

How Light Should An Opening Bid Be?

Gordon Bower - Source

Part I: First and Second Seat Openings

The Traditional View

When people talk about opening light, they usually are talking about opening in third seat, after partner and right-hand opponent have already passed. There are still many people who adhere to the old Goren rule: "open all hands with 14 or more points, and those with 13 points and a good rebid." (Traditional Goren adds points for short suits as opener, so his minimum strength was 12-13 HCP for 4432 and 5332 distribution, 11-12 HCP with 5422 or 5431 shape, and 10-11HCP with 5-5 or 6-4 hands.) The modern equivalent of Goren's guideline is the "rule of twenty:"

The Rule of Twenty:

Add your HCP and the number of cards you hold in your two longest suits. If the total is 20 or more, open the bidding; if not, pass.

In fact many people play sounder opening bids than the Rule of Twenty recommends. Max Hardy's Two Over One Game Force says this: "All hands with 13 HCP should be opened. Hands with 12 HCP are opening bids when they have two defensive tricks and no rebid problem. Hands with 11 HCP are opening bids if the high cards are primary and placed in the long suits (it would be criminal to pass with AKxxx-Axxx). . . . the guide to whether or not to open with marginal high card holdings is the shape of the hand and placement of the high cards. Do not open with a bad balanced 12 count in first or second seat, but a distributional 10 count with combinations of primary cards in long suits should be opened." This is "rule of 20.5 or 21" -- only the most exceptional rule-of-20 hands are opening bids. The Roth-Stone system, a predecessor of modern 2/1, was even stricter.

Traditional Precision allows openings on 11 HCP and a good 5-card suit, or 13HCP with a flat hand. This is essentially rule of 20 with a few rare exceptions.

Some modern systems (rarely seen in North America, and uncommon in most of the rest of the world) take a wildly different approach, opening many or even all hands in the 8-12HCP range in first seat, but using a completely different, usually highly artificial, set of responses. [I need to add some links here to examples] However this article is aimed only at natural 5-card major systems like Standard American and 2/1.

What Are The Rest Of Your Agreements?

Exactly which hands you should open in first and second seat depends in part on what treatments you use in the rest of your system. Before you read on, ask yourself which of these popular methods do you and your regular partner use:

- 1NT Forcing response to 1♥ or 1♠ opening
- 2/1 Game Forcing responses
- Drury (Regular, Reverse, Two-Way, etc.)
- Fourth Suit Forcing
- Delayed Stayman or New Minor Forcing

It may not be obvious to you at first -- but you have to consider your whole system when deciding which hands to open. If you start by rigidly adhering to a guide like the Rule of 20 and then try to decide what response and rebid methods to play, you're going to give yourself some unnecessary headaches. This isn't an area that the textbooks talk about much, and it's one that I see cause disasters every day in tournaments even for experienced partnerships.

The Key Question

Any time you're in a borderline situation and can't decide whether to open the bidding or not in first or second seat, there is a question you should ask yourself. First, imagine you decide to open; think of what your partner's most likely responses are, and decide how happy you will be about finding a rebid in that auction. Then, imagine you decide to pass; think of what your partner is most likely to open, and decide how you'd respond to him. Which half of that exercise was easier for you?

*If you aren't sure whether to open the bidding or not, ask yourself ---
Which will be easier -- opening and having to find a rebid, or passing and having to find a response to my partner's opening bid?*

If you have a hand that's easy to bid either way, go ahead and open; no reason not to take up some bidding space and make your opponents' lives a little tougher.

If you have a hand that can open and then rebid easily, but can't think of any response that will do justice to your hand if partner opens, then open yourself and prevent partner from posing an impossible problem to you.

If you won't have a good rebid if you open, but you do know how to describe your hand as responder, pass -- don't create trouble for yourself by opening, let partner make your life easy for you.

Hopefully, you won't run across many hands that you can't describe adequately whether you are opener or responder. If you do, you have just identified a flaw in your current bidding system. No bidding system is perfect; but if you find this happens to you frequently -- it's time to look for ways to improve your methods, not just bemoan your bad luck.

Examples

Now let's look at some typical hands you might be faced with as the dealer, and decide whether or not they should be opened, by asking ourselves that key question. Be warned -- some of the answers may surprise you! It's not as simple as just saying "2/1 players need sounder opening bids than Standard players do." Think back to the list of conventions I mentioned above:

- 1NT Forcing means that a 1♥ or 1♠ opener always has to find a second bid -- passing with a weak hand and 5332 shape isn't allowed anymore.
- 2/1 Game Forcing is based on the principle that to make a 2/1 response, you're certain the partnership's assets will produce a game. That means the weaker opener is allowed to be, the stronger responder will have to be to bid a 2/1, and the more often responder will have to resort to using 1NT Forcing.
- Drury makes it easier to show an 11-point hand with 3-card trump support after passing, but makes it harder to show a club suit (or a diamond suit, if you play 2-way Drury).
- Fourth Suit Forcing and New Minor Forcing give responder more flexibility and make it easier to handle wider-ranging opening bids. Some people use opener's 3rd bid in a

NMF auction to distinguish between minimum and maximum hands for the 1m-1M-1NT sequence.

Two-Suited Hands

These are probably the most clear-cut cases of how your shape influences whether to be aggressive or conservative in first or second seat. Look at these six hands, and see how much difference it makes which of your suits is longer:

1. ♠ JT9xx ♥ KQxx ♦ Axx ♣ x
2. ♠ xx ♥ Kxxxx ♦ KQxx ♣ Kx
3. ♠ KJxx ♥ Qxx ♦ x ♣ AJxxx
4. ♠ KQxx ♥ Kxxxx ♦ Kxx ♣ x
5. ♠ x ♥ Axxx ♦ KJxxx ♣ Kxx
6. ♠ Jxx ♥ x ♦ QJxx ♣ AQJxx

With the first three hands, it's easy for you to open in your longest suit and rebid in your second suit. Hand 1 might not be too bad if you pass; partner will probably open a minor and rebid 1NT, and you just have to decide if this is a weak or an invitational hand, and figure out if you can distinguish 5-4 and 5-5 hands after 1♣-1♠-1NT. You won't find many books telling you to open hand 2, but I don't know why not: if you pass and partner opens a spade -- or if the opponents bid spades -- you have no hope of describing this hand to your partner. (This opening is safer in SA than 2/1, because a 2C response is less likely to get you too high; but the risks of passing are so great I'd open Hand 2 playing either system.) Hand 3 has an easy 1♠ rebid if you open, and if you play FSF you'll still be able to find a 5-3 heart fit. If you pass, you'll have to pass again after it goes 1♦-1♠-1NT, or overbid and lose your 4-4 spade fit with 1♦-2♣. If you pass and partner has hearts, people who don't play Drury will be miserable.

Hands 4-6 are just the opposite of the first three. If you open Hand 4 with 1♥ and your partner says anything other than 1♠, I can promise you won't like how the rest of the auction unfolds. With Hand 5 you have no rebid if it starts 1♦-1♠, but over partner's 1♠ opening you have an easy 2♦ and will be happy with whatever your partner rebids. If your partner starts with 1♣ and RHO overcalls 1♠ you can make a negative double and then introduce the diamonds if partner fails to show enthusiasm for the hearts.

Hand 6 is the worst of both worlds. If you open 1♣, you're going to be stuck raising 1♠ on Jxx, rebidding your 5-card club suit, or contemplating a ugly 1NT over 1♥. If partner opens 1♥, Standard players are happy with 2♣ but Drury people are up a creek; if partner opens 1♠, it's the other way round. At least if you pass, the opponents might bid and raise a major and let you come back in with 2NT.

With non-touching suits, it's not so clear what to do, because partner might bid either of your two short suits. Go with your gut instincts, but here are my personal preferences:

- 4 hearts and 5 clubs: Pass. 1♣-1♠ is a problem.
- 5 hearts and 4 clubs: Open; partner is more likely to respond 1♠ than 2♦. If you pass and partner opens 1♠ it's bad, if he opens 1♦ you might still find hearts via FSF/NMF.
- 4 spades and 5 diamonds, or 5 spades and 4 diamonds: tossup. (Can you see a reflection in your partner's eyeglasses to tell you how many hearts he has?)
- 5 spades and 5 diamonds: I tend to pass, since I have the master suit and will probably have a chance to bid it however the auction develops. You'll find plenty of experts who disagree, and are eager to open these hands to preempt.

- 5 hearts and 5 clubs: I tend to bid, to get the hearts into the auction before the opponents mention the spades, and again, I am more likely to hear 1♠ than 2♦ from partner.

In summary, with two-suiters, rather than "rule of 20 always", think "rule of 20 if my second suit is easy to show, wait for full opening high-card values if not."

Balanced Hands

This section of the article will strike some of you as heretical. But bear with me. Especially if you can open 1♣ and not 1♦, you should be happy to open many 4333 and 4432 hands in first seat with only a bad 12 or even 11 HCP! Why? The same reason as before ... look ahead to the second round of the bidding.

With a weak balanced hand, you always have an easy rebid: if partner responds in a major and you have 4-card support, raise him to two; if not, rebid 1NT. If you pass as dealer with these hands, here is a sampling of what might happen on the second round:

If partner opens a major and you have 4-card support for it, everything is fine: you will give him a limit raise. Similarly, if partner opens 1♥ and you have 4 spades and 2 hearts, you have an easy 1♠ response. Hands like these don't give you response problems when your partner opens and they aren't too bad if the opponents open and you or your partner makes a takeout double. With these four hand patterns (4432, 4423, 4234, 4243) you are not under pressure to open the bidding in first seat with a sub minimum hand.

With other distributions it's not so pretty. If partner opens 1♠ and you have 2443, 2434, or 2344 and 11-12 points, your textbook bid is a jump to 2NT. If partner opened light you now have only one way to escape in a partscore -- passing 2NT. If partner is strong, he has limited bidding room to decide which suit is your best fit and consider slam exploration. Wouldn't you be so much better off if you'd opened 1 of a minor, partner had responded 1♠, and you had rebid 1NT?

What if you have 3-card support for your partner's major after you pass and he opens? You need one more trump to give a limit raise. If you bid 2 of a new suit, partner might pass, since you're a passed hand. Even if you play 1NT Forcing, that probably doesn't apply either now that you are a passed hand. You really have three choices:

You can adopt Drury. Now you can respond an artificial 2♣ when you have a 3-card limit raise for partner's 3rd-set opening. The down side is that you have traded one problem for another: now it is hands with a club suit that are hard to bid. People use various workarounds: opening the club hands light (but should they rebid 1NT or 2♣ after partner's 1M response?); using the jump shift to 3♣ by a passed hand (but do you really want to be that high with your ♠ Jx ♥ AQx ♦ xx ♣ KJxxx after partner opens 1♠?); or sticking a bunch of semi-balanced and unbalanced hands into your 1NT and 2NT responses.

You can agree that 1NT and/or 2m by a passed hand is still absolutely forcing on opener. This is playable, with the same plusses and minuses as 1NT Forcing by an unpassed hand. The down side: it limits your ability to open light in 3rd seat, which we'll come to in Part II of this series. Especially newer players might like the simplicity of this approach. Almost no experts currently use it, though.

Yes, you guessed it ... open all your weak balanced hands including a 3-card major with 11 or 12 points, instead of waiting for partner to open them! The catch here is that you need to have a mechanism to uncover the 5-3 fit after 1m-1M-1NT. That means playing some form of Delayed

Stayman or New Minor Forcing. Ideally a form that allows opener to show both whether he is minimum or maximum for his 1NT bid and whether he has 3-card support for responder's suit.

Not surprisingly, the last is my personal recommendation. In a later article, I will describe *my preferred form of Delayed Stayman*, which I use to handle my 11-14 1NT rebid. If you play this way, you'll open many flat hands that don't meet the rule of 20, and even some that don't meet the Rule of 19.

One-Suited Hands

One-suited hands (6331, 6322, and more extreme shapes) have the best of both worlds. If you open 1 of your suit, you are guaranteed to have an easy rebid: 2 of your suit, to show minimum values and six cards! The choice with these hands is not whether to open, but what to open. Hands with 11 HCP and a 6-card suit meet the textbook requirements for a 1-bid and for a weak two-bid.

Playing classic Standard American, my advice is to open with a weak two if you have only one side suit stopped, but open at the 1-level with two side suits stopped (and a correspondingly weaker long suit.) In fact with one of my regular partners, I play Ogust over weak twos, modified so that instead of a vague "good or bad hand, good or bad suit quality," I show specifically "side stopper or not, 2 of top 3 trump honours or not."

If you play 2/1 you have to be a bit more careful: do you really want to open 1M on your 10- or 11-count and hear your partner force to game by bidding two of your singleton? For 2/1 players, I recommend the same rule for your weak twos, but to pass the questionable hands with scattered values and a weak 6-card suit. You'll show these hands the same way you would if they had a good 5-card suit.

Of course, with a 6331 or 6322 hand with 3 cards in the other major, the problems described in the balanced hands section above still apply.

People who play Standard American might well choose to open 1 of a suit -- especially 1♥, which is likely to be shut out by the opponents bidding spades -- with 5332 shape and only 11 points, planning to escape by passing a non-forcing 1NT response or by rebidding 1NT over 1♠ themselves. If you play 1NT Forcing (and especially if you play 2/1GF), this becomes too dangerous, and you'll have to plan on showing these as a responder on the second round. Provided you have good FSF/NMF agreements and they still apply to a passed hand, this isn't anything to worry about. Playing 2/1 without having FSF(1 round) or NMF still apply to a passed hand is dangerous, because a lot of 24HCP games on 5-3 major fits get lost if you can't describe these 11-point 5332s.

Part II: Third Seat Openings - Source

Third seat is the classic time to open with a weaker than normal hand. But when is it safe to open a weak hand? Why should you? How do you escape without getting too high when you do? And when you have a real opening bid -- how do you stop your partner from dumping you cheaply because he's afraid you opened light?

Why is 3rd seat the best time to open light?

It's an ideal time for very aggressive preempting, because if you have a very weak hand, *and* your partner was unable to open, you can be sure your opponents have most the strength and are about to start bidding strongly as soon as 4th hand comes into the bidding.

The same argument applies, with reduced force, when you have a 10-12 point hand. Your side *might* still have more than half deck, if partner had a maximum pass. But *if* anyone at the table has a good hand, it can only be the person on your left who hasn't had a chance to speak. A 1♠ opening can be valuable as a preempt if LHO has a good hand that's hard to describe in one bid, especially if your partner is able to raise spades.

You still have to exercise restraint in opening weak hands at the 1-level. Remember, your bidding system still has to cater for all the full opening bids you might hold. You don't want to cripple your own ability to find good games.

What Kind Of Hands Are Worth Opening Light?

For the reasons mentioned above, *preempts and weak twos* in third seat will tend to run almost a full trick weaker than the same bid in second seat. You're trying to take away as much bidding space as you can, and you have no fear of your partner going crazy and looking for slam with 16 points, or of him coming in with a 7-card suit of his own and arguing with you about what trump should be.

To open at the one level in third seat, you need to have a good reason. What is a good reason?

Do you have full opening bid values? If so, you still have an opening, and should go ahead and make your normal bid. It's only when you have a sub-minimum hand that you need to worry about whether or not you can afford to bend your system and open.

Will your hand be difficult to describe later with an overcall, if you don't open? If so, you want to describe it now while you have the chance. This is an argument in favour of opening ♠ Ax ♥ AJxxx ♦ Jxx ♣ xx. This is your only chance to compete in hearts; if you pass and hear 1♠-Pass-2♠ back to you, you're out of luck, even if partner has the cards to let you make 3♥. On the other hand, there is not so much of a hurry to open ♠ xx ♥ x ♦ KQTxx ♣ KQTxx: you are very likely to be able to come back in with an Unusual 2NT call at your next turn.

Is it safe? You still have a partner. If you open a sub-minimum hand, *you normally have to be prepared to pass any response your partner makes*. If you take a second bid your partner will assume you have a full opening bid. It is safe to open with ♠ AQxxx ♥ xxx ♦ Qxx ♣ Qx: if partner responds with 2 of a new suit, he is denying spade support and showing a decent 5-card suit of his own, and will be happy with your support for him. Of course you *hope* partner bids 1NT or 2♠, both of which you will also pass. It is *dangerous* to open a hand like ♠ AJxxx ♥ x ♦ xx ♣ KJxxx. You are not prepared to hear your partner respond 2♦ or 2♥. Even if he bids 1NT you'll give him the impression you have more in high cards when you rebid 2♠.

Are you making the opponents' life difficult? Opening 1♣ doesn't take away any bidding space at all from your opponents; opening 1♠ takes away a full level of bidding from them. Opening ♠ ATxxx ♥ xxx ♦ Kxx ♣ Kx puts some pressure on fourth seat. Opening ♠ xxx ♥ Kxx ♦ Kx ♣ ATxxx doesn't.

Are you prepared to have your suit led? Opening a 4-card major instead of a short club (or even instead of a 5-card minor!) is tempting in third seat, because of the higher-ranking bid's preemptive value. And opening 1♠ is a better bid on ♠ KQJx ♥ Kx ♦ xxx ♣ Jxxx than 1♣ is, for that very reason. But if you hold ♠ KTxx ♥ xx ♦ AKxx ♣ xxx, and your LHO winds up declaring

4♥, you will be sorry if your partner leads a spade into declarer's ace-queen because you asked him to with a foolish 1♠ opening. Either pass, or open in diamonds, the suit you want led.

Responding To A Third Seat 1-Level Opening

Responder has to be alert to the possibility of a light third seat opening in selecting his response. In particular, in Standard American, a new suit bid by a passed hand is constructive, but *not forcing* though opener *usually* will rebid anyway. This leads to a couple important considerations for responder after a third seat opening:

A two-over-one response requires a good 5-card suit. If partner opens 1♠ in third seat, you can bid 2♦ with ♠ xx ♥ Axx ♦ KQTxx ♣ xxx, but had better stick with 1NT holding ♠ xx ♥ AJx ♦ QTxxx ♣ Kxx. If opener has 11 HCP and a flat hand, *you will be playing 2♦!*

Support for a third-seat opening of 1♥ or 1♠ must be shown immediately. Opposite a first-seat opening, you can show a 3-card limit raise by bidding 2 of a new suit (in Standard American) or 1NT Forcing (in 2/1), then going back to opener's major at your second turn. If you are a passed hand, *you are not guaranteed a second chance*. If partner opens 1♠ and you hold ♠ QJx ♥ xx ♦ AQxxx ♣ Jxx, you risk going down in 1NT or 2♦ with nine easy tricks available had you been in spades, unless your *first response* shows support. A new-suit response *denies* holding support for opener!

How Can I Solve "the 3-card limit raise problem"?

There are several solutions available:

Prevention: This problem arises far less frequently if you follow the advice in *Part i* of this article, and *open in first seat* when you are afraid of an impossible decision on the second round if you don't

Proper hand evaluation: If you hold ♠ Axx ♥ Qxx ♦ Qxx ♣ Qxxx, you have a terrible hand with no ruffing values, and at least one of your side queens is sure to be wasted opposite opener's singleton or doubleton. A simple raise from 1♥ to 2♥ or 1♠ to 2♠ is more than enough, despite holding 10 HCP and an ace. Add another side-suit jack to this hand, and I'd *still* only offer a single raise even with 11 HCP because the hand has no shape and so many fast losers.

Fit-jumps: In the previous section, I talked about how a 2-over-1 response by a passed hand had to show a *good* 5-card suit and something like 9-11 points. Is there such a thing as a hand *too good* for a non-forcing response to partner's opening, that *doesn't* have trump support and wasn't worth an opening bid? No! Similarly, are there flat 11HCP hands that are worth jumping to 2NT and getting left there opposite a garbage opener? It's safe to respond a non-forcing 1NT on 10 or a bad 11 HCP if you're a passed hand with no good suit and no support.

What else can a jump to 3♦ over 1♠ possibly mean, except a hand with a nice diamond suit *and* spade support? The ideal hand for this jump is something like ♠ Qxx ♥ Qxx ♦ AQTxxx ♣ x or ♠ Axx ♥ xx ♦ KQJxx ♣ xxx. With 4-card support for partner's major, I can choose between a fit-jump with a strong side suit or a normal limit raise without.

Similarly, you might choose to use the jump to 2NT to promise a hand with a good 11 HCP and three (but not four) card support for opener and scattered side values, offering him a choice between 2NT, 3NT, 3 of his major, and 4 of his major. In my own experience, however, this hand type is virtually non-existent, especially given my first-seat opening bid style.

Drury: Some people avoid the "3-card limit raise problem" by agreeing to use a purely artificial 2♣ response to show *any* hand with 3 trumps that is too good for a single raise. This avoids any danger of getting to the 3-level with insufficient trumps, and it gives added safety to the people who frequently open 4-card major suits in third seat.

One down side of the Drury convention, as discussed in Part I, is that if 2♣ is artificial, responder now has a difficult problem when he holds ♠ Jx ♥ Axx ♦ xxx ♣ KQTxx, ideal for a natural passed-hand 2-over-1. A second minus, shared with all artificial bids, is that the opponents can use your 2♣ bid to their own advantage and uncover an otherwise unbidable club fit, as in **this deal* from Bobby Wolff's bridge column. (*Note: this online link is no longer available.)

There are many different forms of Drury in use today. I personally don't recommend Drury; I prefer to make frequent use of the other 3 methods described in this article, and to only open a 4-card major when I have a very good reason for doing so. But it would be only fair for me to note that a majority of modern experts *do* use some form of Drury. If you wish to learn Drury, I suggest **Karen Walker's Drury page* as a good starting point for the simplest and most popular form of Drury. (*Note: this online link is no longer available.)

Knowing whether or not your partnership plays Drury obviously influences how aggressive you can afford to be with opening bad hands in third seat, especially hands with 4-card majors. Also refer back to Part I for a discussion of how whether or not you play Drury impacts your *first seat* openings, as you think about how easy it will be to find a suitable response if you pass a marginal hand in first seat.

Summary

Opening in third seat at the one level:

Open if you have a normal opening bid, OR:

- You are prepared to pass any non-forcing response at your next turn, AND
- You are prepared to have your suit led if the other side declares, AND
- You believe you can describe your hand better now than if you wait to overcall.

Responding to a third seat opening:

- If you have support, show it at your first chance.
- Have 6 or more cards, or a *good* 5-card suit, to bid two of a new suit, because you might have to play it there opposite a doubleton.

More On Third Seat Openings Elsewhere:

Mike Lawrence has written **an entire book on passed-hand bidding*. (*The referenced publication is titled *Passed Hand Bidding: Revised Edition*, ISBN: 1877908010, published 1989.) It's aimed mostly at 2/1 players so has quite a different flavor in places than my presentation does. It covers Drury variations, 4-card majors, whether or not 1NT should still be forcing, etc., in great detail. Surprisingly it *doesn't* say much about the idea of deciding in first seat whether or not to open based on whether you anticipate trouble responding to a third-seat opener.

**Double Drury* by Jeff Goldsmith, describes a novel way to handle the second round of bidding if you like to open insanely light in third hand. Not for the faint of heart, but strikingly original. (*Note: the online link to the publication by Jeff Goldsmith no longer functions.)

Part III: Fourth Seat Openings

The Big Difference

There is one major difference about opening in fourth seat from all other seats: you know exactly what the final result will be if you pass -- the board will be passed out, for a score of 0 to both sides!

In third seat, if you open light, it is with an expectation that your side was outgunned. You *expect* to go minus on the board whether you open or not, so you are less afraid of suffering a small penalty if you open a sub-minimum hand and get stuck declaring. You preempt higher because if you have a very weak hand in third seat, you are almost certain your opponents have a game available.

The situation is just the opposite in fourth seat. It is unwise to open in fourth seat unless it is with the intention of making your contract.

One-Level Openings

If you have a strong hand -- say more than 14 HCP -- you should certainly make your normal opening bid. Your side is almost guaranteed to have more than half the deck, and you plan to have a constructive auction to a makeable contract - quite possibly a game. You even have a fair chance of not getting serious interference from your opponents, who have neither the strength to open at the 1-level nor the distribution to preempt.

If you hold a minimum opening in fourth seat, neither side is likely to have game -- and both sides are likely to have a partscore. If you open with only 11-13 points in fourth seat, *you have to be planning to out-compete the opponents* at the 2- or 3-level. This leads us to the single most important factor in deciding whether to open a minimum hand in fourth seat:

Do you have the major suits -- especially spades? If your fit is higher-ranking than your opponents' fit, you have an advantage. If theirs is higher ranking, you face an uphill struggle for a plus score. In first seat, ♠ x ♥ Kxx ♦ AQxxx ♣ KJxx would be a routine opening; in fourth seat, seriously consider passing that hand, because there is such a risk that the result will be 2♥ or 2♠ made against you (or 3♣ or 3♦ your way down one.) There are many hands that are perfectly good first-, second-, or third-seat openings that are not worth opening in fourth seat. The only sub-minimum hands worth opening in fourth seat are ones with a clear advantage in a partscore struggle.

Some people strongly advocate opening 4-card majors in fourth seat just as much as they do in third seat. I do not. In *Part II* I discussed the safety issues regarding opening ratty 4-card suits in third seat. Those same factors apply in fourth seat: you don't want partner raising one time too many on those partscore hands and negating the advantage of holding the higher-ranking suit because you don't know how many trumps you have.

Most of the advantages of *having* a 4-card spade suit apply whether you *open* in spades or not: your partner can easily name spades if he has four of them too, even if LHO overcalls, especially if you play negative doubles. And if the opponents try to bid spades themselves, a suit like ♠ KT9x that isn't good enough to open is more than good enough to give your side two stoppers in notrump - or two defensive tricks if the opponents declare in spades and run into a bad break.

One popular rule of thumb for fourth-seat openings is "Pearson's Rule" or the "Rule of 15": open if your HCP total plus your spade length is 15 or more. As bidding rules based on high card points go, that's one of the better ones out there.

If you *do* open light in fourth seat (because you like your major-suit holdings), bear in mind the cautions from Part II about responder's new suits not being 100% forcing anymore and the need to be careful not to fool partner into thinking you have a strong hand with your rebid. Here are a few examples:

1. ♠ xx ♥ AQTx ♦ Kxxx ♣ Kxx: In first or second seat you'd probably open 1♦. In third seat, most would open 1♦ but aggressive pairs might try 1♥. In fourth seat, consider passing. If the opponents have spades they will outcompete you; if your partner has a weak hand with spades, you may be struggling in notrump.
2. ♠ KQJx ♥ xx ♦ AJxx ♣ xxx: In first or second seat, pass; you will be well placed if partner opens or if you can make a takeout double of 1♥ at your next turn. In third seat it's a clear 1♠ opening. In fourth seat, it might be right to pass but I would try opening, either 1♦ or 1♠.

Fourth-Seat Preempts

Calling these preempts is a bit of a misnomer. The classical preempt is a bid that risks a game-sized penalty if partner has nothing (on the theory that *if* partner has nothing, the opponents should be able to make a game.) But after your opponents have already announced they have no interest in even looking for game, you no longer want to be offering them even 200- and 300-point penalties if you can help it. Unless you think you will *make your bid* if you catch one or two useful cards in your partner's hand, you should pass and avoid any risk of a minus.

I have two basic requirements for a fourth-seat opening of 2♦ or higher:

- Bid for *one trick* more than you can take in your own hand.
- Have a hand where it will be easy for partner to count how many winners he has for you.

The first rule comes straight from the paragraph above: your partner is a passed hand; you really can't hope for more than two or three nice cards in his hand. And the odds are good that some of partner's strength will be wasted opposite shortness in your hand. Unless you are sure partner can contribute two tricks more than half the time, you can't afford to overbid by two tricks.

The second rule is a practical matter that you don't often see discussed in books. Partner needs to be able to count how many of your loser he can cover with confidence. Make his job easy for him. if you preempt in fourth seat, you are saying to your partner, "count your trump face cards and your side *sure* winners, and raise me only to a level I can make." Let's look at some examples:

1. ♠ Kx ♥ KJT9xxxx ♦ x ♣ xx: This is a near-perfect 3♥ opening in fourth seat. I'd estimate this at half a spade trick and 6 1/2 heart tricks. More importantly, *all partner has to do to know whether to raise you* is count how many of ♠ A, ♥ A, ♥ Q, ♦ A, and ♣ A he has. If he has any two of these cards (or ♣ AK or ♦ AK) he will raise you to 4♥ and you have at least a 50% shot at game, possibly a sure thing; if he doesn't -- even if he has ♦ KQJ ♣ KQJ! -- he can *pass* and know that you don't have any chance at all of making four.
2. ♠ xxx ♥ xx ♦ AQJ9xx ♣ KQx: I wouldn't open this hand at all in fourth seat. But if you do open it, open it 2♦ not 1♦: when the opponents compete in a major, partner will know

whether to compete on in diamonds, sell out, or double. (In first or second seat I'd have opened 1♦, and in third seat 3♦.)

3. ♠ KQJTxxx ♥ Axx ♦ Qxx ♣ -- : I would prefer to open 1♠ than 2♠. I do have seven tricks. But I'm not afraid of bidding spades again, I do have honest opening-bid values, and a slower auction, competitive or not, will help both me and partner decide if our red-suit cards are worth anything.
4. ♠ Ax ♥ KQJTxxx ♦ Axx ♣ x: You have 8 tricks, but don't even *think* about opening 3♥. Your partner is looking at a bunch of kings and queens, and you are forcing him to take a wild guess whether or not those cards are winners or not. Compare to Hand 1.
5. ♠ AQTxxxx ♥ xx ♦ Jxxx ♣ --: In first seat you'd bid at least 3♠. In fourth seat, bid just 2♠, and count on partner to know whether it is right to raise. You don't want to be beaten in 3♠ X when your opponents had only a part-score.
6. ♠ xx ♥ KQTxxx ♦ Qxx ♣ xx: A perfectly normal first-seat weak two-bid. But why open at all in fourth seat, when you have no guarantee of making even 2♥ and your opponents have at least 21 and maybe 23 HCP between them?
7. ♠ x ♥ AQJxx ♦ KQJx ♣ Jxx: In any other seat an obvious 1♥ bid. A 1♥ bid in fourth seat is fine too; but expect competition in spades from your opponents. Stretching to open 2♥ instead, since your partner will have an easy hand-evaluation decision and you can survive being at the 2-level opposite only doubleton support, is worth considering.

To sum up: In fourth seat, open only when you expect a plus score from bidding on.