

# Winning at IMPS/Team Games

By Neil H. Timm

To win team games using IMPS requires (1) good hand evaluation methods combined with (2) precise bidding methods that enable one to distinguish good-quality intermediate hands from “normal” opening hands.

These two qualities will allow the partnership to bid both marginal games and slams which are essential to winning Knockout Team and Swiss Pair events.

Of course, most of the time (3) aggressive pre-emptive bidding, (4) less sacrificing, (5) careful play of the hand, (6) defensive signaling, and (7) less aggressive opening leads also contribute to the success of the team event.

In this Bridge Tip I will address only points (1) and (2).

## Hand Evaluation

Many players use only hcp when considering a bridge hand. Most will open any hand with 12 hcp playing in a team event; however, in match point (MP) games some will open with as few as 8 hcp or use the rule of 17; now allowed by the ACBL.

We consider two balanced hands each with 12 hcp where an A=4, K=Q, Q=2, J=1.

Hand 1: ♠J642 ♥KQ ♦KQ96 ♣J62 Hand 2: ♠AQ9 ♥QJ2 ♦K10875 ♣94

Hand (1) is ace less, has un-protected jacks and no intermediate values, with no 5-card suit and an honor doubleton, a valueless hand with no clear re-bid. Hand (2) has an ace, a good 5-card suit, and intermediate values with less flaws.

In IMPS, one would open hand (2) 1♦. And pass with hand (1) playing either 2/1 or precision.

Two methods may be employed to evaluate whether to open a hand in IMPS: (1) Quick Tricks (QT) with Losing Trick Count (LTC) or (2) the Optimal Point Count (OPC) method.

### Guideline using Quick Tricks (QT) and Losing Trick Count (LTC)

- (1) An unbalanced hand with 10+hcp, at least (1.5 – 2) quick tricks, and 7 and fewer losers with a suitable re-bid is opened.**
- (2) A balanced hand with 11+hcp, 2 quick tricks is opened containing 8 or less losers with useful intermediaries is opened.**

Recall that balanced hands are flat hands with 4333, 4432, or 5332 distributions; all other hand patterns are unbalanced and include semi-balanced hands. LTC looks at a max of 3-losers in each suit and QT looks at honor combinations.

Recall for LTC

- (A) 0 losers = AKQ, AK, A, Void
- (B) 1 loser = AKx, Ax, Kx, K, Q, x, AQx, KQ, KQx
- (C) 2 losers = Axx, Kxx, QJx, Qxx, Qx, Jx, xx
- (D) 3 losers = Jxx, xxx

For QT

AK=2, AQ or Kx = 1.5 and A or KQ =1

### Guideline using the Optimal Point Count (OPC) Method

**Any hand (balanced or unbalanced) with 12+ Optimal Points is opened.**

For an opening hand, the OPC method looks at Honors, Length, and Distribution (H+L+D) points (**HLD points**) while responder hands consider only H+L points; however, when a fit is found responder will add D points. This is contrary to many other methods where responder “D” is only considered with a fit!

Using the OPC method, for hand (1) we have 11 H points (0.5+5+5+0.5), -1 for the honor doubleton, -1 for no ace -1 for flatness or 8HLD points. In hand 2 we have 13H points (6.5+3+3.5) +1L point = 14OPC points. Hence, we would open hand (2) and Pass with hand (1).

Using LTC+QT; while both balance hands have 12hcp, hand (1) has 8 losers (3+1+1+3) and 2 QT with no useful intermediaries while hand (2) has only 6 losers (1+2+2+2) and good intermediaries. So, we would again open hand (2) but not hand (1).

What about the unbalanced hand (3): ♠A10643♥QJ7 ♦K1096 ♣7?

This hand has 10hcp with 1.5 QT and 7 losers (2+2+2+1) so one would open this hand. Using the OPC method, the hand has (4.5+3+3.5) = 11H points + 1L point +2D points= 14 HLD points. So, we would again open hand (2).

### Optimal Point Count (OPC) Overview

**The Opening bidder considers HLD points and Responder’s only HL points where  $L \leq 2$  w/o a fit except for flatness -1 4333. With a suit Fit, add/deduct F, Semi-Fit, Distribution-Fit, MS: (HLDF).**

#### HONOR POINTS (H)

Ace: 4½ pts    K: 3pts    Q w/A, K, J: 2 pts    Qxx: 1½ pts    Qx=1pt

J w/A, K, Q: 1pt      Jxx: ½ pts      Jx=0 pts  
Value of **10s** vary: 10K=½, 10A=0, 10Q/J=1, 10J=2  
No Aces = -1 pt (Only Opener) No Q =-1 No K=-1 (all hands) with Max=-2  
3Ks = +1 pt, 4Ks = +2pts, 4Qs = +1pt

For 3 of the top 5 honors (**suit quality-Q**) in a 5-card suit add +1 pt and in a 6-card suit add +2 pts.

For a Singleton honor or for **TWO** Honor doubletons (AK/AQ/KQ/QJ deduct -1 pt  
However, DO NOT deduct a point for an AJ/KJ doubleton since they are better than Ax and Kx.

### **LENGTH POINTS (L)**

For a suit headed with at least 3 points (QJ/K) and 5-cards add +1 pt and for 6-cards add +2 pts  
Suit Quality (Q). A 6-card suit without 3 points add only +1 pt.  
Add +2 pts for **each point** from the 7<sup>th</sup>-card on in any 7+ card suit – Length alone has value.

### **DISTRIBUTION POINTS (D)**

VOID = 4pts    Singleton= 2 points    **ONE** doubleton= 0 pts    **TWO** doubletons = 1pt  
4333 = -1pt  
Singleton in a NT contract = -1pt

**The values defined for HLD apply to Opener's hands for both NT and Suit contracts.  
Responder adds D points once any suit fit is found.**

What follows are two typical agreements playing 2/1 and Precision when playing Match Points.

### **Playing 2/1 Basic Opening Match Points Bids**

1♣    3+ clubs 12-18 – better minor  
1♦    3+ diamonds 12-18 – better minor  
1♥/1♠ 12-18 points 5+card major suit  
1NT   15-17  
2♣    20+ and artificial with 4QT and 4 or losers by LTC  
2♦    6-10 6+cards - feature/ogust  
2♥    6-10 6+cards - feature/ogust  
2♠    6-10 6+cards - feature/ogust  
2NT   20-21 and balanced  
3X    5-10 must have 2/3 of top 3 honors  
3NT\*  GAMBLING solid 7+ minor suit (AKQJxxx)

\*=alert

### **Basic Opening Bids for Precision**

1♣\*    Artificial 16+  
1♦    11-15 may be short (at least 2) MUST ANNOUNCE  
1♥/1♠ 11-15 5+card major

**1NT** 15-17  
**2♣\*** 11-15 6+ Clubs (may have a 4-card major)  
**2♦\*** 11-15 4315/3415/4414/4405 - ♦ Singleton/Void  
**2♥** 6-10 6+cards – feature/ogust  
**2♠** 6-10 6+cards – feature/ogust  
**2NT** 20-21 balanced  
**3X** 5-10 with 2/3 of top 3 honors  
**3NT\*** GAMBLING solid 7+ minor suit (AKQJxxx)

\*=alert

Playing IMS requires only a minor change to the above agreements.

## **Bidding Changes with IMPS**

In IMPS every major suit game with a 9-card fit and at least 24hcp (15+9) has a reasonable chance of making. Most partnerships playing 2/1 or precision have methods like Bergen raises, Fit bids, Jacoby 2NT and splinters handle to these hands. Less use the Schuler Shift approach described below.

In IMPS two balanced hands with no 8+major suit fit and 25+hcp belongs in 3NT where the bid of 1NT=15-17hcp.

However, 2/1 or Precision most partnerships are unable to distinguish between good quality opening hands from opening hands which is essential to team IMP games.

In IMPS a good quality hand is defined as an intermediate 18-19 strong single-suited hand with a 6+card major suit and 5 or less losers or a 4/5 loser hand with a 6+ minor suit. Now partner needs only 6hcp for game with 3-card support.

Knowing partner has at least 18 points, slam in a suit is likely with 13/14+hcp points and a fit and without an 8-card fit slam in NT is likely.

Looking at the typical 2/1 and Precision bidding agreements what is on to do playing Team Games?

**Replace the 2♦\* bid with a multi-type of 2♦\* bid as follows allowed by the ACBL:**

**2♦\* = weak 2M bid or a strong balanced 18-19 hand with 5-losers or 6+ minor suit with 4/5 losers.**

Yes, the bid is like the multi-2♦\* bid with two options and not three!

The new agreement does not interfere with the weak- preemptive 2M bids since after 2M, partner may pass or correct and with a strong hand may rebid 3♣\*/3♦\*/3♥\*/3♠\*over 2♥/4♥ over 2♠; and after 2NT\* may make a jump rebid into a long 5+card suit.

This new bid allows one to reach otherwise unbitable games using standard 2/1 bids.

Let's look at an example:

Opener ♠AQ7 ♥AJ2 ♦7 ♣AQJ1072      Responder ♠J5 ♥1073♦AK985 ♣K94

The bidding would go:

Opener	Responder
2♦*	2♥ pass/correct
3♣* big hand	4♣ control
4♥ control	5♦ control
5♠ control	6♣
Pass	Pass

Playing 2/1, the bidding may go:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
2♣	2♦
2NT	3NT
Pass	Pass

Playing Precision, the bidding may go:

Opener	Responder
1♣*	2♦
3♣	3♦
3NT	Pass
Pass	

Both would reach the game but perhaps miss the slam without the IMPS change!

While the above change may be accepted by partnerships playing 2/1 this may not be the case for Precision pairs.

What can one do? For Precision partnerships define the 2♦\* bids as 4441 will 11-15 or 18-19 balanced!

The complete deal for the example follows where North is the Dealer.

		♠ AQ7	
		♥ AJ2	
		♦ 7	
		♣ AQJ1072	
♠	K642	N W     E S	♠ 10983
♥	KQ985		♥ 64
♦	Q1065		♦ J43
♣	-		♣ 9653
		♠ J5	
		♥ 1073	
		♦ AK985	
		♣ K94	

**For more on winning strategies playing in IMP events read the recent book by Rakesh K. Kumar (2020) “Winning IMPS”, Master Point Press.**

One other comment made by Kumar in his book when opening a major is to give up both Bergen type raises playing 2/1 and Fit bids playing precision when playing in IMP events. For an interesting discussion and new approach see pp. 56-60 in his book. The response bid of 2♣\* over 1M defines shows a game forcing 13+ hand so that 2M shows a minimum hand or any 5+/5+ hand and 2NT\* shows extra strength with 6+card suit called a Schuler shift not Jacoby!

## The Schuler Shift from Andrew’s blog

The Schuler shift is a modification to standard rebids in 2/1 auctions that improves bidding accuracy. For years there has been an argument about this auction: 1M -- 2X -- 2M. There are two schools of thought:

- Bergen School
- Lawrence School

### Bergen School

The Marty Bergen school of 2/1 treats 2M as showing a 6+ card major. This works great when opener does in fact have a 6+ M, but unfortunately leaves opener with no good rebid in this situation:

1S -- 2C  
?

AQxxx

AKx

xx

xxx

Opener is forced to rebid a "catchall" 2NT, potentially wrong-siding a final 3NT contract.

The strength of the Bergen school is that 6- and 7-card majors are called out immediately and separated from the much less slamish 5-3-3-2 shaped hands. This makes slam bidding much easier, since responder can feel freer to try for slam aggressively when certain of a 9+ card fit.

### **Lawrence School**

The Mike Lawrence school of 2/1 treats the 2M response as opener's "catchall" rebid and insists that 2NT promise stoppers in unbid suits. This approach is better for siding NT contracts but means that follow up auctions after a 2M rebid are uncomfortably vague. Sometimes opener must rebid his major twice just to show six of them, losing the chance to show a side feature. For example:

1S -- 2D

2S -- 3C

?

KQJTxx, xx, Axx, Qx

With this nice hand opener would like to rebid 3D to indicate a fitting diamond card in addition to long spades, but he has not yet shown a sixth spade. His only realistic call is 3S since 4S will often be the best spot, even in a 6-1 fit.

6-3, 7-3 and 6-2, 7-2 fits are much better handled by the Bergen school where the responder can safely raise to 3M on honor-x and where the extra slam potential of opener's long suit is identified by his 2M rebid.

### **The Schuler Shift**

John Schuler of San Diego came up with a bidding twist which is superior to either. John noticed that if you reverse the meanings of the 2M and 2NT rebid, you can solve most of the problems. His approach works well because you get the benefits of the Bergen school without wrong-siding the 3NT contracts when opener is balanced.

1M -- 2X

2Y

Unchanged. 5-4 or better in the two suits

1M -- 2X

2M

A waiting bid promising exactly a 5-card major and denying extra distribution.

1M -- 2X  
2NT  
Artificial, showing a 6+ card major.

1M -- 2X  
3 Lower ranking suit  
5-5 in the bid suits.

1M -- 2X  
3X  
4-card support for responder and no singleton

1M -- 2X  
3 Higher ranking suit  
Splinter raise of responder's suit.

### **Examples**

Auction  
1S -- 2C  
?

AQxxx, xx, xxx, AKx  
Rebid 2S. If partner bids 2NT, rebid 3C.

AQxxx, Kxx, Kxx, xx  
Rebid 2S. If partner bids 2NT, raise to 3NT. If partner rebids 3C, you will rebid 3NT.

AQxxx, Kxx, xxx, Kx  
Rebid 2S. If partner bids 2NT, raise to 3NT. If partner rebids 3C, you will rebid 3H to show your heart stopper and deny a diamond stopper.

AKxxxx, x, KQx, xxx  
Rebid 2NT. Show your sixth spade. 3NT is relatively unlikely to be the final contract.

AKQxxx, Jx, Jxx, xx  
Rebid 2S. This is the exception to the rule. With your dull 6-2-3-2 distribution, 3NT is a likely final contract. Bid 2S nominally denying a 6th spade planning to raise 2NT to 3NT. If partner rebids 3C, you can correct to 3S to show your excellent spades.

Jxxxxx, AQx, Kx, Qx  
Rebid 2S. Another exception. Once again, 3NT is a likely final contract, so its best to treat this as a 5-card suit.

### **Conclusions**



In practice, I have had good success with the Schuler shift. It works well for many reasons. When the 2M rebid unambiguously promises a 5-card suit:

- Responder is less tempted to overbid searching for marginal slams on a 5-3 fit.
- Responder can easily identify 5-3 major fits where 3NT is a better contract
- Both partners can contribute to NT siding decisions, when opener has the unbid suits stopped, he can always correct responder's rebid back to NT. When responder has stoppers, he has a cheap 2NT call over 2M.
- the 2NT rebid promising extra length greatly facilitates slam bidding.

The only warning is that when opener has 6 spades but 3NT from partner's side may be the best final contract, he is better off rebidding 2M to side 3NT correctly.

To reach Andrew's blog go to: <http://andrew-gumperz.blogspot.com>

An example of the Schuler Shift bidding sequence follows:

West		North		East		South
				1 ♠		Pass
2♣*	No fit	Pass		2♠* waiting		Pass
2NT*	Second suit?	Pass		3♦ (5-5)		Pass
4♦		Pass		4♥ kickback		Pass
4NT	2 with Q	Pass		6♦		Pass

		♠	K62	
		♥	K2	
		♦	A65	
		♣	QJ975	
♠	8	N		♠
♥	A96	W E		♥
♦	Q743	S		♦
♣	AK842			♣
		♠	J753	
		♥	QJ10543	
		♦	10	
		♣	63	
		♠	AQ1094	
		♥	87	
		♦	KJ982	
		♣	10	

Not playing the convention, the common contract reached by most will be 3NT!

We have spent a lot of time when partner opens the bidding, but what agreement do you have when partner overcalls a major and the opponents open say 1♣/1♦ playing 2/1 and partner overcalls 1♥.

A simple strategy is:

- 2♥ 3+hearts and 5-7
- 3♥ 4+ hearts and 0-7 – yes pre-emptive
- 2♦ 3+hearts constructive 8-10
- 3♦ 3+hearts 11+ invitational

In IMPS you must be aggressive!

The same approach may be applied over Precision pairs when they open 1♦\* = 11-15 and may be short.

However, over their strong 1♣\* precision bid to compete give up Mathe where X\*=hearts and 2NT\*= the minors while 2-level bids are natural!

And instead use the **Rule of 8** and what I call the 1-level modified Blooman transfer bids which puts the strong hand on lead since partner bids your 6+card suit:

- 1♦\* = 6+hearts
- 1♥\* = 6+spades
- 1♠\* = 6+clubs
- 1NT\* = 5-5 in the minors
- X\* = major + minor ( 5-5 ) & partner next bids 2♣\*
- 2♣\* = 6+diamonds
- 2♦\* = 5/6+hearts and 16+
- 2♥\* = 5/6 spades and 16+
- 2NT\* = 5-5 in minors with 16+
- 3M\* = transfer to major game
- 3NT = to play

**Rule of 8** says you need 6hcp and after adding the number of cards in your two longest suits and subtracting the number of losing trick count (LTC). Then compete/interfere if the number is 2 or more in the direct seat.

In the balancing seat all bids are natural with 6+ cards except the X\*=major + minor.

If you like transfer bids, over pairs playing 2/1 where the bid of 1♣ is a better minor bid or may be NF and short one may also play transfers with 10-15 points

- 1♦\* = 5/6+hearts
- 1♥\* = 5/6+spades

1♠\* = 5/6 +diamonds

1NT\* = shortness in clubs

X = 16+

2♣\* = both majors 10-15

2♦\* = 5/6+hearts and 16+

2♥\* = 5/6 spades and 16+

2NT\* = 5-5 in minors with 16+

3M\* = transfer to major game

3NT = to play