

Bidding balanced hands - Part 1

Introduction

For a given situation, balanced hands tend to be divided up into a series of contiguous high card point ("HCP") ranges. The call that you make with such a hand and the subsequent continuations are determined by the pre-defined range into which the hand in question falls.

That said, we should not slavishly assume that HCP are the beginning and end of hand evaluation. The true expected playing strength of one 14 HCP hand may be at least as good, or perhaps better, than another 15 HCP hand, and no experienced bridge player should have cause to complain if another's hand falls marginally outside the "designated" strength. This is a point worth stressing because inexperienced players tend, in my experience, to get disproportionately upset about minor digressions from stated definitions, concerning NT bids, when for no logical reason they tend to afford greater latitude in other sequences.

This is the first 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. I may touch on some of the original methods that I was taught as being the cornerstones of "stone-age" Acol, which are often still taught as basics to the beginners of today, in order to highlight some differences with my preferred methods, and illustrate why I have chosen to diverge from the original path. The purpose is more to get the reader to think about the issues, merits and costs of particular methods, rather than to ram any method down your throat as being superior. That said, I will add that my methods have a lot in common with the treatments adopted by many good players who have also migrated from stone-age Acol.

The different HCP ranges can be viewed as self-contained, isolated modules. Your scheme of responses to the 1NT opening bid, for example, does not have much impact on your scheme of continuations when opener is too strong to open 1NT, nor vice versa. That is not the whole picture but it serves for these purposes. In these two articles I choose to consider just two situations in uncontested auctions: The 2NT opening bid (in this article, specifically the 3C response) and (next article) handling the hand types whose strength falls between the 1NT opener and the 2NT opener, during which I hope to comment on some of the gains v losses compared with stone-age methods. The other ranges are of course worthy of consideration, but they will have to wait for another time, if ever.

The 2NT opener

The opening bid is defined by limitations on HCP and by limitations on distribution.

Limitations on HCP

In stone-age Acol the opener is 20-22 HCP. I have a preference for 21-22. What difference does a single point make? Not enough to make too big an issue about it. If

responder is distributional, the distinction is lessened. If responder is balanced the difference is more significant.

My objections to the "20-22" school are four-fold:

- 1) If responder would have passed 1-suit opener, the chances of making game are minimal opposite a 20 count opener.
- 2) By contrast, if responder has a hand that would pass a 20-22 count 2NT opener, then 2NT is likely to be at greater risk than 1-suit.
- 3) There is (virtually) no room to invite game (certainly not invite to 3N) opposite a 2N opener. When I open 1NT with 12-14, I tend to await sight of dummy with some trepidation after declining a 2NT game try with a 12 count. If I feel slightly uncomfortable opening 1NT with as little as a 3 point range, despite that there is room to invite in that case, I should expect to be less comfortable opening a non-forcing 2NT with the same breadth of HCP range and no room to invite. In the second article you will observe that in some circumstances I do use 2NT as wider than 2 HCP range, for which I will provide justification at that time.
- 4) If I open 1-suit with 20 HCP and responder does not pass, the subsequent continuations should be more accurate because of the additional bidding space. The 2NT opener is popularly dubbed "the slam-killer", because the preemptive effect that it has on your own side.

Before moving on from this subject, I should briefly mention the "Mexican 2D" opening bid. Not my favourite convention I nevertheless have to acknowledge that it is gaining in popularity among a number of players with far better pedigree than I. The opening bid is used to show a balanced hand that would otherwise open 1-suit and jump rebid to 2NT following a 1-suit response, ie typically about 18-19 HCP. This usage flies in the face of my (above) stated objections to including a 20 count in the 2NT opener. Its popularity derives from the ability then to adopt an artificial 2NT rebid having opened 1-suit. It also clears up some messy continuations after a 2-over-1 response in a system otherwise based on a strong 1NT opener. Perhaps if you take the trouble to optimise those continuations, the costs of forcing yourself to a high level with the 2D opener opposite a possible "bust" is less by comparison. But I believe that the margin of benefit is reduced in a weak 1NT system.

Limitations on distribution

Obviously balanced hands count. Factors that might influence a preference for opening NT (whether at the 1 level or 2 level, according to strength) v 1-suit on slightly less balanced hands (not in any order of priority) are

- 1) Desire to preempt opponents
(suggesting opening NT, a high priority at the 1 level, low at the 2 level)
- 2) Desire to conceal information from opponents
(suggesting opening NT)
- 3) Desire to place the declaration in a particular hand
(suggesting opening 2NT, but neutral when considering a (weak) 1NT)
- 4) Desire not to preempt your own side

(suggesting opening suit. If it were simply a question of avoiding missing a major suit fit, this issue would be of greater significance where the alternative is 1NT. But there are also numerous constructive auctions with slam aspirations where opening 2NT creates an awkward development when unsophisticated responses are employed)

5) Availability of a safe rebid

(broadly neutral over all where 1NT is considered - cases falling either way, but suggesting opening 2NT where that is an option)

6) Desire not to miss game

(suggesting opening 2NT, but neutral when considering 1NT)

Digressing for a moment, opinions vary on the merits of opening 1NT with a 5 card major, sometimes dependent on suit quality. Without any hard statistical data to support it I get the impression that 1NT tends to be a more popular choice of opener among better players. There is some empirical statistical evidence to suggest that this is marginally superior technique (following a Bridge Browser study of thousands of hands). It is easy to construct individual exceptions where opening 1NT loses out, but that should not cloud the bigger picture.

But even those who shy away from opening 1NT with a 5 card major will tend to relax that restriction when considering the 2NT opener, mainly because of factors 5 and 6 above.

So, any 4333, 4432 and 5332 shapes qualify.

Opening 6322 with a long minor is also normal, as is opening 5422 shape.

Responding to 2NT

Your responses could be extended to a situation in which you are too strong to open 2NT, but having rebid 2NT after initially opening (say) 2C. It is possible that there are some restrictions on opener's distributions and on responder's values and distributions, by the time you get to the 2NT rebid, and that may detract from the efficiency of using the same structure of responses.

Most systems of responses to 2NT involve the use of 3C as some sort of enquiry on Stayman-like principles. 3D and 3H are usually used as transfers, and thereafter methods diverge. A particular problem hand is one where responder has 5 Spades and 4 Hearts. The other way round (4 Spades and 5 Hearts) you could transfer to Hearts and continue with 3S, leaving open the option to play in 3NT (there being no guarantee of a fit). With 5-5 in the majors, you could transfer into Spades and bid 4H (possibly losing when opener had two doubletons in the majors, although even then a 5-2 fit may not be wrong). But with 5 Spades and 4 Hearts, a transfer to Spades leaves you with no safe continuation that leaves 3NT available on a misfit but still allows you to find a 4-4 Heart fit. One solution might be to use the 3S response to 2NT to show this hand type. But that is rather a waste of a valuable bid as alternative solutions are available.

2NT-3C

Whereas a 2C response to 1NT might be used as Stayman for 4 card majors, it is normal for the 3C response to 2NT to cater for finding opener's 5 card majors. It is

far from obvious whether you should look for opener's 5 card major just because as responder you have a 3 card major. The act of enquiring gives information to the defenders on those much more frequent occasions that there happen not to be a fit and you end in 3NT. As to whether you are better off in 4M than 3NT when opener has 5 in the major and responder has just 3 card support, this is also something on which I am unconvinced. If responder is 4333 shape then I tend to the view that 3NT is likely to be superior. There will be exceptions. Torbjorn Lindeloef ran a computer simulation in the 1980s in support of his (now out of print) book "Cobra" - a book about a strong club system that he had developed, containing some interesting (at the time) theories on hand evaluation and contract placement. Probably, if you have no other information, a 5-3 fit will on balance play better in 4M. This may be more pronounced where the long suit is held by responder. I shall outline here a 6 methods ranked (in my opinion) in ascending order of preference.

Method A - the classic 5 card major ("puppet") Stayman

2N-3C-3N = no major suit of 4 or more cards
2N-3C-3M = 5 cards in bid major
2N-3C-3D = No 5 card major, but unspecified 4 card major
2N-3C-3D-4D = 4 cards in both majors
2N-3C-3D-3N = No 4 card major (originally interested in 5 card major)
2N-3C-3D-3S = 4 card Heart suit,
2N-3C-3D-3H = 4 card Spade suit

Comments:

Fairly simple

The ordering of 2N-3C-3D-3H/3S adds a tiny bit of complexity, designed to maximise the frequency with which the declaration is placed in opener's hand.

If responder has slam interest with both majors, he might consider rebidding 3M after 2N-3C-3D, initially showing the other major, rather than rebidding 4D to show both. If you think about it there is never any ambiguity about the trump suit, but it does risk playing the hand by responder. That may be a price worth paying for the privilege of allowing responder to show a slam try (or opener to show slam-suitability) below game (by way of 4-minor cue bids). Alternatively he could still initially rebid 4D as scheduled, showing both majors, and follow up with another bid above game, which would also show a slam try, albeit at a cost of playing in a potentially risky 5 Major contract if the slam try is declined.

The method does not cope with the problem hand where responder holds 5 Spades and 4 Hearts, so that hand would require a separate dedicated response (3S?).

Method B - variation (1) on 5 card major Stayman

2N-3C-3N = fewer than 3 Spades and fewer than 4 Hearts
2N-3C-3M = 5 cards in bid major
2N-3C-3D = anything else
2N-3C-3D-3N = no 4 card major (originally interested in 5 card major)
2N-3C-3D-3M = 4(+) cards in bid major (bidding 3S denies 4 Hearts)
Natural continuations after 2N-3C-3D-3M, but note:
2N-3C-3D-3H-3N = no 4 card major, then
2N-3C-3D-3H-3N-4S = 5 Spades and 4 Hearts (confident of fit, see 2N-3C-3N)

Note that as responder with 5 Spades and 4 Hearts, respond 3C and then

(a) Pass over 3N

(b) raise 3M

(c) bid 3H (not 3S) over 3D (not intuitive).

With 5 Hearts and 4 Spades, do not respond 3C (transfer to H then bid 3S)

Comments:

Fairly simple and intuitive, as long as you don't forget to rebid 3N with 2-3 in Spades and Hearts.

Contract is played the wrong way up a lot of the time.

Avoids the need for a separate dedicated response when holding 5 Spades and 4 Hearts. Whether this is a price worth paying for the cost of wrong-siding the contract (contrasted with Method A) largely depends on how well you take advantage of the bidding space released in the other continuations (which in Method A are dedicated to the 5 Spade 4 Heart hand). If you make minimal use of the additional space then Method A is probably better, but I am certain that the potential for effective use of the other continuations, if fully utilised, more than compensates.

Method C - variation (2) on 5 card major Stayman

2N-3C-3N = fewer than 3 Spades and fewer than 4 Hearts

2N-3C-3M = 5 cards in bid major

2N-3C-3D = anything else

2N-3C-3D-3N = no 4 card major (originally interested in 5 card major)

2N-3C-3D-3S = 4 Hearts, fewer than 4 Spades

2N-3C-3D-3H = 4+Spades (does not deny Hearts)

2N-3C-3D-3H-4C+ = 4 Spades

2N-3C-3D-3H-3N = No 4 card major (then 4S by responder = 5th Spade, known fit)

2N-3C-3D-3H-3S = 4 Hearts, fewer than 4 Spades (thereafter natural)

Comments:

This is an evolution of (and similar to) Method B, but contains an attempt to get around the problems of wrong-siding the contract contained in Method B. In the process it loses a lot of simplicity and exposes you to lead-directing doubles. It is also not wholly effective in right-siding the contract, although in that regard it is an improvement on Method B.

This method has no advantages over Method F that follows below and which largely restores simplicity, reduces surplus information given to opponents and reduces exposure to lead-directing doubles. Method F is also more effective in right-siding the contract.

In summary, if the shortcomings of Method B are regarded as so great as to override the simplicity of that method, you might as well skip over method C in favour of D, E or F.

Method D - the "Hybrid"

This is a radical departure from 5 card major Stayman. Back in the good old days, the 3C response tended to be used in one of two methods: either it was normal Stayman

(none of that 5 card major nonsense) or it was Baron (requiring the natural bidding of 4+ card suits up the line by both parties). Scottish international Rob Sheehan wrote up a method that he had cooked up in collaboration with another player whose name I cannot recollect (I have a feeling it was Bob Rowlands), which was a hybrid of Stayman and Baron, hence its name:

2N-3C-4C+ = Hearts and Spades

2N-3C-3N = Clubs and Diamonds

2N-3C-3S = Clubs and Spades

2N-3C-3H = Clubs and Hearts

2N-3C-3D = anything else, that is to say: Diamonds and a Major, or just one suit.

2N-3C-3D-3N = NF, mild slam interest in Clubs (with no slam interest you would have responded 3N, and with a major you would still enquire)

2N-3C-3D-3S = Natural, no slam interest (perhaps mild slam interest opposite a Spade fit - plenty of room yet for opener to encourage below 4S).

2N-3C-3D-3H = Hearts or slam try.

2N-3C-3D-3H-4C+ = Hearts (use available bids below 4H to clarify whether 4 card Diamonds are held, or 5th Heart)

2N-3C-3D-3H-3N = just one (minor) suit

2N-3C-3D-3H-3S = Natural (one suit or with Diamonds as second suit)

You can swap some of the suits around "to taste" without affecting the general principles, except that opener's initial rebids beyond 3N must show both majors, and the "anchor" suit in the 3H/S/N rebids must be a minor.

Comments:

Fairly simple (with familiarity).

Not good at locating opener's 5 card major without committing beyond 3N (although still available if responder has a slam try).

Cannot cope with the hand where opener has 5 Spades and 4 Hearts, within the 3C initial response.

Otherwise, pretty strong in the field of slam investigation.

To respond 3C you must have a slam try or a 4 card major, so it is safe for opener to rebid beyond 3NT with both 4 card majors. Precisely how you divide up the 4 level rebids I leave as an exercise for the student.

I have played this method successfully for several years and am pretty comfortable with this, my second favourite response structure. For the most part I am content to give up on the 5 card major investigation, in favour of the enhanced slam investigation launchpad.

Method E - Hybrid revisited

Method D has one obvious inefficiency: Opener's 3H rebid has the potential to contain more hand types, because of the availability of 3S as an enquiry that does not commit beyond 3N on one of them. How about a slight variation on Method D:

2N-3C-4C+ = Hearts and Spades

2N-3C-3N = Clubs and Diamonds

2N-3C-3S = Clubs and Spades

2N-3C-3H = Clubs and Hearts or just Clubs
 2N-3C-3H-3S = 4 Hearts
 2N-3C-3H-3S-4C+ = 4 Hearts
 2N-3C-3H-3S-3N = just Clubs
 2N-3C-3D = anything else, that is to say: Diamonds and a Major, or just one suit (other than Clubs)
 2N-3C-3D-3N = NF, mild slam interest in Clubs (with no slam interest you would have responded 3N, and with a major you would still enquire)
 2N-3C-3D-3S = Natural, no slam interest (perhaps mild slam interest opposite a Spade fit - plenty of room yet for opener to encourage below 4S).
 2N-3C-3D-3H = Hearts or slam try.
 2N-3C-3D-3H-4C+ = Hearts (use available bids below 4H to clarify whether 4 card Diamonds are held, or 5th Heart)
 2N-3C-3D-3H-3N = just Diamonds
 2N-3C-3D-3H-3S = Natural (one suit or with Diamonds as second suit)

Comments:

Adds a whole level of complexity compared with Method D - but I think probably worth it. In fact while Method F is I think a clear winner over Method D, I think that the superiority of Method F over Method E is less clearcut. I have only just thought up Method E while writing this article and have not had a chance to test it in the field. But I like what I see. Anyway, for the time being moving on:

Method F - 5 card major Stayman revisited

2N-3C-3N = 4-4 in the majors, then 4D/4H = transfer, 4C = slam try (doubleton? controls?)
 2N-3C-3S = 5 card Spade suit
 2N-3C-3H = 4 or 5 Hearts, fewer than 4 Spades, then 3S asks for 5th heart (3N denies)
 2N-3C-3D = anything else, namely fewer than 5 Spades and fewer than 4 Hearts
 2N-3C-3D-3N = to play - heard enough
 2N-3C-3D-3S = 4 Spades and 5 Hearts
 2N-3C-3D-3H = asks after Spade length.
 2N-3C-3D-3H-4C+ = 4 Spades
 2N-3C-3D-3H-3N = 2 Spades
 2N-3C-3D-3H-3S = 3 Spades

Comments:

This method caters for responder having 5 Spades and 4 Hearts, within the 3C response. If opener rebids anything other than 3D, you have immediately found a fit. If opener rebids 3D, you enquire after Spade length (3H), and opener's rebid will then confirm or deny a Spade fit without committing beyond 3N on a misfit. Over opener's initial 3D rebid, responder also bids 3H to enquire after a 4-4 Spade fit if interested. 3H might also be used on a general slam try that can afford to go beyond 3N opposite any shape.

This method also caters for responder holding 4 Spades and 5 Hearts, within the 3C response. The priority is not so acute, as this hand type can be handled with safety via an initial transfer to 3H. However as the sequence 2N-3C-3D-3S is otherwise

redundant it seems sensible to slot that hand type in here and free up the other continuations.

This method guarantees finding any major suit fit to be had except where responder has a 5 card major and not precisely 4 in the other (for which see other responses), and it virtually guarantees that the contract will be played by opener. The exception is where responder has 4 Spades and 5 Hearts, and opener has 4 card Spade support, fewer than 4 Hearts, and elects to play in Spades (2N-3C-3D-3S-4S).

This method goes some way toward minimising extraneous information provided to the defenders which is of no interest to responder in investigating the correct contract. Remembering the 2N-3C-3D-3S sequence is a bit non-intuitive and therefore something of a strain on memory. The same applies to the ordering of opener's second rebid following 2N-3C-3D-3H, which is designed to ensure that opener declares.

Higher level responses to 2N (ie other than 3C response)

I do not intend to discuss other responses in detail, in this article, but pass some general comments.

There are some who use 2N-3S as a transfer to 3N. Supposedly this provides additional bidding space, as a hand that wishes to play in 3N can be combined with other hand types contained within 3S. The direct 3N response is then freed up for artificial use. Personally I think that the benefits of a 3S transfer are at best marginal. Perhaps the least significant objection is the possibility of forgetting the system. It goes without saying that if you are prone to forgetting it you should not be playing it. Next in line of objections is your vulnerability to a lead-directing double of 3S. This can be a 2-edged sword: Opening leader may have found the Spade lead without the double, which then may guide you away from a failing 3N. The double may also help you to play the hand, wherever you end up. That said, exposure to a lead-directing double is on balance a negative aspect. But my main objection is that 3S is of more use if the following 3N rebid by opener is optional, being one of a choice of rebids and conveys some information about opener's hand, which it would not do if 3NT were a forced rebid.

Although not keen on a 3S transfer I am more sympathetic to an artificial 3NT raise (which need not be forcing). Any raise to 3N that wishes to play there CAN be bid via 3C. The cost is increased disclosure of information to the defenders, as well as a risk of lead-directing doubles, and that (significant) cost has to be weighed against the benefit to be had in an artificial 3NT raise, having regard also to the frequencies of events.

If adopting "Method F" use of 3C response, all other non-slamgoing hands (as well as several slam-going hands) can be included in the 3D response (ie discarding normal major suit transfers) and still force opener to be the declarer. Although I do not expand on those sequences in this article it would effectively mean that all responses higher than 3D would promise a slam try, as well as including certain slam try hands in both the 3C and 3D responses. Making full use of the available bidding space within that context goes quite a way to overcoming the "slam-killer" reputation of the 2NT opener.

If sticking with transfers into the Majors, you might use 3S response to show slam interest in a minor (both minors?) where 3C is a 5 card major Stayman variant, or use 3S to show 5 Spades and 4 Hearts if using the "Method D or E" Hybrid-style 3C response (with a minor suit slam try you would normally start with 3C in that event, opener's rebids being useful to that investigation).

Playing "Method F" 3C response structure, the transfer sequence 2N-3D-3H-3S becomes redundant as a method of showing 4 Spades and 5 Hearts (contained within the 3C response). It seems fairly elegant to use the sequence to show 5-5 in the majors. The problem with this use is that it dedicates a fairly low level sequence to describe an infrequent hand type, which is inefficient. However the hands with 5-5 in the majors are otherwise difficult to handle: 2N-3H(tfr)-3S-4H would be non-forcing (being game), so responder is left with a problem if wishing to force. Added to which, opener MIGHT have just 2-2 in the majors and prefer to play in 3NT, an option that remains open after 2N-3D-3H-3S but not after 2N-3H-3S-4H.

Incidentally, if you do play a method where you start with 2N-3H-3S transfer when responder has 5-5 in the majors, then perhaps opener's rebids should be re-transfers, thus:

2N-3H-3S-4H = Spades + Clubs

2N-3H-3S-4D = Spades + Hearts

2N-3H-3S-4C = Spades + Diamonds.

This has two advantages over natural rebids:

- (1) It gets a minor suit contract played by opener, and
- (2) It allows you to show a Heart suit in one bid, whether responder has slam interest or not, without concerns about a natural 4H rebid being passed.

A final miscellaneous point about transfers into the majors: Rejecting the transfer normally shows a well fitting hand, confirming responder's major as trumps. This general principle holds true after a 3-level transfer over 2NT as it does after a 2-level transfer over 1NT. However, where you would normally require 4 card trump support to reject the transfer after 1NT, a good hand in context should reject the transfer on many occasions with just 3 card support following a 3-suit transfer response to 2NT.

There is one common exception to the rule that a rejection of a transfer shows a good fit, and this only applies following a 2NT opener (ie not after 1NT): The cheapest rejection, ie 2N-3D-3S or 2N-3H-3N, is reserved to show doubleton support for responder and 5 cards in the other major (usually 5332 with two x 3 card minors). This bid carries some risk, principally that responder might have been attempting to sign off in a major suit partscore, and by rejecting the transfer you may be forcing the auction too high. That potential cost has to be weighed against the benefit of potentially finding a 5-3 fit in the other major, which would otherwise be lost. Furthermore, responder could pass 3S with a partial Spade fit after 2N-3D-3S, when his initial intention might have been to play in 3H, so the damage in that event may be lessened. Weak take-out responses to 2N are sufficiently rare that the benefit of this treatment is the decider.

Although contested auctions are not the subject of this article, the prospect of a contested auction should never be dismissed in deciding your methods. Vulnerability and method of scoring are factors that affect the likelihood (and likely nature) of a

contested auction, but following a 2NT opener the most common intervention is the lead-directing double, and it would be criminal to fail to prepare for that. One simple technique (following a double) is to redouble with a stack (suggesting to play), pass with a guard, and make your normal bid without a guard. After a pass, partner then redoubles to require you to make the bid that you would have made without the double. This general agreement could be extended to a wide variety of situations in which the opponents make a natural lead-directing double. If you find it easier to remember, you could swap around the bids, provided that you are consistent (although with a stack and contract suggestion you would obviously have to choose between pass and redouble, not a direct bid).

That's it for this session.