

## Constructive Auctions After a Major Suit Opening Bid - Part 1 of 2

This is the third tutorial of a 5 lesson series on the Fundamentals of Constructive Bidding. Constructive bidding is defined as auctions with no interference by the opponents.

The purpose of these lessons is for students to learn the concepts behind constructive bidding. I have found that, although many students understand the (often complicated) rules about bidding, they do not understand the reasoning behind these rules. By learning the fundamentals rather than just the rules, a student will be able to more intuitively and comfortably bid, without being confused by the many (sometimes conflicting) rules that may or may not apply. Note that these lessons will not teach any particular system. It will simply teach the fundamentals upon which most bidding systems are built. A student should therefore be able to more comfortably play any of the popular systems.

The series consists of 5 lessons;

- Introduction to Constructive Bidding
- No Trump Auctions
- Major Suit Auctions Part 1 (this lesson)
- Major Suit Auctions Part 2
- Minor Suit Auctions

This lesson and the next lesson will discuss constructive auctions when the opener has started with 1♥ or 1♠. In this lesson, Part 1, we will discuss responder's options with support for the opener's suit (3 or more cards in the suit). The next lesson, Part 2, will discuss the more complex auctions that result when responder does not have support.

In all of these lessons, I will assume the reader uses basic hand evaluation techniques. That is, he or she uses the standard 4-3-2-1 method for counting HCP and makes small adjustments for either shortness or length. I now teach, and prefer, the more accurate Bergen methodology, but, because it is not familiar to everyone, I will not use it in these lessons.

### Introduction

With support for opener's major, responder has a very simple objective -- just deciding whether or not the final contract should be game (4♥ or 4♠). If you have 3 or more cards in opener's major suit, that is the suit you should play in, and it is up to you to keep the auction simple and ensure that the final contract is in that suit.

Recall that opener's hand falls in one of 3 categories:

1. minimum (12-14 points)
2. medium (15-17 points)
3. maximum (18+ points)

Similarly, responder's hand falls in one of 3 categories:

1. minimum (6-8 points)
2. medium (9-11 points)
3. maximum (12+ points)

Below is the table that I presented which summarizes when to bid game:

|           | Opener  |        |         |
|-----------|---------|--------|---------|
| Responder | Minimum | Medium | Maximum |
| Minimum   | No      | No     | Yes     |
| Medium    | No      | Yes    | Yes     |
| Maximum   | Yes     | Yes    | Yes     |

## The Law of Total Tricks

The Law of Total Tricks is a fairly easy and extremely important concept that every player should know.

Simply put, the Law of Total Tricks states that you are safe in bidding to the level equal to the number of trumps you have. So, for example, if you have a 9 card fit, you are safe in bidding to the 3 level (9 tricks). Similarly, with a 10 card fit, you are safe in bidding to the 4 level (10 tricks).

Notice that the Law does not mention high card points. That is because, even if you go down, the contract is almost always a good sacrifice against whatever the opponents can make. The Law is very accurate and should be followed on all hands. Sometimes it goes against your intuition, but, in my experience, you should strictly follow the Law.

Note that the Law specifies the minimum level to which you should bid. Even with an 8 card fit, if you have enough points to bid game, you should still bid game, which is a 10 trick contract.

## Responses with 5+ card support

If you have 5 or more cards in opener's suit, you are guaranteed to have at least a 10 card fit (since opener guarantees a 5 card major).

Most of the time, you should simply bid 4 of the major (even with 0 points!). This gets you where you want to go quickly, and makes it very difficult for the opponents to bid. This is very much in line with the Law of Total Tricks.

The only exception to this rule is that you may want to proceed more methodically if, as responder, you have a medium or maximum hand with 5 card support. In that case, slam is possible, so you might want to proceed more methodically.

To summarize, a jump to 4 of the major shows 5 card support and 0 - 9 points. Opener must pass, as responder is saying he has a weak hand with long trumps, and there is little chance of making slam.

## Responses with 4 card support (Basic)

In this section, I will discuss the basic responses you should make if partner opens 1 of a major and you have exactly 4 card support. In the next section I will discuss a more advanced set of responses that a more experienced partnership might want to adopt.

For illustration purposes, assume partner has opened 1♠ and you, as responder, have exactly 4 spades. The possible auctions are very simple:

1. With a minimum hand, bid 2♠. Opener should bid 4♠ with a maximum hand.
2. With a medium hand, bid 3♠. This is known as a "limit raise." Originally, a jump to 3 guaranteed an opening hand, but modern bidding methods use limit raises. Opener should bid 4 with a medium or maximum opening hand, or with 6 or more trumps (since the partnership is known to have a 10 card fit), or with any hand containing a singleton or void.
3. With a maximum hand, bid 2NT. This is a conventional bid that shows 4+ card support and a maximum hand. Many people play this as the "Jacoby 2NT" convention. If you play that convention, then the subsequent auction can get fairly complex. If you are a less experienced player, I suggest you simply bid naturally after the 2NT response, rather than bothering with the conventional responses. You definitely should not jump to 4 of the major, since, as discussed above, that is a pre-emptive bid that promises 5 or more trumps, no more than 9 points, and no slam interest.

With a minimum hand, opener should bid 4 of the major. With a medium hand, opener should consider exploring for slam. If opener has a maximum hand, slam is likely, so opener should assume their side will be in slam unless he discovers that they have two probable losers.

## Responses with 4 card support (Advanced)

It turns out that if the partnership has a 9 card fit, that is significantly better than an 8 card fit, even with the same (or even slightly fewer) points. On most hands, you will take at least one more trick as declarer with a 9 card fit than you will with the same high cards and an 8 card fit.

Marty Bergen, a well know bridge player and teacher, thought this concept was so significant that he came up with a set of bids to precisely describe your strength when you have a 9 card fit in a major. His system is known as Bergen Raises, and is very popular with many advanced bridge players.

Bergen Raises work as follows:

1. An immediate raise to 3 is a weak bid, showing 4 or 5 points at most and 4 card support. Note that this is consistent with the Law of Total Tricks because with a 9 card fit it is safe to bid to the 3 level. You can think of this bid as similar to bidding 4 with 5 card support. It preempts the oponents, making it hard for them to get to the correct contract. Opener should virtually always pass the raise to 3, unless he has a six card suit (and hence a 10 card fit, making 4 the correct contract using the Law of Total Tricks).
2. With 4 card support and a good 6 to a bad 9 points, responder bids 3♣. This is a completely artificial bid, saying nothing about clubs. Opener should raise to 4 with a six card suit, a maximum opener, or a medum opener with a singleton or void.
3. With 4 card support and a medium hand, responder bids 3♦. Again, this is a completely artificial bid, saying nothing about diamonds. Opener shoud raise to 4 with a six card suit, any medium or maximum hand, or a minimum hand with a singleton or void.
4. With 4 card support and a maximum hand responder bids 2NT (same as above). This establishes a game force.

With 4 card support, you must always make a Bergen Raise. If responder does not make a Bergen Raise immediately, he is denying 4 card support.

Note that if you play Bergen raises, and responder raises opener's major to the 2 level, that shows exactly 3 card support. That is very useful for opener, as it allows him to precisely apply the Law of Total Tricks in determining how high to compete.

Some people reverse the meaning of 3♣ and 3♦, such that 3♣ shows a stronger hand than 3♦. The reason is this gives you more room to explore for game with a limit raise, as you are more likely to want to explore for game with a limit raise than the weaker raise. That treatment is known as "Reverse Bergen".

## Responses with 3 card support

For illustration purposes, assume partner has bid 1♥ and you, as responder, have exactly 3 hearts.

1. With a minium hand, bid 2♥ (even if you have 4 or more spades). With a weak hand, it is better to let partner know immediately that you have a fit, and to raise the bidding a level to make it harder for the opponents to compete. Opener should bid 4♥ with a maximum hand.
2. With a medium hand, bid a new suit (remember, a new suit forces opener to bid again). If opener's next bid shows a minimum hand, jump to 3♥ (e.g., 1♥-2♣-2♦-3♥). If opener's next bid shows a medium or better hand, jump to 4♥ (e.g., 1♥-2♦-2♠-4♥).
3. With a maximum hand, bid a new suit and then jump to 4♥.

## Quiz

Your partner opens 1♥. What do you bid with each of the following hands?

1. ♠ xxxxx  
♥ Kxxx  
♦ x  
♣ xxx

Pass. You have less than 6 points.

Some people who play Bergen Raises and are aggressive bidders would bid 3♥ (showing less than six points and 4 card support). The singleton diamond is an attractive feature to this hand.

2. ♠ xxxx  
♥ Kxxxx  
♦ x  
♣ xxx

4♥.

Even though you have less than 6 points, you have at least a 10 card fit. This pre-empts the opponents, making it hard for them to bid. At worst, this will be a good sacrifice.

3. ♠ Kxxxx  
♥ Kxx  
♦ xxx  
♣ xx

2♥.

You have a minimum hand and 3 card support. This is the best description of your hand, and makes it easiest for partner to judge whether or not to bid further. It also mildly pre-empts your opponent. There really is no reason to bid 1♠.

4. ♠ xxx  
♥ KQxx  
♦ Jxxxx  
♣ x

2♥.

You have a minimum hand. However, this is a much better hand than the previous hand. If partner invites to game by bidding 3♥ or a new suit, you should accept.

If you play Bergen Raises, then you should bid 3♣, showing 6-8 points and 4 card support.

5. ♠ KQxxx  
♥ KQxx  
♦ xx  
♣ xx

3♥.

You have a medium hand and 4 trump. A bid of 2NT (4 trump and a maximum hand) is too aggressive. If you bid 1♠, followed by 3♥, partner will play you for 3 trumps (see next hand), and may not bid game when it should be bid. If you play Bergen Raises, you should bid 3♦ (medium hand with 4 card support).

6. ♠ KQxxx  
 ♥ KQx  
 ♦ xxx  
 ♣ xx

1♠.

You have a medium hand and 3-card support, so you must bid a new suit. Remember, partner must bid again since a new suit by responder is forcing. You will then bid 3♥ over whatever partner bids (e.g., 1♥-1♠-1NT-3♥). This sequence shows a medium hand and 3 trumps.

7. ♠ KQxx  
 ♥ Kxxx  
 ♦ Axx  
 ♣ xx

A classic 2NT bid (maximum hand with 4 trumps). Remember, 2NT does not indicate a desire to play in NT. Partner is obligated to bid 4♥ or try for a heart slam.

8. ♠ Kxx  
 ♥ Kxxxx  
 ♦ QJxx  
 ♣ x

This is a problem hand if you do not play Bergen Raises. You want to make sure you play in game. Your best bid is 4♥, showing a hand with 5 card support and no slam interest. However, occasionally, if partner has a very good 1♥ opener, you might miss a slam.

If you play Bergen Raises, this hand is easier to describe. You bid 3♦, showing a medium hand and 4 card support. Even if partner bids 3♥, you will raise to 4♥. This sequence shows a hand not quite good enough for a 2NT bid, but good enough to insist on game. It is often done with a hand like this, a medium hand with 5 card support.

In these next set of hands, you have opened 1♥ and your partner has responded 2♥. What is your next bid?

1. ♠ AQxx  
 ♥ KJxxx  
 ♦ Kx  
 ♣ xx

Pass.

You have a minimum opener. Partner has 6-8 points. Game is not possible.

2. ♠ xxx  
 ♥ AKJxxx  
 ♦ Axx  
 ♣ x

Pass.

Although this is a bit better than the previous hand, game is still very unlikely.

3. ♠ xxx  
♥ AKJxxx  
♦ AQx  
♣ x

3♦.

Try for game by bidding 3♦. Partner should accept with 8 points or 7 points and diamond cards (e.g., the K, or J10).

4. ♠ Kxx  
♥ AKQxx  
♦ QJxx  
♣ x

4♥.

A bit aggressive, but, as opener, you have close to a maximum hand, and game will make most of the time. If playing with an aggressive partner who sometimes bids 2♥ with 4-5 points, make a game try by bidding 3♦.

5. ♠ KJxx  
♥ AQxxx  
♦ Ax  
♣ Kx

4♥.

Game is virtually assured unless you encounter some unusual breaks.

On this next set of hands, you have opened 1♠ and partner has responded 3♠, showing a medium hand with 4 card spade support. What is your next bid?

1. ♠ AJxxx  
♥ KJxx  
♦ Kx  
♣ xx

Pass.

You have a minimum.

2. ♠ AJxxxx  
♥ KJx  
♦ Kx  
♣ xx

4♠.

Even though you have a minimum, you have a 10 card fit. Pass is possible, but conservative.

3. ♠ AJxxx  
♥ KJxx  
♦ Kxx  
♣ x

4♠

Even though you have a minimum, you should bid game over a limit raise whenever you have a singleton or void.

4. ♠ AQxxx  
♥ KQxx  
♦ Ax  
♣ xx

4♠

You have a medium hand, and will make game more often than not.