

Bidding balanced hands - Part 2

This is the second article (of currently two) that considers the HCP ranges available to opener in an uncontested auction, and some of the continuations, in the context of a system essentially based on Acol with a weak (12-14) 1NT opening bid. The first article examined some aspects of the 2NT opener, concentrating on the definition and 3C response, with some miscellaneous thoughts on other responses to 2NT.

This article considers the bidding of balanced hands that are too strong to open 1NT and too weak to open 2NT, embedding within it a comparison of some of the gains and losses in my preferred methods with those of the original Acol standard.

Choice of opener

Which 4 card suit to open when 4432 shape? And is there a case for opening 1C with 4-3-3-3 shape? (note on terminology: 4432 refers to any order of suits. 4-3-3-3 is in descending order of suit rank, ie with 4 Spades.)

I don't really intend to dwell on this issue. Partly because it is old well-trodden ground. Partly because in the grand scheme of things it probably doesn't matter very much. And partly because it does not seem to make a huge difference to the continuations (although obviously there will be some impact).

My personal preference is for 1M opener to show a 5 card suit, 1D to show a 4 card suit and 1C to be possibly on as few as 2 (ie if 4-4-3-2). Certainly there are bad hands for the method. But if not playing 5 card majors I remain with a preference to open a minor in preference to a major, which is at odds with "Standard English".

If you do open the minor suit in preference to the major, then you might give some thought to promising 5 card Spade suit with a 1S opener, as the only occasion when it might then be a 4 carder is 4-3-3-3. When 1S is opened he is then heavily odds in favour of holding a 5 card suit, and when pressed responder will so assume. If responder is likely to assume a 5 card suit then it makes for an easier life if you fulfil his expectation. Adopting that agreement means opening 1C on the 4-3-3-3 hand. Responder might equally fall into the trap of assuming a 4 card Club suit (being the balance of probability, not because he has forgotten the methods), but that assumption is less likely to impinge on his bidding. It is just something that you have to hammer out with partner.

With 4-4 in the minors the issue is marginal. If you agree consistently to open one rather than the other, opening 1D tends to leave you better placed in a contested auction. Opening 1C tends to leave you better placed in an uncontested auction. Simply opening the better suit has merit, but also carries ethical baggage with it if you have a tendency to psyche the weaker minor. If you play transfer Walsh responses to 1C then you might want to maximise its occurrence, which would suggest opening 1C. If your 1D opener promises 4, whilst 1C might be a nebulous doubleton, that would suggest opening 1D. On balance I prefer to open 1D, partly because of my preference to open 1C on potentially as few as 2 (and 1D promising 4), but mainly because I regard it more important to protect the contested auction than the uncontested one. Contested auctions are more frequent, the likely swing at stake is

likely to be greater, and bidding space available to recover is constricted. Your original plan to show a balanced hand may be disturbed in favour of simulating a 2-suiter.

With 4-4 in the majors it is essential to open 1H rather than 1S. That is standard. With a balanced hand, unless a fit is found first, you intend to rebid in NT, to limit the values and balanced nature, and not bid the second suit yourself which would indicate a 2-suited hand. 4432 is balanced, not 2-suited. Given that you only intend to show one of the suits, you are more likely to lose a Heart fit by opening 1S than to lose a Spade fit by opening 1H. Responder will frequently respond 1S to 1H when holding 4 of them, when he would not respond 2H to 1S if the majors were reversed. Indeed, opposite 1H opener, responder holding 4 Spades would normally bypass a 1S response only if strong enough to bid them later (in which case the fit will come to light without opener bidding the suit), or perhaps if responder has a known Heart fit (when the Spade fit may not be relevant). Some very dated bridge books on Acol or natural bidding suggest that it is acceptable to treat some 4432 shapes as 2-suited but that idea has now been discredited by the bulk of the community.

The rebid

There are two basic distinct situations to consider (there are others but these cater for the vast majority)

- (1) Responder has made a non-forcing limit bid (raise of opener or bid in NT)
- (2) Responder has made a forcing new-suit response

I am not considering esoteric responses such as jump shifts in this article.

There are two subcategories of each of the above two cases. In case (1) you can distinguish responder's NT bids from those where he raises opener. In the latter case an express trump fit is established. In case (2) you can distinguish a 2-over-1 response from a 1-over-1 response. There is an added complication in case (2), that opener may or may not hold a fit with responder's suit.

The obvious main distinction between cases (1) and (2) is opener's option to pass in case (1). Opener's "prepared rebid" is in NT, but this does not mean that opener is compelled to rebid at all, opposite a limited response. A common error that I encounter among beginners is opener raising a 1NT response to 2NT with a balanced 15-16 count, on the apparent justification that he was required to make his cheapest rebid in NT to complete the description of his hand. The same error is perpetuated after a weak raise by responder, although in that case there is some safety in retreating to the fit. When partner has made a non-forcing limit bid and you are considering other than pass, consider the likelihood of missing game opposite a maximum partner, contrasted with the likelihood of playing in an uncomfortably high partscore opposite a minimum partner. This involves adding your precise strength known to you (not your range of possible strengths) to the range expressed by partner's limit. You also need to consider what action partner is likely to take opposite an invitation if he is in the middle of his range. You should almost always pass a 1NT response or weak raise holding a balanced 15 count. With 16 and something special by way of distribution and tens it may work out well to move (but will also often be wrong).

The standard advice in case (1) is to raise 1NT to 2NT with about 17-18, and raise to 3NT with 19-20. Likewise after a simple weak raise, you would invite with 17-18, and force to game with 19-20. These are broad guidelines, and a good 16 or 18 count might be upgraded. The manner of investigating game after a simple raise is a potentially complex subject. You could just bid the requisite number of NT with a balanced hand, but there are alternatives available that I shall not discuss in this article.

Case (2) hands are perhaps more interesting, being where I tend to diverge from stone-age standard practice.

To recap stone-age acol:

Opener has a general obligation to raise responder with a fit at an appropriate level in preference to rebidding in NT. The point ranges pretty much coincide with the case (1) scenario: With 15-16 make a minimum raise, with 17-18 make a jump raise, with 19-20 force to game. Borderline hands can be upgraded or downgraded. Again there is a temptation to show extra strength with 15 (ie by way of a jump raise), on the grounds that you are about a King better than a minimum opener. But you should acknowledge (a) that responder still has room to invite, permitting a wider range for the lower rebid, and (b) the playing strength of a balanced hand is depressed by reason of lack of distributional enhancements. It has about the same playing strength as a weaker, more distributional opener.

In the absence of a fit, after 1-over-1 response, 1NT rebid shows 15-16, 2NT rebid shows 17-18, 3NT rebid shows 19-20. After a 2-over-1 response, 2NT rebid is 15-16 and non-forcing (the 2-over-1 having, in Acol, classically a weaker bottom limit than in other systems).

Moving up to the nuclear age

I have two aversions relevant to this agenda:

I have an aversion to playing in 2NT.

I have an aversion to rebidding 3NT on balanced hands where there remains doubt about the optimum trump strain and when a slower sequence would also afford more room for slam investigation.

Both of these have less relevance in the Match-Point (or Board-a-Match) scoring formats than in others. In a Match-Point event, going down in 2NT by fewer tricks than others who have bid higher assumes a greater significance than in, say, IMP. Also, 3NT may be a more risky contract but has the potential for being a higher scoring game should it make.

Some of these problems are mitigated by opening a major suit in preference to a minor suit when holding both suits in an otherwise balanced hand ("Standard English"). At least then you do not have to locate a 4-4 fit in the opened major suit. It does not wholly eliminate the problems (such as finding a 5-3 fit), and it creates other problems as already touched on.

To get around these problems I choose never to rebid 3NT uncontested with a balanced hand, and rarely bid 2NT in a non-forcing capacity. Only a minor adjustment to the basic system is required in order to achieve these ends without significant cost, by way of forcing the normal rebids of 1NT, 2NT and 3NT into just the lower two options of 1NT and 2NT.

I change the ranges of a minimum NT rebid as follows:

A 1NT rebid shows 15-17 (contrast classical 15-16), and preferred over 1-suit rebid

A jump to 2NT rebid following a 1-suit response shows 18-20

A jump to 3NT rebid does NOT show a balanced hand (various options, not the subject of this article).

A 2NT rebid following a 2-over-1 response shows 15-20 and is game forcing.

A few comments:

1_suit - 1_suit - 1NT

A classical 2-point (15-16) range for a 1NT rebid seems a bit of a waste, there being room to invite game, but virtually no point in having invitational continuations.

That said, the classical rebid structure here really is not that bad. Your (optimised) continuations following a 1NT rebid should be more accurate if you start with a more narrowly defined 1NT bid than with a wider range. The cost in that increased accuracy is the problems that you create for yourself in describing hands that are too strong for the 1NT rebid.

The frequency of hands drops the further that you deviate from the average 10 HCP hand. A balanced 9-11 hand occurs roughly twice as frequently as a balanced 12-14 hand, which in turn occurs roughly twice as frequently as a balanced 15-17 hand. A balanced 15-17 hand most often falls within the 15-16 category. Accordingly it makes some sense to concentrate on increased accuracy on the higher frequency hand types, which in turn argues for a narrower range 15-16 1NT rebid.

Again that said, I find a 15-17 1NT rebid acceptable, for three main reasons:

- 1) The drop off in accuracy is not that great
- 2) If responder passes the 1NT rebid I would far rather be in 1NT than in 2NT even with 17 HCP.
- 3) It furthers the objective of avoiding a 3NT rebid on maximum strength hands (a) when NT might be the wrong strain and (b) when I might prefer more bidding space to investigate slam.

My preference to rebid 2NT after 1-suit response on a 3 point range (18-20) rather flies in the face of the argument that a 3 point range is too wide when there is insufficient room to invite. The problem, of course is the 18 count. With 19-20 you have enough to game force opposite any response, while an 18 count is fractionally on the weak side.

On balance it is a price I am prepared to pay, to avoid having to rebid 3NT. In practice responder will quite rarely be so weak, having responded, to have no play for game opposite an 18 count. So I am content to make the 2NT rebid forcing. Once it

is forcing, the pressure on having a narrow range is released. Indeed, not just forcing, but it makes the subsequent auction much easier to manage if you make it game forcing. If you want to introduce bells and whistles to allow you to sign out in 3-suit then there are plenty of opportunities to do so if you have the inclination, and there may be some benefit to that, although you are looking at a marginal benefit at a cost of a considerable increase in complexity.

At a stretch you might pass the 2NT rebid (the only non-game-forcing continuation) if as responder you really did not have your initial response, but be prepared to take your medicine if (a) partner has a 20 count and game makes or (b) partner as an 18 count and fails in 2NT when you might have left him in 1-suit. An understanding partner really should not criticise you if he has the imagination to appreciate the situations when your response might have gained.

Continuations after 1_suit - 1_suit - 1NT

You really need to employ some artificial low-level rebid by responder, such as "new minor forcing" ("nmf"), or "checkback stayman", or "xyz". (It is very seldom that I say that you need a convention.) Google will find you any number of references to these three techniques (and other similar). They are all variations on a theme: A designated low level rebid by responder is reserved as an artificial forcing bid, whose principal purpose is to split up responder's possible values into manageable limits.

The need for these methods is somewhat lessened if you adopt an opening style that opens the major in preference to the minor when 4432. It is possible that simple systems such as Standard English adopt this style partly to avoid the need for complexities of this nature in the continuations. Even then, however, there remain some benefits to these conventions, and once you are committed to them, the transition to opening the minor in preference to the major becomes less painful.

"xyz" is a fairly complex method that involves using 2C as a puppet to 2D, and 2D as a game forcing relay (there are undoubtedly variations). My personal preference is for a similar method that uses 2D as an invitational relay and swap out the game forcing hands into the other responses. I shall not be giving the full details in this article - perhaps one for another day.

Going for simplicity, however, I prefer "Checkback Stayman" over "nmf". The main difference is that "nmf" uses 2D as the artificial bid after 1C-1M-1N. Otherwise, both methods use 2C as the artificial bid. You can use natural continuations, or if you feel inclined you can add some tweaks. The main point to focus on is that the artificial minor bid promises at least an invitation to game, and so opener has carte blanche to respond at the 3 level with a maximum hand in context (which would establish a game force), and use 2 level bids with a minimum (non-forcing).

If responder makes a bid via 2C (or nmf, for that matter) he is normally showing a stronger hand than had he bid it by an alternative route. Thus:

1D-1S

1N-2D = weak, to play

1D-1S

1N-3D = invitational but non-forcing

1D-1S

1N-2C (Checkback)

2?-3D = Game forcing

There is scope for changing these principles around - you just have to agree. But it also enables you to use

1D-1S

1N-2H = weak, non forcing, to play or convert to 2S, showing 5 Spades and 4 Hearts

And then go via 2C with a stronger hand to investigate the Heart fit with game aspiration.

You might also consider the meaning of

1D-1H

1N-2S

Clearly this cannot be weak (just because you have a game invite or better, you are not forced to go through 2C). There is also little point in the bid being non-forcing. But how is this sequence distinguished from investigating via Checkback? Scope for agreement, but I tend to use this sequence to show 4-4 in the majors (as distinct from a 5th Heart with 4 Spades), on the grounds that with a 5th Heart I am at least interested in hearing about a 3rd Heart in partner's hand, which 2C may elicit.

This article is not a complete discourse on Checkback, nmf, or xyz, as there are better resources in the public domain with the aid of Google. Hopefully this article will prompt you to search, at least, if you do not already employ one of them.

1_suit - 2_lower_suit - 2NT

Stone-age Acol allows for quite a considerable overlap in hand strength between a 1NT response and a 2-over-1 change of suit. This seems unnecessary and inefficient. It is undesirable if it requires a narrow range, non-forcing 2NT rebid following a 2-over-1, causing you to devote a low level rebid for a low frequency of hands. Provided that you keep the 2-over-1 response up to strength (and it only requires a very small uplift to the classical bottom end of the range) you can safely force to game with 15. Once you have sufficient combined strength to game force, there is again relaxed the requirement for a narrow range in the 2NT rebid, in turn releasing you from the obligation to make a space-consuming 3NT rebid with maximum values.

The margin at which you should respond with a 2-over-1 is determined by two simple questions:

- 1) If you responded 1NT, how happy would you be if opener passed your response with a balanced 15-16 count (as he would normally be expected to do)? If the answer is "not very happy" (specifically, for fear of missing game), then you probably have a 2-over-1.

2) If you responded 2-over-1, how happy would you be if opener indicated a misfitting minimum hand with his rebid? If the answer is "not very happy", then you probably have a 1NT response.

What do you do if the answer to these two questions conflict? It does happen. It then boils down to the question with what are you MOST "not very happy"? Holding 3 card support (or at a pinch 2 card support) for opener's (first) suit provides you with some protection should you choose a 2-over-1 on a borderline hand. If opener signifies a minimum then you can sign out in a fit at a low level. On a misfit, you may prefer to respond 1NT. These issues are typical of several factors that might contribute to your "not being very happy" with the way the auction might develop using an alternative response. On average, question 2 tends to hold precedence. If you fear missing game in response to question 1 then a missed game is likely to be marginal. If you get into a mess on a misfit the consequences tend to be more certain and potentially as catastrophic.

Acol and other natural systems all teach you the discipline of being prepared for the worst that partner can throw at you, and this applies to responder as well as to opener. Slightly, off topic, but what would you respond to a 1H opening bid holding:

S: Kxxx
H: x
D: x
C: QJxxxxx

The hand would improve dramatically if opener has a Club fit, but it is still a long way to 5C and you are short of values for 3NT unless partner has enough to make it in tops. I would not expect much dissent from the proposition that the hand falls short of a 2C response.

I encounter players regularly who would respond 1S on this hand for fear that any other action would lose a Spade fit. Predictably, however, opener rebids 2D, and now you cannot mention the Club suit at all.

1NT is easily the best response with this hand. Any subsequent bid in Clubs by responder will then be natural, weak and non-forcing, whatever opener throws at you with his rebid. Certainly the response risks missing a Spade fit, but there is no certainty even of that: Opener may yet mention the suit with reversing values.

Back on topic, using a forcing 2NT rebid by opener you ARE going to get into some pretty thin games. With a shapely 9 count you would probably respond 2 over 1, and this may propel you into a combined 24 count 3NT. (The same may happen with a 6 count 1-suit response and 2NT rebid by opener on 18.) But the added flexibility of generating low level game forcing auctions makes this a price well worth paying.

Continuations after 1_suit - 2_lower_suit - 2NT

Once you have established a game forcing auction, the incentive for artificial continuations is lessened. At least it is lessened to the extent that you no longer have to introduce artificial sequences purely in order to establish a forcing auction.

However a wide range (ie 15-20) 2NT rebid is not without problems that need to be addressed. In particular, responder may be left in doubt over whether the partnership has sufficient combined values for slam, or whether it is safe to investigate that matter without risking an unacceptably high level contract in the process.

One partial solution is for opener unilaterally to commit beyond 3NT with an absolute maximum hand (19-20). This may drive you into a 29 count 4NT contract when you would have preferred to be in 3NT, but if NT is really the right spot (and by then you will know) a combined 29 count 4NT contract is very unlikely to be at risk. You need to be sure that partner will respect 4NT as not being Blackwood, depending on how you get there.

Another solution is to use 3C rebid by responder as an artificial bid to express (in principle) slam interest, the other 3-level rebids (in principle) denying slam interest. Which is NOT to say that you should never find slam after responder bypasses 3C, should opener be particularly good and well-fitting. Nor does 3C force you into slam opposite 17-18, although you should be sniffing for it.

You could employ, but do not really need, all sorts of artificial gadgetry on top of these, but I find that natural bidding seems to suffice thereafter.

Concealing a fit (or to be more precise, deferring its expression)

Generally there are few things in life that give me greater pleasure than to support my partner's suit.

Possibly one of the weak points of a weak 1NT system is the doubt over whether to raise responder's 1-suit response to the 3 level with a good-ish "strong notrump" hand type and 4 card support. Playing a strong 1NT, you have an obvious raise to 2 when holding a weak 1N, and an obvious jump bid when too strong for a strong 1NT opener. The problem for weak notrumpers is perhaps exacerbated by the growing trend to respond on weaker and weaker minimum holdings (especially where you have been playing around with your 2-suit opening bids to such an extent that you no longer have a way to show a classical Acol-2).

I have been wondering whether opener, holding a 15-17 point balanced hand which he judges to be worth a raise to 2.5 of responder's suit, might be better off by concealing the fit (at this stage) and rebid 1NT. The added strength should add some safety to the 1NT rebid should it be passed by responder, and you can come out of the bushes with support should responder happen to bid (which is a fairly likely option). You will not be disadvantaged compared with the strong 1NT systems against whom you might be competing, as they will have opened 1NT anyway and be in the same boat. Perhaps you won't be in precisely the same boat, because opposite a 1NT opener you might pull to a 5 card suit expecting 2-4 card support opposite. After a 1NT rebid you probably would not pull to a 5 card suit, expecting 1-3 card support opposite. I would be more inclined to rebid 1NT opposite a 1D response at MatchPoint scoring, and less inclined to do so opposite 1M response.

The other question is whether you should rebid 2NT or support responder, following a 2-over-1 response, when holding a fit for responder. There are perhaps two schools here. In classical Acol a raise of responder shows a minimum with a fit, and is non-forcing. In that case it is highly convenient to be able to make a forcing 2NT rebid and later show a fit if responder shows slam interest (or if the fit is in Hearts). There is a reasonably strong case for a raise of responder's 2 over 1 to be game forcing (in which case you automatically have an elegant agreement that any rebid by opener beyond is suit originally opened establishes a game force, as the raise is otherwise the only anomaly). Playing that method it becomes less clear, but in that case I favour the raise. Incidentally, if playing this way, as opener you may find yourself rebidding your first suit initially, concealing the fit with responder, when minimum and lacking GF values. Responder may pass that rebid but only with a fit - so you still end up in a fit. Otherwise, responder should only respond with a 2-over-1, with a misfit for opener, if strong enough to bid again over a minimum rebid by opener. That brings the minimum strength of a 2-over-1 up in line with SAYC-like systems.

That's it for this session.