

Opening light – law and bridge aspects

Over time, bridge systems have evolved in terms of the high card points (HCP) needed to open a hand at the 1-level. Back in the 70's it was normal not to open a hand with less than 13 HCP but these days they teach Standard American with 12 HCP openings, and many players today systemically open all hands of 11+ HCP.

It is a fact of life that players will be flexible with this, and even though their system card says 12 HCP, they might open 1S with 11 HCP, or even 10 HCP in third or fourth seat with a good spade suit. Bridge judgement comes into play here.

However, there is a pattern among some players to push the envelope, and consistently open hands at the 1-level with fewer than 10 points, arguing that distribution makes the hand stronger. Some have even opened with 7 or 8 HCP.

There are two aspects to consider here – bridge and the law.

Bridge factors

When your partner opens at the 1-level, you can expect them to show close to 12 HCP. You will base your decision about game raises on this. Also, in a competitive auction, the fact that partner has shown opening points will influence your decision about doubling the opponents' contract. This is especially important if you have agreed a suit and you hold most of the high card points in that suit – that tells you that all partner's high card points should be good defensive points.

Imagine you have 13 HCP and partner opens 1H. Without a heart fit you will be heading for 3NT. What if partner is 6/5 in hearts and diamonds and only has 8 HCP? You might be 2/1 in the red suits, but with a combined 21 HCP and non-fitting hands, 3NT will probably be a disaster, and so will 4H or 5D if your partner pulls it. If however your partner opened that hand 2H, showing 5/5 hearts and a minor, you won't be going to game with your 13 count, and will most likely play in 2H or 3D. The 2-level opening describes the hand much better than any bidding sequence that starts with a 1-level bid.

A good rule is: if in doubt, pass first. When you enter the auction as a passed hand and bid aggressively, partner knows your strength is in distribution. If you

are not a passed hand and need to show a second suit at the 2 or even 3 level, partner will be justified in believing you have reasonable values and you will probably end up too high.

Besides, why open at the 1-level and risk confusing partner when most systems provide 2-level opening bids (and higher) to describe distributional hands with less than opening points? Multi-2's are the most popular, where you can show any 2-suiters or a single suiter in hearts or spades with 2-level opening bids. The purpose of these 2-level bids is (a) to describe your hand to partner, (and they are very descriptive; with one enquiry bid partner knows 10 of your cards and your approximate point count); and (b) to take up bidding space making it harder for the opponents. Opening these hands at the 1-level has neither of these benefits.

Law factors

There are also legal aspects regarding light openings.

Firstly, if your system allows for you to open hands at the 1-level with less than 8 points, no matter how good you think the distribution is, it is a Yellow system, and as such cannot be played at most clubs' sessions and many congresses.

Secondly, you need to make sure that your system card adequately describes the minimum HCPs of your 1-level openings. There is provision on the ABF system card to record the minimum HCPs for each denomination e.g. 1S – 12 HCP, 1H – 12 HCP etc. The HCP value shown here should be the points that you usually open all hands on, so if you will open all 12 HCP hands but will occasionally open 10 or 11 HCP hands, then record 12 HCP here, but record elsewhere that hands with fewer points will be opened with compensating distributional values e.g. "Rule of 20"¹, or "3rd or 4th seat openings 10+". But having said that, it needs to be recognized by all players – partners and opponents – that everyone will occasionally fudge a point or two here and there.

Remember though that having something on your system card doesn't mean that's your system. If the card states that you open on 12 HCP, but the partnership frequently opens at the 1 level with 9 or 10 HCPs, then that's the system. It comes down to this: if you make an opening bid, and your partner can deduce that the HCP might be as low as 9,(or 10 or 11), then that's your system.

If you fail to describe your system to the opponents (either verbally or on your card), they may claim damage and the director has the power to adjust the score had the opponents been able to achieve a better score with full knowledge of your agreements.

Opening weak hands light

System disclosure is also important in describing the nature of your pre-emptive openings e.g. the 2-levels, Multi-2s or the 3-level long weak suits. The opponents are entitled to know the minimum HCP of these hands, and as with 1-level opening points, what's on the card is irrelevant if the partnership has a habit of opening very weak hands.

An important point though – if you open at the 2-level, and systemically (i.e. per the system card or by past experience) the low end of the range is less than 5 HCP, any conventional bids that may be available to partner will classify the system as Brown Sticker. A typical example is a 2NT bid after partner opens 2D in Multi-2s – this asks partner to describe their hand further, and as 2NT here is conventional (i.e. not natural), the system is Brown Sticker. The restrictions with Brown Sticker systems are not as severe as they are if you play a Yellow system, but your system card must disclose that it is Brown Sticker.

So, make sure your system card describes the possible range of your 2-level openings. Further, if your opening or jump overcall pre-emptive bids may be weaker than expected, or a 3-level bid may not hold the expected 7-card suit, these too should be on your system card.

¹ The "Rule of 20" states that if the sum of your HCPs and the length of your two longest suits reaches 20, then the hand can be opened at the 1 level. There's also a "Rule of 15" that says you add your HCPs and the length of your spade suit and if that reaches 15, the hand can be opened at the 1-level, (generally used for 4th seat openings).
