

## Bidding Myths

Or.....

"What you thought you'd been taught about bidding, but only got half a tale, and have been playing it wrongly ever since."

**Myth 1 : "I must have 23+ to force to game with my first bid (2♦)".**

Many people believe an opening bid of 2♦ denotes 23+ hcp. Yes, it does, but there is an alternative, which many people forget! Partly, I suspect because they don't quite understand what it means. The alternative is: "a hand which is game forcing." This means a hand which is capable of making game, on its own, even if partner holds a fairly balanced Yarborough.

For example, suppose you hold:

♠ A K  
♥ Q J T 9 8 6 5  
♦ (Void)  
♣ K Q J T

There are only 16hcp in this hand, but how many tricks will you make playing in hearts? Apart from the two top trumps and the Ace of clubs, you ought to make all of the rest. And it doesn't really matter what partner holds. So, this hand is "game forcing" and should be opened 2♦. Yes, it is true you could construct hands for the other three players so that an opponent holds all six of the outstanding hearts, but quite frankly this is extremely unlikely. Possibly more likely is that opponents may score a club ruff against you before you can draw their trumps. This is certainly a possibility, and you should draw trumps asap, but it is just as likely that partner may hold a club shortage, or perhaps the ♥7 to over-ruff.

If partner holds a couple of the three important cards you are missing, then slam is on. If partner holds none of them, then game is still very likely. However, if you only open 1♥, partner is likely to pass before game is reached, so you must force partner to keep bidding, by opening 2♦.

**Myth 2 : "My main priority, with a balanced hand, is to give partner a point count".**

Bidding is about an exchange of information. It is also about looking for a "fit", or a suit to play the contract in. You want to give partner an idea of the general

strength of your hand, and you also want to show general shape. But also, you need to show specific suits, in order that a fit can be located. If that suit is a major, it is particularly important. It is almost always wrong not to show a four-card major when you have the opportunity.

Suppose the bidding starts 1♦ - 1NT. What does 1NT show? We all know that it is a balanced hand with 6 to 9 hcp. What a lot of people don't realise is that it also implies that the bidder does not have four hearts or four spades to show (which they could have done easily by bidding 1♥ or 1♠).

Consider this hand:

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

After East opens 1♦, then West can bid 2NT to show 11/12 balanced, which seems to fit their hand very well. East, with 16hcp, will raise to the NT game. This goes off, because the defenders can cash at least four spade tricks and the Ace of hearts.

If, however, West replies 1♥ to the opening bid, then you will play in hearts, hopefully at game level. The Heart game makes, for the loss of a top trump and two top spades. So, don't just show you strength and "balancedness" - show your suits, particularly majors, too.

**Myth 3 : "I must have 12, or more, high card points to open the bidding at the one level".**

Do you open this West hand?

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

It is only 10hcp and people who just believe in hcp will not open it. However, it is a very worthwhile opening bid. The shape (2641) is excellent, and the two Aces are very good cards (Aces are, of course, undervalued by the point count system). The Queen of hearts is well placed, supporting the Ace of the long suit. Queen of spades would be much less use. The ten and nine of hearts are very good cards

(again, tens are undervalued by the point count system). A better way of deciding to open, rather than just looking at points, is to use the "Rule of 20". This means add together your hcp, together with the length of your two longest suits, and if it comes to be 20 or more, then open. Here it is 10+6+4, and so you should open. Some people use the similar "Rule of 19", and will open on slightly less. Note that none of these systems are perfect. So, don't forget the Myth that you need 12hcp to open the bidding and replace it with the Myth that Rule of 20 should always be adhered to. Always be flexible, and remember that circumstances alter cases!

#### **Myth 4 : "I can only use Stayman if I have at least 11 high card points"**

Many people believe that you need 11 hcp to use Stayman. This is certainly one use, when you are making a positive, forward-looking bid, hoping for a potential game. However, there are other uses of Stayman, where it can help with a weaker hand. The important thing to remember about Stayman is that you must be able to cope with any response partner may give.

There are two typical types of weak hand when Stayman can be used. The first is a hand that is at least 5-4 in the majors. Suppose partner opens 1NT and you hold:

♠ Q 5 3 2  
♥ J 9 5 3 2  
♦ 5 4  
♣ 8 2

Here partner will go badly off in 1NT because you are so weak, and, probably more importantly, there is likely to be no entry to your hand. So, you bid Stayman. If partner bids either major, you are quite happy and pass. You are still weak, but with at least a 4-4 trump fit, partner might still struggle home, or at least just go the odd trick off. If partner bids 2♦ in response to your Stayman request, you just bid two of your five-card suit, and partner will pass. You are in at least a 5-2 fit, and hopefully a 5-3 fit. This may well not play too well, but it is certainly an improvement on 1NT from partner.

The second type of weak hand that can use Stayman, is when you have at least 5 diamonds and are at least 4-3 in the majors. Something like:

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

Again, 1NT from partner is likely to play very badly indeed. So, you bid Stayman. If partner bids a major, you are playing in, at worst, a 4-3 fit, and hopefully better. If

partner bids diamonds, you simply pass, safe in the knowledge that you are playing in, at worst, a 5-2 fit, and hopefully better. None of the above situations are ideal, but, when your hand is weak, most of the time they are better than letting partner struggle in 1NT.

**Myth 5 : "I must have six, or more, high card points to respond to my partner's one level opening bid".**

This Myth tends to be fine when the responder's hand is pretty flat, but when you have distribution on your side, then it is often correct to ignore it. Suppose you hold:

♠ 5 4  
♥ K J 9 8 6 3  
♦ 6  
♣ T 9 5 4

If partner opens 1♦, it is worth responding 1♥ to try and find a better fit. Again, your points fit together in the same suit, and you have a decent suit of six cards. If partner bids 1♠ or 1NT you just repeat the hearts and partner will get the message that you have a long suit and a weak hand. If partner says 2♣, you can pass, safe in the knowledge that you have found a decent fit, and despite your lack of strength in high cards, partner will have a good chance of making the contract. If partner repeats their diamonds at the two or three level, then you are rather unfortunate, and must pass. Occasionally partner will hold four hearts and be able to support your suit. You can obviously pass at your next turn, but now you are playing in hearts, with a good chance of making the partscore, or even game occasionally, that partner has put you into.

**Myth 6 : "With a 20 count I must open 2N".**

This Myth is clearly false as it depends on distributions. Many pairs have a particular opening for a particular strong point count, but this is clearly very silly as you must take into account the distribution of the hand. We teach, *with balanced hands*, to open 19-20 as 2NT and 21-22 balanced as 2♣ to be followed by 2NT.

Consider this hand:

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

If you open the West hand 2NT (I had 20 points partner), then surely East will raise to 3NT. This contract is likely to lose the first five (at least) heart tricks and go off. However, if you look at it, it is clear that 5♦ makes comfortably. It is much more sensible to open the West hand with a bid of 2♣, showing an Acol-2 8 playing trick hand, and when partner bids 2♦, follow it up with 3♦. The Diamond game is then much more likely to be reached. It is true that East holds the right cards for you, but if East is weak, the hand is much more likely to play better in diamonds than NT, as there may well be no entry to the East hand and your club and heart stoppers may well be quickly knocked out. Don't use a NT bid to show points purely, particularly if you have a suit you could show.

**Myth 7 : "If partner pre-empt (at the 3level, say) and I have a very strong hand with no fit for partner, I should bid 3N".**

A strong hand opposite a pre-empt often plays well, but it depends in what denomination. If there is a trump fit, then clearly you will play in that suit. But if there is no trump fit? Should you try 3NT?

Consider these hands:

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

If partner opens 3♥, what should West bid? Clearly there is no trump fit. So, it looks as though 3NT is the bid. The problem on these types of hands is that the dummy is often lacking in entries. Here, for once, the dummy has a certain entry in the Diamond King, but as soon as you use it and play a heart, opponents will take their Ace and the suit is lost. On this particular hand, 3NT stands no chance, but 4♥ is an easy make, losing just the top club and one, possibly two, trumps. West has not been very good at seeing his partners hand, and thinking about where tricks may come from. Game in the pre-empted suit is a much more likely proposition than in NT.

**Myth 8 : "I must always show my second five card suit".**

Now, of course, we are in reversing/going over the barrier territory. Certainly, you should try to show both your suits, but if you are not strong, and showing the second involves going over the barrier, you should not do so. Look at this hand:

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

After you open 1♥ (remember it's higher of two five-card suits), partner bids 2♦. What is partner going to say if you now bid 3♣? With some sort of stop in spades, and you holding a strong hand, partner is likely to say 3NT. You have 23hcp between you and no long suit to run. Unless you are very lucky in where the cards are placed, this contract is doomed to failure. The bidding went wrong at West's second turn. Not strong enough to reverse (or "go over the barrier"), West should just bid a simple 2♥, and that is where the bidding should end, as any continuation is likely to put the partnership into an unmakeable contract. Only show your second suit, if you are weak, if you can do so by not going over the barrier to do so.