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Bidding Matters

The 12 habits of highly effective bidders

5. They are not slaves to their systems. (continued)

In the last issue, we looked at situations where responder should be willing to break the old rule about never bypassing a four-card major at the one-level. Opener also has opportunities to conceal a major — temporarily or forever — and in some cases, that will be his best strategy.

Strong balanced openers

The easiest auctions are those where opener limits his hand early and puts responder in charge. For this reason, it's become standard for opener to bypass a four-card major — or even both majors — when he holds a balanced 18 to 19 points.

If you open 1♣ and partner responds 1♥, a 2NT rebid is recommended with a hand such as:

♠AJ104 ♥K5 ♦KJ3 ♣AK75.

By showing your point-count and balanced pattern all in one bid, you give partner easy options for finding the best contract. There's little risk of losing a 4-4 spade fit because partner has the three level available to investigate further. If he holds four spades and/or five hearts, he'll bid 3♦ to

check back for a major-suit fit.

If you instead rebid 1♠ with your 19-count, it can lead to several awkward situations. Partner may rebid 1NT, and although you'll have no problem getting to game, the weaker hand will be declaring. If partner instead shows extra values — with a rebid of 2♦ (new minor forcing) or 3NT — you have no way to show this strength. That risks missing a possible slam.

* Minimum balanced openers

Is this rush to notrump ever right when you have a weaker opening bid?

Those who play Walsh-style responses routinely bypass majors after the auction 1♣-1♦. In Walsh, a 1♦ response shows one of two hands: a minimum with no major or game-going strength with five or more diamonds and a possible four-card major. With the stronger hand, responder will bid his major at his next turn, so opener is free to ignore his majors and rebid 1NT with a balanced minimum.

Another treatment, played by many expert pairs, is that if you open 1♣ and rebid 1♠, you guarantee at least four clubs. With a minimum 4=3=3=3 opener, you must skip the four-card spade suit and rebid 1NT over a 1♦ or 1♥ response.

This agreement offers several advantages. The 1NT rebid limits your hand quickly — and tends to slow partner down — when you have a totally flat, unremarkable opener. Partner also has easier decisions over 1NT than 1♠. Knowing you have a balanced minimum, he can place the final contract in his suit or clubs or notrump.

When you open 1♣ and rebid 1♠, you promise "real" club length and a ruffing value in a red suit. With a minimum response, partner will be

able to make a better choice between 1NT and 2♣. This picture of your distribution is also helpful if he has a borderline decision about inviting or bidding game.

The downside of this agreement is that you'll occasionally miss a 4-4 spade fit when opener rebids 1NT and responder has a minimum. This is seldom a disaster and can even be a benefit, as opener's flat pattern may make 1NT a better contract than 2♠.

Finding the best strain shouldn't be a problem when responder has extra values. After 1♣-1♥; 1NT, responder should search for a possible spade fit by bidding 2♦ (new minor forcing) or 2♠ with a hand such as:

♠J1042 ♥AKJ7 ♦J3 ♣K104

Judging the exceptions

As with most system agreements, you'll have more success with this treatment if the words "promise" and "guarantee" are loosened a bit. Opener should be allowed to use his judgment with a hand such as:

♠AKQ10 ♥1093 ♦754 ♣KQ8

If you open 1♣ and partner responds 1♥, does a discouraging 1NT really feel right with this hand? You have all your high cards in your suits, no tenaces and no stopper in the unbid suit, plus a spade suit that begs not to be ignored.

Depart from your system and rebid 1♠. If the "promise" of four clubs and a red doubleton happens to encourage partner to stretch to game, this quick-trick heavy 14-count shouldn't be a disappointment.