

# Bridge Theory for the Practitioners

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## 21. Light Openings --- Part I

Light opening bids have become quite common these days. This has always been a way of life for *strong clubbers* (i.e. who plays 1C opening to show all strong hands, typically 16+), but more and more players are opening light playing Standard or 2/1 game force as well. In this column I will discuss some issues to consider while opening light and how to handle 2/1 game force when partner is expected to open light.

### Issues to Consider when Opening Light

#### Benefits:

The advantage of opening light is twofold. I quote Eric Rodwell for the first type of benefit: "I think opening light, though not too light, has advantages at all forms of the game, in the sense you are announcing certain minimal values and something about your shape. You're just positioning yourself well, primarily for a competitive auction. If you knew your opponents were never going to bid, you would probably be better off playing sounder opening bids." [Reference 1]

The second advantage is the pre-emptive value of opening light. The hand below was opened a weak NT (10-12) against our teammates Curt Soloff and Shawn Tate by the 'Bulgarians' in the Des Moines regional of 2005:

Kxxxx      J9x      Ax      QJx

Note that 1S opening with this hand would also have the same pre-emptive value. One can actually do better with Bailey type weak-2 bids with this hand --- the topic of discussions in Part II of this article.

The typical rule that is followed by most players when opening light is the so-called 'Rule of 20'. This rule says: Add your points and the number of cards in the two longest suits and if this sum is 20 or more open the hand 1 -any. For example, one would open

Axxxx      KJxx      Kxx    x

Or

KQxx      KJxx      Kxx    xx

But **not**,

Axxxx      KJx      Kxx    xx

Or

KQxx      KJx      Kxx    xxx

Or the 'Bulgarian' hand:      Kxxxx      J9x      Ax      QJx

### **Dangers:**

As I see it, there are two main dangers of opening light. These are: i) Partner will double the opponents in a competitive auction. It causes partnership strains when you double the opponents only to find that partner does not have his/her opening bid. But I admit that this is a bigger danger in Matchpoints (MP) than in team games (IMP). One rarely doubles part-scores in IMPs.

To avoid this danger one might decide to open light on 1st or 2nd chairs only holding hands that pass the rule of 20 **and** have 2 defensive tricks ("quick tricks") . (For quick reference, AK is 2 quick tricks, AQ is 1.5, A is 1, KQ is 1, and guarded K is half). **This is what Marty Bergen recommends in the context of Rule of 20 [Reference 2]** and has been highlighted in one of Mel Colchamiro's Bulletin column (although without referring to Bergen).

The second danger is that partner will bid aggressive games and slams. Bidding aggressive games is not a big danger in IMP. When vulnerable, I bid games that has a 3/8 chance of making (Perhaps you are wondering how do I come up with this probability and how do I know that a hand I am holding has this probability of making game. That will be the subject of a future column on bidding where I will introduce you to the "*Utility Function*" of game and slam bidding). But bidding a bad slam in IMP is a killer when opponents are bidding only a (vulnerable) game. In matchpoint however, bad games are hugely costly and even bidding at the 3-level when only 2 can be made can lead to very bad result.

After considering all the benefits and dangers of opening light, I have come up with the following recommendations for you *if you decide to open light*:

**1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> chair both vulnerable and non-vulnerable** Opener must have either a) any real opening hand (13 or more count) or b) a *Rule of 20* hand **with** 2 defensive tricks.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Chair Non-Vulnerable:** Find any excuse for opening any 10+ count hand

**3<sup>rd</sup> Chair Vulnerable:** The same guideline as opening 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> chair.

**4<sup>th</sup> Chair:** You can follow the conventional wisdom: must pass the rule of 15 (high card points + number of spades = 15 or more; the technical name is *Pearson points*) for 4<sup>th</sup> chair openings.

The next question is how to handle a 2/1 game force when partner is expected to open light. Most players I know do not have a systematic way of dealing with this. They open light and when something goes wrong they treat this as an opener's problem while this should really be a partnership problem.

I have the following recommendations for you if you open light and play 2/1 GF.

- 1) Play 2/1 GF **except** when opener rebids his suit after a 2/1 auction. This rebid does not promise any extra length in the suit; it only says partner, I have opened a dog and I have no interest in game unless you drag me into it. For all I know, game forcing is off from my end.
- 2) Use a **semi-forcing** NT response to 1 of a major in all chairs. Opener with a weak opening (less than 13) and flat hand passes. Opener with real opening (13+) or good shape (say, 5-5 in the major and 11 count) treats this as *forcing* and bids accordingly.
- 3) If you play semi-forcing NT, you cannot go through 1N to show 3-card limit raises. You can have to use modified Bergen type raises to do this (topic of a future bidding column).
- 4) Use a *two-way Drury* type sequence over 1H/1S openings in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> chairs to deal with limit-raise type hands. Yes, topic of another future bidding column.

## References

[Reference 1] Eric Rodwell's interview in *Bridgematters*, 2001; this interview is a hidden treasure. Study it carefully and you will learn nuances of the game from a real expert, a true "Turkish Dinosaur" (for glossary, see my column # 7)

<http://www.bridgematters.com/rodwell.htm>

[Reference 2] Marty Bergen: "Bergen's Best Bridge Tips" (I have a signed copy of this book).