

With 4-4 in a major and a minor, open the minor

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR). Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

IN the February 2008 debate about weak no-trump or strong no-trump, one of the horrors Tom Townsend recounted was this. The bidding starts: 1♠ – (3♦) – Double – (Pass) – ? What do you do now holding the hand below?

♠ K Q 10 3 ♥ A 10 ♦ J 4 3 ♣ A Q 7 6
Tom had no idea, and neither did I!

But fortunately I would not have to face this problem: I would have opened 1♣ on the hand, and now if opponents come in with 2♦ or 3♦, I can introduce the spades comfortably.

For the purpose of this debate I will assume that you are playing a weak no-trump, and will therefore be considering balanced hands with 4-4 in two suits and 15-19 points.

Pre-empting the opponents – or pre-empting partner and yourself?

The first key is to understand that opening a major is more pre-emptive than opening a minor. Opening 1♠ with a 4-2-4-3 shape means that the opponents have to bid at the two level to show hearts, whereas over 1♦ they can make a one-level overcall. You have pre-empted them out of their 1♥ overcall. However, it also makes life more difficult for partner, who may have to respond INT rather than bidding a heart suit; you are pre-empting him as well as opponents. This could be bad in two ways: you might miss the heart fit, and you may play no-trumps by the weak hand.

So is it better to pre-empt opponents, or should you be more worried about pre-empting partner? Generally with a weak hand we are happy to pre-empt opponents, but with strong hands it is critical not to pre-empt partner, to give yourself the maximum chance of finding the right contract.

Take this deal:

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

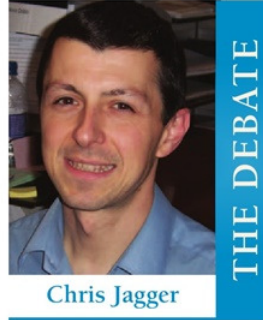
Most people nowadays would not regard the East hand as being worth a two-level response, so the auction would go 1♠ – 1NT, perhaps going off in no-trumps when in fact you have a good fit in both diamonds and hearts, and will probably make 4♥! I am sure that if you open 1♦ you are going to be able to find at least one of your fits! There are always hands that work well one way rather than another because you happen to open partner's suit, but in this case it is not just the luck of the draw. If you opened 1♦ on the hand, and partner instead had:

♠ J 8 6 4 3 ♥ A Q 6 5 2 ♦ 4 ♣ 6 3

You would still manage to find your spade fit.

Responding hands with five hearts are generally easier to bid over a minor-suit opening than over 1♠. If the auction starts 1♠ – 1NT – 2NT, responder can rebid 3♥, but is this showing five hearts or six? Is it forcing? Either way round, it is much more comfortable to be able to bid hearts at the one level. I have seen people miss games as they don't ever find the heart fit, or bid games when they should have played at a lower level, as they have to introduce hearts at the three level.

Some of you may not care about making partner's life harder, but you also pre-empt yourself! What do you rebid if you open 1♠ with a 4-3-2-4 shape and partner responds 2♣? You would like to show your



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club fit, but you would also like to bid no-trumps, and you are too strong to simply raise to 3♣ anyway. Presumably you bid no-trumps, and hope that it is not critical to play in clubs. If you are weak in your doubleton, then you still have to rebid no-trumps. Wouldn't you have preferred to open the hand 1♣? Over this, partner can raise clubs, and then we can happily bid no-trumps, or with a weakness bid one of our other suits. I remember scoring up with team-mates who had just this problem, and ended up going down in 3NT with 6♣ on!

Advantages and disadvantages

There is another benefit of opening the minor. In the contested auction 1♥ – (2♠) – Double – (Pass) – 3♣, my partner knows that I have five hearts, as with 4-4 I would have opened 1♣. But those that open the higher of two suits are left guessing – with three-card support they would like to put you back to 3♥ or even 4♥, but this could be a silly contract.

We have seen that there are big advantages to opening the minor suit, but I shall also be open about its main disadvantage: you may not find the 4-4 major-suit fit. Like any system, there will always be some hands that are bad for it. However, playing the weak no-trump, it is less likely that this will happen, as with 15+ points you are likely to be strong enough to carry on and find the major-suit fit.

The key here is not that there are examples where opening the lower works better, it is more that there are many inherent difficulties with opening the major rather than the minor – you give yourself problems even when opponents are silent throughout the auction! □