

## FIVE-FIVE IN THE BLACKS

Most modern bidding manuals, in their misguided zeal to eliminate judgment from bidding, teach choice-of-suits-to-open in the form of "rules" based on suit-lengths alone. With two 5-card suits, their "rules" say, open the higher-ranking. Other "rules" say to open 1♦ with two 4-card minors, and 1♣ with two 3-card minors (4=3=3=3 and 3=4=3=3 patterns).

I teach judgment. Consider (a) the playability of your suits (partner may pass or raise), (b) the lead you would prefer partner to make (your left-hand opponent may become declarer, especially if your opening is minimum), (c) the ease with which your partner can bid, (d) the convenience of your own rebids, and (e) the impeding of your opponents' auction.

In principle, these guidelines should suffice, but bidding is so unintuitive that more specific guidelines can prove helpful. Here they are.

Even though spades outrank clubs on an absolute scale, clubs rank just above spades in the spiral of suit-bids. They are "touching" suits, and the normal order of bidding touching suits of equal length is to start with the suit that ranks just above the other in the spiral. With five clubs and five spades, you should normally open 1♣, planning to bid spades at your next two turns (the auction and the strength of your hand permitting).

These six prototypical (uncontested) auctions illustrate the benefits of opening 1♣ rather than 1♠ with five-five in the blacks:

(1) 1♣-(1♦ or 1♥); 1♠-(1NT, 2♣ or 2♦); 2♠. You've shown a minimum opening with five clubs and five spades and are only at the 2-level.

(2) 1♣-(1♦ or 1♥); 1♠-(1NT, 2♣ or 2♦); 3♠. You've shown five clubs, five spades and substantial extra values (with your third-round jump).

(3) 1♣-(1♦ or 1♥); 2♠-(2NT, 3♣ or 3♦); 3♠. You've shown five clubs and five spades and have forced to game.

(4) 1♣-1NT; 2♠-(2♦, 2♥ or 2♠); pass. You've shown five spades, four clubs (perhaps only three if you play partner's 1NT response as forcing, making it especially important to open 1♣ with 5-5 in the blacks), and not much more than minimum opening strength. You're probably in the wrong trump suit if partner has given false preference to your 5-card major with longer clubs than spades (I've seen Two-Over-One Game-Force teachers advocate doing so with two spades and four, even five, clubs), but even when responder has two spades and three clubs, 3♣ will usually be a better contract than 2♠.

(5) 1♣-1NT; 2♠-(2♦, 2♥ or 2♠); 3♣. You've shown five spades, five clubs and substantial extras (enough to be reasonably safe at the 3-level).

(6) 1♣-(2♦ or 2♥); 3♣. You've shown five spades, four clubs (presumably), and substantial extras (a sensible treatment even if you play partner's 2-over-1 response as forcing to game).

If you examine these six auctions, you will see that the "clubbers" are better off than the "spaders" in most cases (the minimum openings and the jump-shifts). However, there are exceptions. Auctions (5) and (6) leave the "spaders" better off than the "clubbers" are in auction (2). This indicates one exception: a "tweener" with substantial extra values but not quite enough for a jump shift is more suited to a 1♠ than a 1♣ opening.

The other exception stems from marked differences in playability. If one of two equally long suits is much stronger than the other, it is a good idea to treat it as if it were a card longer. A difference of two or more honor-cards should trigger this treatment. Thus, for example, ♠KQJ92 ♥4 ♦K9 ♣A9762 is better opened 1♠ than 1♣, while ♠J9762 ♥AK ♦A ♣KQ1092 (a "tweener") is better opened 1♣ than 1♠.

One caveat about opening 1♣ with five-five in the blacks: if partner responds a natural 1NT (balanced, no four-card major, played by most as 8-10 HCP but better played as slightly stronger, e.g. a good 8 to bad 11 HCP), your 2♠ "reverse" should not be construed as showing the substantial extra values that other reverses promise. ♠AQ972 ♥84 ♦7 ♣KQ1062 would be a normal minimum. To force, you would have to jump to 3♠ over partner's 1NT response.

However, it's not a good idea to play a 1NT response to 1♣ as purely natural. It preempts opener, wrong-sides the notrump when partner has a balanced 19-HCP, and is not really needed to bid your hand. If you play Inverted Minor Raises, you'll do better to play a 1NT response to 1♣ as a weak balanced club raise (a weak 3♣ jump raise requires a distributional hand); you can always respond 1♦ with fewer than four clubs. If you don't play Inverted Minor Raises, you'll do better to play a 1NT response to 1♣ as showing a decent 6 to a bad 10 HCP with precisely 4=3=3=3 distribution (four spades).