

LARRY COHEN SEMINARS – THINGS YOU CAN DO IN THIRD SEAT

Life in the third seat is not like it used to be.

In a typical session of bridge, the bidding will start with two passes perhaps 25% of the time. It used to be more than that but today, players are opening lighter and lighter hands and they are opening more and more weak two bids and weak three bids. Since people are bidding more, there are fewer hands where there are two passes at the start of the auction.

However, 25% of the time, the bidding will start with two passes. You may be surprised by how much you have to think about.

When it gets to you in third seat, you can reasonably judge what the fourth player has.

For instance:

No one vulnerable

W	N	E	S
	P	P	?

Hand One

4

764

K873

Q10873

You have five high-card points. The most points that first hand and second hand rate to have is eleven points each, or twenty-two points total. Your five means that fourth seat surely has thirteen points. He could have more. He could have a lot more. He will never have less.

Another way of looking at this is that if you have five points and partner has a maximum of eleven, their side is sure to have game points.

W	N	E	S
	P	P	?

Hand Two

Q10852

974

43

632

Your two high-card points tell you that the player in fourth seat has at least sixteen points. The odds are good that it is more.

If you know that fourth hand is going to bid, you might wish to start the bidding yourself in some fashion.

Say you have eight points. A common scenario.

This tells you that their side has at least twenty-one points, with serious odds of it being more.

The player in fourth seat can have any of the following hands. Assume no one is vulnerable. I'll comment on different vulnerabilities later. I'll give my fourth seat player a name. Call him Chuck. Chuck is a pretty good player and is getting better every day. He's a difficult opponent to play against. You know him. He's everywhere.

Hand One

W N E S

P P P

?

74

AQ864

KJ83

K10

Chuck, sitting West, was preparing to open 1H if possible. If third seat had opened 1C or 1D in front of him, he has an easy 1H bid.

Still, I point out that even a 1C bid distorts Chuck's bidding. It forces him to use defensive bidding tools instead of the tools he gets to use when he opens the bidding.

But if the player in front of him opens 1S or 2D or worse, 2S, Chuck will experience some discomfort.

Hand Two

W	N	E	S
	P	P	P

?

K108653

Q2

AQ8

32

Chuck would open 1S in fourth seat. Pretty clear.

He would overcall at the one level if he could. He would probably bid at the two level if South bid 2H. But would he be happy if he heard third seat open with 3C or 3H?

The usual point is that a 1S overcall does not carry the same weight as a 1S opening bid.

The previous examples were a bit boring. How about these?

Hand Three

W N E S

 P P P

?

92

AJ8

AK1082

Q94

Chuck would like to open 1D. If third seat bids 1S first, Chuck is not comfortable. He might bid 2D. He might make a takeout double.

Be honest. Don't you prefer auctions where your opponents stay out of your bidding?

Chuck would have to bid this hand using his defensive bidding methods. Competitive bidding is much different and much harder than constructive bidding.

Hand Four

W N E S

P P P

?

AKJ7

4

A74

KQJ95

If third seat passes, Chuck gets to open 1C. If the opponents don't get into the bidding, Chuck's partner will bid something and Chuck will be able to show his big hand, and can explore both of his suits. Might be a slam here.

However, if third seat opens with something, life dramatically takes a turn from routine to something else.

A 1C bid would be unsettling to Chuck. A 1D bid would be awkward for him and a 2D or 3D would be quite annoying. He can handle any number of hearts. But what Chuck would most like, as usual, is to open 1C.

I'd like to ask the audience what they would choose if RHO opened 3D. Here are your choices.

ONE Pass

TWO Double

THREE 4C

FOUR 3S

FIVE 3NT

You can respond by selecting the proper number.

Hand Five

W	N	E	S
	P	P	3S

?

Q6

AKQJ

A2

AQJ93

Chuck has been waiting to open 2C with this.

How would he feel if East opened 3S?

I'd hate it.

GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT THIRD SEAT BIDDING

11

If you have a legitimate opening bid, do that. Don't think about anything else. You may end up having a normal auction. Your partner, in first seat, could have a ten- or eleven-point hand. If you open 1H or 1S, he may be able to use Drury to reach your best spot. If you have a bit more, games are not out of the question. This hand is an example of that.

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1H

74

KJ984

AKJ

Q105

You would open 1H. In any position.

If your partner bids 1S, you will rebid 1NT.

You don't mind if he bids 2H or uses Drury to show you heart support.

All is relatively calm when you have this hand.

WHEN OPENER HAS A BIG HAND IN THIRD SEAT

If your hand is big enough, you may have a slam facing many of partner's modest hands.

AJ543

83

KJ74

94

4

AK104

AQ9853

A10

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1D
P	1S	P	2H
P	3D	P	?

The auction should reach 6D after this start. The point is that when you can use your normal methods, you can still reach good contracts.

Now if West happens to have a hand worth a 2C overcall, the bidding becomes more difficult.

OBSERVATION WORTH RECOGNIZING

Players like the comfort of uncontested auctions when they are the ones with good hands to bid.

THIRD SEAT FUN

The real fun in third seat begins when you have an assortment of motley hands that have a little something but not a legitimate bid to make.

If you don't have a legitimate bid to make, consider making a bid that you would not make in first or second seat.

Here are hands that you might have in third seat which are not classically worth an opening bid but which, in third seat, you might be motivated to make. Certainly, if you sense that Chuck is still counting his points, you might feel extra motivated.

THERE ARE TWO GUIDELINES THAT YOU MUST FOLLOW IF YOU ARE THINKING OF OPENING A ONE BID WITH LESS THAN NORMAL VALUES.

FAILURE TO FOLLOW THEM MAY CAUSE YOUR PARTNER TO DO SOMETHING BAD AS A RESULT.

GUIDELINE ONE

If you open a suit in third or fourth seat and your partner responds by bidding a new suit at the one level, a rebid by you promises a decent opener. The way you show a poor hand is to pass partner's bid.

GUIDELINE TWO

If you open a suit in third or fourth seat and your partner responds by bidding a new suit at the one level, a pass by you promises that you have three cards in his suit.

EXAMPLE

W	N	E	S
	P	P	?

74

K10985

A73

Q53

This is not worth a normal opening bid. But in third seat, one makes do with what one has.

However, this hand is not a 1H bid in third seat. It's strong enough to make a noise but there is a danger.

That danger is partner.

Do not open in third seat with a minimum hand if there is something partner can bid at the one level that you are not ready for.

On the hand above, if your partner bids 1S, what are you going to do?

If you pass, your partner will be in a lousy contract.

If you bid something, you promise a decent hand. Your partner will count on this and may bid more. You would not like it if you bid 1NT and your partner bid 2NT with his boring 12-count.

So, if you have opened a suit and partner bids a suit at the one level, a pass by you PROMISES three-card support along with a poor hand. The hand here has something useful but bidding 1H with it is likely to lead to trouble.

Do you have to pass this hand?

More on this hand shortly.

Here are three hands that can open and then pass when partner bids a suit at the one level.

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1C
P	1S	P	P

You could have a hand like this one:

Q85

Q84

43

AQ1085

This hand can pass 1H or 1S. If partner bids 1D, pass it and apologize.

Or this one:

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1D
P	1S	P	P

KJ43

AJ54

QJ6

J8

Or this one:

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1C
P	1S	P	P

Q654

K75

K73

KJ3

You have a twelve-count. But since partner is a passed hand you won't have a game.

It's OK to pass such hands. If you bid 2S, your partner might have enough to find another bid. Ouch.

USE YOUR JUDGMENT- SOME WEAK OPENING BIDS ARE ENTITLED TO BID AGAIN.

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1C
P	1S	P	2S

K1086

7

A106

A10874

This is worth a 1C bid in any seat. When partner bids 1S you should consider how much your hand has improved. It's not a weak hand anymore. It's a raise to 2S. A rather good one, in fact. Your hand is now worth around 15 support points after you add in your quality high-card points and your excellent shape and your nice spot cards. If your partner makes a game try, you should accept.

EXAMPLE HANDS

Assume no one is vulnerable unless otherwise stated.

The bidding is the same in all cases.

W N E S

 P P ?

SITUATION ONE

Just a few moments ago, I showed this hand.

74

K10985

A73

Q53

I discussed why you should not open 1H. You would be poorly placed if partner bid 1S. My suggestion was that you should not open a weak hand in third seat if partner is likely to bid a suit at the one level that you hate. I will talk about this hand again but for now, it is a useful comparison hand that allows me to make some observations.

Hand One

W	N	E	S
	P	P	?

K10985

A73

Q53

74

This hand has the same points and shape as the previous hand, and can bid 1S because there is no suit partner can bid at the one level that will cause you a problem.

Hand Two

763

AJ9

763

KQJ9

You can bid 1C, intending to pass whatever partner bids. Chuck is likely to have a fair hand and he may get involved, but at least you have indicated a lead if partner ends up on opening lead. And you have three cards in the other suits, meaning that if you pass, your partner won't be in a 4-2 fit.

Hand Three

W	N	E	S
	P	P	?

Q10975

A43

Q103

43

Pass. I'd like to bid 1S. It's an amazingly good way to inconvenience Chuck. However, I'd suggest that a third-seat opening bid ought not to be weaker than a good nine points. I'd pass this.

Hand Three

43

AKJ74

K53

J42

Bid 1H. You can rebid 1NT if partner bids 1S. Importantly, you can pass 1NT if he bids that.

SEMI-FORCING 1NT RESPONSE

Some players use a 1NT response to 1H or 1S as a forcing bid. This is part of the Two Over One system. The forcing 1NT method does not work after a third- or fourth-seat opening bid because opener may not have a good hand, in which case the forcing 1NT bid may push your side too high.

ENTER the semi-forcing 1NT response. It works nicely when partner opens 1H or 1S in third or fourth seat. It works this way. If responder has a hand that can raise or bid Drury or bid a suit naturally, he does so. If he has a hand worth six or more points that does not offer a natural bid, he bids 1NT. Opener makes a normal rebid when he has a full opening bid. Or, perhaps, he rebids something when he has a lot of distribution and close to an opening bid.

If opener has a balanced hand up to around fourteen crummy points, he passes 1NT.

How many here either use or are familiar with the semi-Forcing 1NT bid?

Auctions like these can happen:

W N E S

 P P 1S

P 1NT P P

P

NORTH

Q3

K98

Q843

KQ83

SOUTH

A9654

Q4

A97

J65

South opens 1S with his ratty eleven. North might wish to make a strong bid. It's not necessary if you use semi-forcing 1NT bids here. North bids 1NT, knowing that if South has a full opening bid, he will bid something and North will get to show his extra points. On this hand,

South will pass 1NT and North gets to play it there with twenty-three points. This is better than playing in 2NT when you can play in 1NT.

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1H
P	1NT	P	?

If you bid:

2C Natural. Might be three cards. You have some kind of opening bid. Not garbage.

2D Natural. Might be three cards. You have some kind of opening bid. Not garbage.

2H You have a six-card suit and opening bid strength.

2S A normal reverse.

2NT 18-19 balanced points.

Note that if you open a major in third seat and your partner bids 1NT, you know absolutely that he does not have support for your major.

He would raise with a normal 6-9 support points plus three or four cards in your major.

He would use Drury with 10-12 support points and three or four cards in your major.

Hand Four

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1D
P	1H	P	P

Q1095

J864

AK94

2

Open 1D. You have both majors. If partner bids one, as happens here, you will pass and will surely be in your best contract. If the opponents find a way to compete in clubs, you will support your partner's suit later.

Note: If partner bids 1NT, it's not a semi-forcing bid. That's true only after a 1H or 1S opening.

If he does that, pass. Your light 1D bid had merit but it didn't get you what you were hoping for. Put the dummy down and wish your partner good luck.

Hand Five

W	N	E	S
---	---	---	---

			P
--	--	--	---

P	1H	P	1S
---	----	---	----

P	P	2D	?
---	---	----	---

KJ954

73

J7

QJ84

South heard North bid 1H in third seat.

South responded 1S.

North passed 1S.

When East bid 2D, South, knowing his partner has three spades, can bid 2S. It won't be a good bid if North has two little spades. This is a situation where partnership trust is key.

Hand Six

W	N	E	S
	P	P	1H
P	2C	P	2H
P	P	P	

AQ4

QJ876

J32

87

If you came to my Drury class a couple of weeks ago, you will recall that the first thing I did was ask everyone how weak your third-seat openers could be. This South hand is getting down to the worst possible.

North's 2C bid is Drury and South bids 2H to say he does not want to go higher. I said during the Drury talk that when you bid Drury and partner rebids his suit, you should pass. If you had this South hand and rebid 2H after his Drury bid, you would be seriously stressed if partner bid again. If North even thinks of bidding again, South will be stressed.

MORE EXAMPLES OF THIRD SEAT CONSIDERATIONS

30

Hand One

W	N	E	S
	P	P	?

65

J4

8762

AKQ65

Pass.

You can't handle the bidding if partner bids 1H or 1S.

Hand Two

AKJ4

763

Q84

852

Pass. Tempting to bid 1S for the lead, but too many bad things can happen if you do that. Partner might raise to 2S, for example. I'd stay away from opening a four-card major.

Hand Three

Q74

Q9763

QJ3

Q10

Pass. There's no need to bid when you have total junk.
Suppress that urge.

Hand Four

74

K10985

A73

Q53

Does anyone recognize this hand? I showed it to you moments ago. I explained why you should not open 1H. However, there is a bid you can and should make.

Open 2H.

In my Drury talk, I asked, 'How many would open a weak two-bid in third seat with a five-card suit?'

The answer was close to zero.

HERE'S A FACT:

When not vulnerable, experienced players have learned that in third seat, you can do things that you would not do in any other seat.

Opening weak two-bids with a five-card suit when not vulnerable is done by almost all experienced players.

It's so common that about half of their weak two-bids in third seat have only five cards.

These players wouldn't do that if it didn't work. They know that Chuck is likely to be sitting there with a good hand. It's worthwhile to make him work harder than normal by bidding.

Hand Four, just above, has a good five-card suit. That's about all you need in third seat.

Here are a number of hands that are potential weak two-bids in third seat.

W N E S

 P P ?

QJ10854

43

53

832

Bid 2S. This hand has six spades and three points, but it qualifies for a third seat weak two.

This hand is a mandatory weak two-bid for me and I hope it will become one for you when you are not vulnerable.

763

KQJ87

432

53

Bid 2H. Not vulnerable. Good suit. Chuck is waiting. What more to you need?

76

43

KQ1043

5432

In third seat, not vul, this is a 2D bid. You are almost immune to going for a number. The opponents will be looking for their best contract. If they catch you in 2D doubled, it's just unlucky.

I've seen good players open 3C with this type of hand.

76

6532

32

KQJ94

An optional thought.

3C is a scary bid but when the vulnerability is right, you might hit a home run. Don't feel that your four little hearts are an issue. You were never finding a heart fit. Your goal is to be a problem for Chuck.

KQJ94

43

5432

J8

This hand looks like the previous hands. Why not bid 3S with this one too?

The reason is that when you bid 3S, you put so much pressure on them that when someone doubles, as is often the case, the responder is faced with a choice of bidding at the four level or bidding 3NT. He may decide that none of his choices are comfortable and he may pass out of frustration.

Here's a hand to consider. There's a lesson in it for you.

W	N	E	S
	P	P	3S
Dbl	P	?	

Here's East's hand. He just heard South open 3S in third seat, and West has doubled it for takeout. What should East bid with this hand?

J84

J765

K87

QJ2

East has some points but he has bad shape and rather poor points. Bidding 4H is technically right, but it would be no surprise to see it go down. Passing is a judgment call that you should consider.

3H and 3S bids should show sane suits in third and fourth seat. You might be a bit light on high-card points.

But 3C and 3D are bids that you can get away with more than you might suspect.

53

3

KJ10962

9874

Most players would pass in first seat. You might bid 2D, though, in third seat.

If you are feeling nervous about this style of bidding, I sympathize. It seems weird to stick your neck out when you are sure the player on your left has a good hand.

But it makes sense.

Here's a hand that should give you courage.

AK976

Q983

J1065

AKJ95 107

Q5 J84

J6 A1042

A984 KQ32

Q86432

1032

K75

7

The bidding rates to start with North and East passing. The South hand is not a classic 2S bid. The spade suit is full of holes and there's not much else. It looks like 2S will go down a lot. Could be doubled. But who is going to double? West can't double. Wrong shape. West can't bid 2NT. Too weak. East probably won't double. Dangerous shape. I'd expect that 2S would be passed out. Down three or four undoubled tricks. Not bad considering that East-West can make 3NT. Perhaps with an overtrick or two.

32

AJ10976

KJ4

62

A perfect weak 2H bid in first or second seat. It's too good for a weak two in third seat. Partner will expect a crummy hand from you. How about bidding 1H? This hand is closer to a 1H bid than a weak 2H bid in third seat. You run a modest risk by bidding 1H but partner, a passed hand, doesn't rate to get excited. Some of his hands can use Drury. If he bids 1NT, you will rebid 2H and be concerned that partner will play you for more.

As the vulnerability gets worse for you, you will have to lean towards being sane.

Not vulnerable versus vulnerable is the best time to go wild with your third-seat bidding.

Not vulnerable versus not vulnerable is the second best.

Vulnerable versus vulnerable is third best.

And, perforce, vulnerable versus not vulnerable is the worst.

If you are not vulnerable and they forget to double you and you go down two, that's a 100-point penalty. This can be a great score much of the time.

If you are not vulnerable and they don't double you, down three for minus 150 points can be a reasonable score.

If you're vulnerable, down two is -200, and that is usually enough that it's a bad score. Your contract may be so bad that the opponents didn't have to double you.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT.

You are having a decent game when you notice that Chuck is coming to your table. He's a sound player who has been difficult for you to beat. But for the first time you see who he is playing with today.

Larry Cohen. No kidding. You point that out to your partner, who tells you that the two of them have been playing together on BBO for the last two years. They have done well together. Yikes. Your record against Larry hasn't been too good either.

What do you do?

Do you fold up your tent and concede? Do you fear that you are going to get two bad boards on that round?

Worse, do you fret about this for the next two rounds *before* they arrive?

Here's the best advice you will ever get.

You will not get two average scores. Good players bid to good contracts. Good players know how to take their tricks. They won't misplay a hand or misdefend a hand. You will not get any gifts from these guys. Good players do not favor you with wild overbidding and sloppy play.

Here they come.

Look happy. No cringing. No telling Larry how much you love his books and articles.

If you are in third seat after two passes and Larry is on your left, remember this. If you leave him alone, he and Chuck will get the most they can out of their cards.

Do not give Larry an easy time.

Open a weak two if you have one.

Open some of your ten-counts if you have an appropriate hand.

Remember this hand from above?

KJ10962

9874

Open 3D. Bid 3D without an apparent care and let Larry find the best solution. After the round is over, now is the time to tell him there was a typo in his last book.

POSTMORTEM

OTHER PREEMPTS YOU MIGHT CONSIDER IN THIRD SEAT

W N E S

 P P ?

43

QJ98743

4

J103

3H is not a bad idea.

KQJ987

3

8763

53

3S is also acceptable.

4

AQJ8763

Q93

83

Bid 3H.

Your partner is a passed hand. You aren't likely to miss a game.

KQ985432

-

6543

2

Try 4S.

K73

3

QJ865432

9

Bid 4D.

AKJ9873

8

7

KJ94

Bid 4S. Given partner is a passed hand, you don't have to worry much that you are missing a slam.

If you open 3S, you may miss a game.

In first or second seat, you should open 1S. Partner is not yet a passed hand. You might have a slam that you can both bid to and then make. A grand slam is not that far away either. If you open 4S, you preempt your own auction.

In third or fourth seat, opening 4S is good bridge.

HOW DOES YOUR PARTNER BID WHEN YOU OPEN IN THIRD SEAT?

It's not that difficult.

IF PARTNER PREEMPTS IN THIRD SEAT

If your partner opens with a weak two-bid or a weak three-bid in third seat, you will pass unless you have a surprisingly good fit for partner along with quality points and shape.

W	N	E	S
---	---	---	---

			P
--	--	--	---

P	2S	P	?
---	----	---	---

J64

K87

QJ6

K1062

This hand is junk. Just pass. Hope your partner's 2S bid will nudge East-West into an error of some sort.

A874

42

43

A9765

You like spades. You like your high-card points. You like your shape. You can raise to 3S if RHO passes and you can bid 3S if RHO bids. It's the quality of your points, not the number of them, that counts. Your four trumps are a huge plus too. Especially given that partner will frequently have a five-card suit.

It's when partner opens a one bid that you have to use modest care.

If the bidding goes in normal fashion and partner shows a full opening bid, you are entitled to look for a game.

W	N	E	S
			P
P	1D	P	1H
P	2H		

Partner has something. If you have a balanced eleven-count, about as much as you can have, just pass 2H.

If you have shape and can reevaluate your hand, consider trying for game, or perhaps bidding it.

A976

KJ543

Q75

2

This hand has gone up a lot in value. You can bid 4H, or if feeling conservative, can make a game try. Do not pass.

QJ8

KQJ4

Q7

J432

This hand has twelve high-card points but they don't amount to much. Only four hearts. No distribution of note. Lousy high-card points. These two hands are simple exercises in hand evaluation. In other words, judgment.

Maybe I should write a book about judgment.

