP? Sure, that new Hand B is a real beaut!

4♣ was Roman Key Card (1430) and 6♣ is ice-cold! It's amazing what a little texturing can do!

Post Script

Suppose that our splendidly textured hand is slightly weakened to:

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

Now, it's only an 11-count, but one which passes the Rule of 20. Yes, we'd open that in a flash. And we'd even be sorely tempted to open this pure 10-count:

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

That's not opening light, that's recognizing a good hand when we see it!

Here's another 10-count: ♠ 6 5; ♥ A J 10 9 3; ♦ 4; ♣ A J 10 9 4

A lovely hand! Definitely worth an opening bid, it has so many things going for it:

- Has interesting distribution
- Has marvelous intermediates
- Has two Aces
- It is a good lead-director if we end up on defense

Still dubious about opening some 10-counts? Well, maybe this will convince you. Have you ever been dealt this hand?

♠ 6 5; ♥ A J J J 3; ♦ 4; ♣ A J J J 4

No, neither have we. But, in reality, doesn't this 14-count have the same playing strength as that earlier 10-count? Yes, of course it does, and remember, we always open 13-counts and up, so opening this multi-Jack 14-count is a no-brainer!

Ruth Weber held this last Tuesday: ♠ 6 5; ♥ A J 10 8 3; ♦ 4; ♣ A J 8 7 4

Needless to say, Ruth opened, she obviously liked that ♥ A J J 8 3 Heart holding. And, it turned out to be the winning bid, getting her and her Partner a good board.

Finally, let's watch O'Reilly and Bosco in action. Here is a pair that likes to bid a lot.

| | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| ♠ Q 8 7 4 | |
| ♥ 9 7 5 3 | |
| ♦ 7 5 2 | |
| ♣ J 5 | |
| <i>Martha</i> | |
| <i>West</i> | <i>East</i> |
| <i>Marietta</i> | |
| ♠ 5 3 | |
| ♥ K Q 10 8 4 | |
| ♦ Q | |
| ♣ K 7 4 3 2 | |

Marietta opened her mediocre 10-count, but she was in 3rd seat. Then over West's Double, Martha leapt majestically to 3♥. Bold preemptive bidding which created problems for E-W, who missed their cold game. Well done, M & M!

We've concluded that it's not such a bad idea to open suitable 5-4 11-counts, and also suitable 5-5 10-counts. How about 6-5 9-counts or 6-6 8-counts? That's up to you. But remember that Partner expects us to have some defensive tricks when we open the bidding. If you hold something like ♠ 3, ♥ KJ543, ♦ Q, ♣ QJ5432, you won't be happy if you open the bidding and then Partner doubles them in 4♠. Those doubled overtricks can be expensive!