Lesson 6 by Roger Lord

Strong Balanced Opening Bids

The term "balanced" pertains to a 13-card hand with a distribution consisting of 4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, or 5-3-3-2, in any suits. The term "semi-balanced" pertains to a hand with 5-4-2-2 or 6-3-2-2. The "strong" balanced and semi-balanced opening bids discussed here comprise ranges from 18 to 37.

The lowest range for natural opening bids that fit in the strong category is 18 through a square 20, or 17 with a good five-card suit. With these hands, we open one of a minor with three or more cards, or one of a major with five or more cards. Responder (opener's partner) bids at the one-level if he has as much as six HCP, or an ace and a jack, or a king-queen in one suit. Over a response of one of a suit, opener jumps to two notrump, with certain exceptions. Over a response of one notrump, responder either bids two notrump or, with a maximum, jumps to three notrump.

Standard procedure mandates that subsequent bidding is natural, although there are several conventions and more homemade treatments in use by partnerships. Responder may pass over opener's two notrump. Any bid he makes is forcing. Responder's rebid of his own major shows five or more, is unlimited, and searches for a 5-3 fit. The rebid of a new suit searches for a 4-4 fit, and if the suit is a minor, it may be part of a slam auction. See the examples on following pages.

By the way, a double-jump rebid by opener to three notrump (for example, one diamond – one heart – three notrump) is intended to play there, with a source of tricks (a long running suit), but with no fit for partner (in fact, possibly with a singleton in responder's suit).

The next range is 20 good HCP through 22. With these hands, the opening bid is two notrump. Responder may pass, or get to game with any five points or with an ace. With no five or four of a major, responder bids three notrump (through a square 11 HCP), or four notrump (a good 11 or any 12, quantitative, invitational, not forcing), or, with more, Gerber four clubs or some forcing sequence.

Holding a five-card or longer major, responder transfers (three diamonds for hearts or three hearts for spades), regardless of strength. When opener accepts the transfer (bids three of the major), responder may pass with a bad hand, so opener should jump to game (or cuebid) with a maximum and a good fit. Any non-game rebid by responder is natural and forcing. Instead, if responder rebids three notrump, opener passes with two of the major, or goes to four of the major with three or more.

An initial jump to four diamonds is a transfer to four hearts, or a jump to four hearts is a transfer to four spades. Opener will either pass or bid Blackwood. A slower sequence – a three-level transfer followed by game in the major – shows six or more of the major and is a slam invitation.

Holding a four-card major and game-going values, responder says three clubs, Stayman, over which opener bids 3 diamonds to deny a major, or names the major (hearts first with both). After three diamonds, or after three of the non-fitting major, responder bids some number of notrump, unless responder has a five-card major to show. After opener's three hearts and responder's three notrump, opener goes to four spades with 4-4 in the majors.

It is possible for responder to bid Stayman followed by four of a minor, which would be natural, with five or more of the minor, and a try for slam.

Another initial response to two notrump is three spades, "minor suit Stayman," showing both minor suits and investigating slam. In reply, opener may bid his better minor, or he may simply say three notrump with a drab hand.

The next range is 22 good HCP through 24. Opener starts with two clubs, responder says two diamonds, and opener rebids two notrump. From there, all sequences described above for two notrump opening bids are available for the higher notrump range.

The simplified treatment for a balanced hand with 25 or more HCP is to start with two clubs and, over two diamonds, to rebid three notrump (25-26) or four notrump (27-28) or five notrump (29-30). The cheapest bid of clubs by responder would be Stayman. The cheapest bid of diamonds or hearts would be transfers. This method is far from ideal. There are superior systems available, where some bids have artificial meanings.

Below are some example hands to bid, with explanations.

1. Opener: SA3 HQJ4 DAQJ97 CKJ10

Opener Responder 1 Diamond 1 Spade

2 Notrump ?

Opener shows 18 or 19 or a bad 20 HCP.

Opener: S 3 H QJ4 D AKQ972 C KJ10Opener Responder1 Diamond 1 Spade3 Notrump ?

This double jump to three notrump is meant to end the auction unless responder's hand warrants a try for six diamonds or six notrump. Opener is not interested in responder's choosing a spade contract.

Note: The following hands are responder's hands.

3. Responder: K107 H KQ872 D 106 C 853
Opener Responder
1 Diamond 1 Heart
2 Notrump 3 Hearts

This three heart rebid asks opener whether he holds three-card heart support. If opener holds two hearts, he bids three notrump; if opener holds three hearts, he goes to four hearts or cuebids another suit.

4. Responder: S Q743 H AJ109 D 7 C Q1054
 Opener Responder
 1 Diamond 1 Heart
 2 Notrump 3 Spades

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This auction shows 4-4 in the majors. Responder is searching for a 4-4 spade fit (he has already found out that there is no 4-4 heart fit).

Responder: S KQ64 H J9542 D Q42 C 8
 Opener Responder
 1 Diamond 1 Heart
 2 Notrump 3 Hearts
 3 Spades 4 Spades

Responder's three hearts shows five cards, after which he raises opener's spade suit.

6. Responder: S 9 H AK103 D 842 C A10874
Opener Responder
1 Club 1 Heart
2 Notrump 3 Clubs
3 Diamonds 3 Hearts
3 Spades 6 Clubs

Responder bids one heart, then raises his partner's clubs. After three honor-showing bids, responder can confidently go to six clubs. Don't even consider removing the final bid to six notrump!

7. Responder: S A1053 H 75 D Q10763 42
Opener Responder
2 Notrump 3 Clubs
3 Hearts 3 Notrump
4 Spades Pass

When you bid Stayman over 2 notrump, you always have at least one four-card major. Therefore, after first bidding hearts, opener knows to go to four spades over your three notrump.

8. Responder: S 8 H QJ82 D 75 C AQ10743
Opener Responder
2 Notrump 3 Clubs
3 Spades 4 Clubs

Responder first looks for a heart fit, then shows his club suit. We strongly recommend that in this and similar sequences, the bid of four clubs not be Gerber. Not only will Gerber interfere with showing clubs, but also it is bound to cause a mix-up at some time. Gerber should be used only to ask for aces immediately over opener's first notrump bid.

9. Responder: S 97 H A10764 D Q65 C 1082Opener Responder2 Notrump 3 Diamonds3 Hearts 3 Notrump

Opener will choose between three notrump and four hearts.

10. Responder: Q10654 H 3 D 852 C 10765Opener Responder2 Notrump 3 Hearts3 Spades Pass

You're probably better off playing three spades than two notrump. If opener has a great hand with four spades, he should bypass three spades and get to game even though his partner might be about to pass. For example, opener might hold S AJ92 H A73 D KQ107 C AK.

11. Responder: S J54 H Q75 D A10643 C A2
Opener Responder
2 Notrump 4 Notrump
5 Clubs 5 Diamonds

?

Responder makes a quantitative slam try. Opener's five clubs says that his hand was good enough to continue, and he bids clubs to suggest playing six clubs. Responder doesn't fit clubs, but maybe partner fits diamonds, so he bids that suit. Opener then places the contract.

12. Responder: S 107 H 852 D 98653 C K92
Opener Responder
2 Clubs 2 Diamonds
2 Notrump 3 Notrump

That king is all you need to bid game over opener's 23-24 or a good 22 HCP.

13. Responder: S KJ8652 H 95 D 62 C 532
Opener Responder
2 Notrump 4 Hearts
4 Spades Pass

The jump transfer is used either to sign off or to follow up with Blackwood. With a hand which is worth a slam invitation but not a slam force, responder first bids three hearts to transfer, then four spades to confirm the slam try in spades.

14. Responder: S QJ762 H K10985 D 4 C 87
Opener Responder
2 Notrump 3 Hearts
3 Spades 4 Hearts

The second bid of four hearts by responder is natural, showing five hearts along with the five spades. On a hand with five spades and only four hearts, responder starts with Stayman rather than with a transfer.