

MY SYSTEM

THE UNBALANCED DIAMOND



MARSHALL MILES

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



In bidding diagrams, I have adopted the following standard notation: 1M means one of either major; 3m means three of either minor; 4x means four of any (new) suit. In text, $1\diamond-(1\spadesuit)-1NT$ means that after a $1\diamond$ opening, opener's LHO overcalls $1\spadesuit$, and opener's partner bids 1NT. In contrast, $1\diamond-1\spadesuit; 1NT$ is an uninterrupted auction where the response to $1\diamond$ is $1\spadesuit$, and opener rebids 1NT.

You will undoubtedly find some of the concepts inherent in the System unfamiliar. However, the entire system uses General Chart treatments which, according to ACBL regulations, must be allowed in all ACBL sanctioned tournaments (other than in events with an upper restriction of 20 or fewer masterpoints and events for which the ACBL conditions of contest state otherwise). Where strict adherence to the System would take you beyond the General Chart, I have indicated this in the text, and offered an alternative treatment. Note, though, that many basic sequences will require alerts and explanations to your opponents.

THE SYSTEM



No doubt you are starting to read this book because you are anxious to learn all about my recommended system, the Unbalanced Diamond, so that you can return better armed to the tournament arena. Patience: I will furnish all the details regarding what various bids mean in this system shortly. My purpose now is to explain the bidding philosophy.

If you have read any of my previous books on bidding, you will know that I have long favored a forcing club system as the optimum approach. There are a number of reasons for this, but one of the most compelling is that other opening bids are thereby constrained to a much smaller range of strength than is the case in standard systems.

There are many advantages to having an opening bid describe your hand within narrow limits in terms of both high-card strength and distribution. If the opponents preempt or make a simple overcall at the two-level, partner can make far better decisions in a limited framework than if you are playing so-called Standard. Even when the opponents do not compete, your bidding is easier when both of you know early on whether a game or slam is likely or almost impossible.

Let's look at an example of what the lack of such definition can lead to. One of the worst sequences in Standard bridge is:

Opener

1♦
2♣

Responder

1♥ or 1♠

The range for this sequence is roughly 11 to 19 HCP, and opener may have six diamonds and four clubs:

♠ A7 ♥ 9 ♦ AJ6532 ♣ AKJ5

(because the diamond *suit* is too weak to jump in and the *hand* is too strong to rebid 2♦), or he can have several other distributions: 6-6, 6-5, 5-5, 5-4. Some experts can even be 4-5: they bid this way on a hand like

♠ xx ♥ Kx ♦ AK10x ♣ Qxxxx

which is far too weak for a reverse and on which they don't really want to open 1♣ and rebid 2♣. Hands for this sequence can vary in high-card strength from 11 HCP

♠ Kx ♥ x ♦ AQxxx ♣ Q10xxx

to 19 HCP

♠ A ♥ KJ ♦ AQxxx ♣ AJxxx

Some players might jump to 3♣ with the latter hand, but most would not, since you need a lot of strength to make eleven tricks in a minor, and this hand doesn't look appealing for notrump.

Given the incredible variation in these possible hands for opener for this simple sequence, you can only pity responder when he holds something like

♠ Kxxxx ♥ J10x ♦ J ♣ KJxx

Opener

1♦
2♣

Responder

1♠
?

Should he raise clubs to avoid the risk of missing game, or should he pass, because game is unlikely? And if responder raises to 3♣, should opener bid 3NT with 14 points or so and a stopper in the unbid major? Or does opener need 15? Or 16? Or 17? When responder has 8 or 9 points, should he take a false preference to 2♦ with something like

♠ Axxxx ♥ Kxx ♦ Jx ♣ Jxx

to give opener another chance when he holds a strong hand? I think he should, but that can work out very badly, especially if opener can have four diamonds and five clubs with a minimum opening bid.

The Unbalanced Diamond, hereafter referred to for convenience as ‘the System’, avoids these and similar problems in other wide-range Standard sequences, such as

Opener

1♣

1♠

Responder

1♥

which may show a balanced 12 points or an unbalanced 11 to 19. Some players, who always bid ‘up the line’, might have 4-3-3-3 distribution while others would guarantee at least four clubs.

In the System, your normal range for opening 1♠ is 10-14 HCP; a 1♥ opening can be slightly stronger (10-15). Just as in Precision, when partner opens 1♥ and you hold any of the following hands

1) ♠ x ♥ KJxx ♦ Kx ♣ Qxxxxx

2) ♠ Kx ♥ Qxxxx ♦ x ♣ xxxxxx

3) ♠ Kxxx ♥ Qxx ♦ AQxx ♣ KJ

you should bid 4♥. Opposite the first two hands with a near minimum, but well-fitting opening bid, partner could easily make game. Give partner something like

♠ Axx ♥ Q10xxx ♦ AJxx ♣ x

opposite the first hand or

♠ Qxx ♥ AKxxx ♦ 10xx ♣ Kx

opposite the second, and you may make game when the opponents can make a game of their own; at worst you will be taking a very cheap sacrifice. Even when the hands don’t fit so well, and you are down one or two, the opponents can probably make a partscore at the three-level or a game of their own. However it works out, you would like partner to play 4♥, preferably

undoubled, with the first two hands. With the third hand, a slam is extremely unlikely when partner has a maximum of 15 points, so again you simply bid 4♥ over 1♥. If the opponents double your 4♥ bid or bid over it, you can probably get a better score defending a doubled contract than by just making 4♥ (and you are not *certain* that you can make 4♥), so you hope they will compete. Nor are you likely to miss a slam opposite a hand in the 10-15 point range (10-14 with a six-card heart suit). When you bid the same way with all three hands, the opponents have some very difficult decisions to make. Should they compete or not?

If you bid this way, then not only do you give the opponents problems in the auction, you also give them problems on opening lead and sometimes later in the defense — especially as compared to standard sequences like

Opener

- 1♠
- 2♥
- 3♠

Responder

- 2♦
- 2♠
- 4♠

When both dummy's and declarer's hands are balanced, passive defense is often best. If there is no long suit in dummy to establish, the opponents can afford to wait for their tricks while declarer has to guess which finesses to take. If either hand is distributional, especially when the dummy has a long suit, it usually pays for the defenders to lead aggressively so as to take or establish their winners before declarer can discard them on the long suit. But if you bid many of your game hands the same way, they have tougher guesses on opening lead.

However, there are only a limited number of bids available. In order to make your opening bids, especially in the majors, narrowly defined as to strength and distribution, it is necessary to make some of your minor-suit bids more ambiguous. I think the system described here is a good compromise.

In order to narrow the limits on opening bids, we use an artificial 1♣ opening, quite similar to a Precision 1♣, but with one main difference: it has an upper limit (with a few exceptions mentioned later) as well as a lower limit. Playing a strong club leaves the 1♦ opening with the burden of showing hands with which standard players would open 1♣ as well as hands with which they would open 1♦. Part of that burden is relieved by playing a weak

notrump: this covers all minimum balanced hands without a five-card major. Consequently a 1♦ opening not only shows a hand too weak to open 1♣ (or one of the other strong bids), but it also shows an unbalanced hand without a five-card major.

Nevertheless, in all strong club systems it is necessary to open 1♦ on some hands where standard players would open 1♣. In Precision, most people play that a 1♦ opening can be made with as few as two diamonds. Others even open 1♦ with a void (with 4-4-0-5 distribution). In other words, the latter treat an opening 1♦ bid as showing a hand too weak to open 1♣ while denying a five-card major, perhaps with one of the following:

1) ♠AQxx ♥Kxxx ♦x ♣Kxxx

2) ♠AKx ♥Axxx ♦x ♣Jxxxx

3) ♠Axxx ♥KJx ♦Qx ♣Qxxx

In the Unbalanced Diamond, the first two hands would qualify as a 1♦ opening, but the third hand would be opened 1NT (12-14 HCP). The 1♦ opening bid denies a five-card (or longer) major and always shows an unbalanced hand ('unbalanced' in this context usually means that you have a singleton or void or a six- or seven-card minor). The closest we come to an exception to this rule is with 5422 distribution when the five-card suit is a minor and the four-card suit is a major. Even then, you have the option to treat it as a balanced hand, rather than a 1♦ opening, depending upon whether the strength is concentrated or scattered. I would open 1NT (12-14 HCP) with

♠Kx ♥Qxxx ♦KQxxx ♣KJ

but would open 1♦ with

♠xx ♥KQxx ♦Ax ♣K10xxx

When you hold the latter hand, you hope partner will be the declarer if the final contract is 3NT.

Until you get used to it, using the diamond opening to show an unbalanced hand may seem strange, and your thinking certainly has to be different. But the auctions commencing with 1♦ usually tell you and your partner what you need to know to make the right decisions, even though the

information provided is quite different from standard bidding. After a diamond opening, you may have a better idea of each other's distribution and strength after the second round of bidding than in either Bridge World Standard (hereafter referred to as BWS) or Precision.

One final point: four of a major is the most frequent game. When you find a good major-suit fit, you can often make game with 22 or 23 combined points (and sometimes with fewer). You don't need stoppers in all the suits. You don't need as many tricks or controls as you do for game in a minor. The frequency of games in a major with reduced high-card strength justifies making all bids with one or two fewer points when there is either a fair or strong likelihood of a good major-suit fit. So rather than say that all one-bids in a suit other than clubs show the same range of points, we may say the range is 'a to b' with a long major, 'c to d' with a four-card major, and 'e to f' with no major suit.

Let's run through an overview of the opening bids, so that you can get a grasp of the overall approach. I will explain what each opening bid means, but delay a full explanation of opener's rebids and how the auction is likely to continue until the appropriate chapters.

1♣

The 1♣ opening is similar to Precision, but has an upper limit. It is usually 15-19 HCP, but it could be as much 20 HCP with a weak five-card major or an unbalanced hand and no five-card (or longer) major — or as little as 14 with a long, strong major suit. (Later I will suggest a few exceptions to the upper limit, but until then, assume 20 points as the absolute maximum.)

1♦

This is the 'catch-all' bid, denying a five-card (or longer) major, but it always shows an unbalanced hand containing a singleton or void, a six-card (or longer) minor, or, conceivably, 5422 distribution under certain conditions. The high-card range is usually 12-14 HCP, but could be 15 or 16 with no four-card major. It could also be a hand with a six-card minor and 11 HCP including at least an ace and a king, preferably in the long suit, or a hand that is 4-4 in the majors and 4-1 or 5-0 in the minors. The most common distributions are (a) a six-card minor, (b) 4441 with the singleton in any suit (including diamonds!), or (c) 5431 with a singleton in any suit (but the five-

ADVANCED

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR NEW BIDDING IDEAS?

Marshall Miles has been writing bridge books for more than fifty years, and during that time has remained one of the world's leading thinkers on the theory of bidding. His recent gold medal in World Senior Teams shows that he has lost little of his edge with time. This book, a distillation of the ideas he has been developing and evolving over many years, describes what in his view is an optimal bidding system: the one he prefers to play, and the one that has brought him great personal success over the last several years. Serious players will want to study Miles' ideas, and adopt, if not the whole system, many of its concepts into their own bidding.



MARSHALL MILES of Redwood, California won the World Senior Teams Championship in 2004. His first book, *How to Win at Duplicate Bridge* (1957), is still in print. His most recent book was *Modern Constructive Bidding* (2005).



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