Opening in Third or Fourth Seat

By Spencer Hurd

Overview

1. After the bidding goes Pass, Pass, to you, you know a lot:

   (a) Since Partner didn’t open, just add 11 to the number of points in your hand and you see the maximum you two can hold on the hand.

   (b) Since Partner didn’t pre-empt, he may not have certain distributional but weak hands. Keep this in mind as the hand continues.

2. If you have a weak hand, the opponents are about to take charge. Can you get in their way?

3. If you have a good hand, watch out - partner will be extra conservative on the first round of bidding.

4. What is the pre-empting strategy by a third seat opener?

5. After two passes, your Right-Hand Opponent opens with one of a suit. What should you do with a good hand?

Principles

1. You should open in third seat with many sub-standard hands. BUT NOT EVERY ONE THAT COMES ALONG!

2. Some bids have different meanings. Which ones?

3. Ignore the “Principles of the Third Seat Opening” at your own peril.

4. What about the Fourth Seat, after P - P - P to you?
Pre-Empts In The Third Seat

Let’s assume the bidding goes Pass - Pass - ? to you and you are considering one of the following hands. What do you bid?

Nobody Vulnerable:
1. QJTxxxx, xx, xx, xx
2. Q986542, xx, xx, xx
3. QJTxxx, x, JTxx, xx
4. xxx, xxx, x, KQJxxx
5. xxx, xxx, - , KQJxxxx
6. x, xxx,xxx, KQTxxx
7. Jxxx, QJTxxxx, xx, --
8. Jx, KJxxxx, xxx, xx
9. xx, QJTxxx, Kx, xxx
10. JTxxxxx, A, xx, xxx
11. KQJxxxx, x, QJxx, x
12. x, xx, AQJxxx, JTxx

Solutions
1. QJTxxxx, xx, xx, xx open 3S. Not attractive in 1st seat, because of the blah distribution, but quite acceptable in 3rd seat.
2. Q986542, xx, xx, xx – just testing your limits. The modern school is to be very aggressive in 3rd seat. Open 3S. Definitely not a 3S opening in 1st or second seat.
3. QJTxxx, x, JTxx, xx – this is a shabby weak 2 bid in 1st or 2nd seat, not a good enough hand for those who play solid weak two’s. But in 3rd seat this is good enough.
4. xxx, xxx, x, KQJxxx - open 3C. Yes, I know it’s only a 6-bagger. I promise you, no one will double you. I would do this in 1st seat also.

5. xxx, xxx, - , KQJxxxx - well, a real pre-empt. I suggest opening 4C.

6. x, xxx,xxx, KQTxxx - still worth a 3C call, but weaken this to xx,xx,xxx, KQTxxx (no singleton), and I won’t recommend 3C, but I would bid it myself at this vulnerability.

7. Jxxx, QJTxxxx, xx, - a clear 3H call.

8. Jx, KJxxxx, xxx, xx - Open 2H.

9. xx, QJTxxx, Kx, xxx - open 2H here too.

10. JTxxxxx, A, xx, xxx - open 2S or 3S. Even in 3rd seat, I hate opening a weak 3-level pre-empt with an outside ace. The suit quality is also a problem (suggesting the 3-level is pretty high).

11. KQJxxxx, x, QJxx, x - Open 4S.

12. x, xx, AQJxxx, JTxx - open 2D, consider opening 3D (my preference)

Part II. Now, re-evaluate each of the hands above assuming you are both vulnerable. Do you bid or pass?

Solutions: For me, I tighten up a lot when vulnerable. The price can be high, and the rewards minimal. Here goes.

1. QJTxxxx, xx, xx, xx open 3S. Not attractive vulnerable. Just pass. (But if you bid 3S, you might find many players making the same bid. I would rather pass now and consider bidding later.)

2. Q986542, xx, xx, xx – Definitely not a 3S opening when vulnerable (in any seat)

3. QJTxxx, x, JTxx, xx – for me, the distribution makes a 2S bid just possible.

4. xxx, xxx, x, KQJxxx - open 3C. The suit quality makes a penalty double inlikely. They may get to the wrong major after 3C, but if you pass, they will find the best contract.

5. xxx, xxx, - , KQJxxxx - well, a real pre-empt. I suggest opening 3C (not loudly, but confidently).

6. x, xxx,xxx, KQTxxx - still worth a 3C call to most. I don’t think it is likely to help, and may draw a blueprint as to declarer play.

7. Jxxx, QJTxxxx, xx, - a clear 3H call.

8. Jx, KJxxxx, xxx, xx - I would not open 2H if vulnerable.

9. xx, QJTxxx, Kx, xxx - open 2H here, however. This is much safer than the previous hand.

10. JTxxxxx, A, xx, xxx - open 2S or pass.

11. KQJxxxx, x, QJxx, x - Open 3S, but 4S is okay here too.

12. x, xx, AQJxxx, JTxx - open 3D, more to suggest a sac over 4S.
A Third Hand Opening occurs after the auction begins with Pass - Pass - your turn. This is a very interesting position in which to be able to make the first “real” bid. As a matter of fact, you know a great deal about the hand already, not just your own cards. Neither Partner nor RHO (Right Hand Opponent) has an opening, and neither has a pre-empt. This knowledge will (or should) affect your possible bids.

Here is a quiz for you. Suppose you hold one of these hands shown below. You may vary your answer according to the vulnerability. Assume, mostly, that you are playing with your favorite partner. Before giving your suggested answers, a few items must be mentioned. The term “Expert” will be used here to mean (a) book author, (b) (well-known) magazine writer, or (c) Southeastern player with 5000 or more master points. (Each condition excludes me!) Nevertheless, my recommendations are “mainstream.”

The Experts use the Drury Convention or some variation of it. My recommendations assume you are playing it. Playing Drury is more important than I can possibly discuss here. Learn it and play it.

What is your weak-two-bid style? Experts vary in first and second seat with their weak two’s. But all loosen up in 3rd seat. You should too.


Think how easy it is for you and your favorite partner to bid when the opponents are silent. Suppose you have a great hand and, oops, your right hand opponent opens in front of you - aren’t you dismayed at the sudden difficulty you and partner will have? I suggest:

When in doubt, open.

There are two kinds of “light” 3rd seat openings - serious and not serious. The serious kind include balanced hands with 10/11 points. These balanced hands should include support for one or both majors. They include weaker hands, sometimes, but hands that have redeeming features: strong suits, convenient rebids, safe pre-empts, attractive distributions, and so on.

Okay, ready? What do you bid after it goes Pass, Pass, to you?

1. xx, Kxx, Axxx, KTxx
2. KQTx, xx, Qxxx, xx
3. JTxxxx, x, xx, Qxxx
4. QT9xx, x, AQx, Qxxx
5. AKx, Jxxx, AT, KJx
6. Ax, Kx, AKQTxx, KT9
7. xx, xx, xx, JTxxxx
8. xx, xx, Ax, KQTxxxx
9. Kxx, Qxx, AKx, xxxx
10. Kx, Qxx, KQx, Jxxxx
11. Kxxx, Qxx, KQx, Txx
12. ATxxx, KJxxx, x, xx
13. ATxxx, KJxxx, Qx, x
14. Txxx, QJxxx, Ax, x
15. JTxxx, QJxxx, AQ, x
16. xx, x, AQQxx, Jxxx
17. xx, x, AQQ9, Jxxxx
18. xx, x, AJTxxx, Qxxx
19. KQxxxxx, xx, x, Kxx
20. AKJx, x, Kxxx, xxxx
21. xx, AJJx, Kxxx, xx
22. xx, AKJx, xxxx, xxxx
23. Qxxxx, x, x, KQxxxx
24. Qxxx, QJxxxx, Jx, x
25. JTxx, AQTxx, xx, xx

Solutions:

1. xx, Kxx, Axxx, KTxx
   You should pass. Not enough in the majors to compete. Hope LHO also passes. If you open 1D, say, you have no good bid if Pard bids 1S. (You could pass 1H) Could your passed hand partner bid 2NT over your 1C or 1D with KJx, QTx, Kxx, Qxxx? Compare with Hand 11.

2. KQTxx, xx, Qxxx, xx
   Open 2S. This is a classic 3rd seat weak two bid. Yes, only a 5-card suit, but the spades are very chunky.

3. JTxxxx, x, xx, Qxxx
   You are too weak to open 2S (unless you have marked your card 3-8 in 3rd seat and alert). Experts have opened 3S against me with this at favorable vulnerability. Improve to JTxxxx, x, xx, Axxx and open 2S. The singleton is a big plus.

4. QT9xx, x, AQx, Qxxx
   Open 1S. A “classic” light opening bid. My partners can’t raise to 3S - I play Drury. This kind of opening is 100% safe. Weaken the hand to QT9xx, x,
AQx, Txxx and I open 1S anyway, promoting the value of the singleton. I might open 2S if not-vul versus vul.

5. AKx, Jxxx, AT, KJx
   Open 1NT. Don’t consider 1H. Open 1NT in first seat as well.

6. Ax, Kx, AKQTxx, KT9
   Open 2NT. When you have a solid running minor, you can cheat a point. Also, if you open 1D and partner bids one of a major, you are far too strong to rebid 3D, and you wouldn’t want Pard to pass a rebid of 2NT. “Doesn’t that apply to opening in first seat as well?” Yes it does.

7. xx,xx, xx, JTxxxx
   Open 3C at favorable vulnerability only. If none vul, I probably wouldn’t bother to open. (You should be content to hope that the opposing Declarer won’t be able to believe that your partner had 11 of the missing 12 points!) Change the hand to x, xxx, xx, QT98xxx and now I would open 3C if none are vulnerable. The singleton is important. 7-2-2-2 is such an unattractive distribution in a pre-empt.

8. xx, xx, Ax, KQTxxxx
   Open 3C (unless vulnerable against non-vulnerable opponents). You could miss a game if you pre-empted in first seat with this hand. With a 3rd seat 3C, your partner may not think you are this powerful, but the opponents may not either. Wouldn’t it be just too bad if the opponents went down in 3NT when it turns out that you have the missing ace for an entry to run your clubs!

9. Kxx, Qxx, AKx, xxxx
   Open 1C. A normal opening, if weakish, for most players.

10. Kx, Qxx, KQx, Jxxxx
    Pass. (No length in the majors.) Nothing to gain and much to lose. (If you open 1C, what on Earth do you rebid over 1S?) Just pass and maybe partner can overcall later if LHO comes in. [Some partnerships have the understanding that a 1NT rebid when Pard is a passed hand shows 11 points!] Change the hand to x, xxx, xx, QT98xxx and now I would open 3C if none are vulnerable. The singleton is important. 7-2-2-2 is such an unattractive distribution in a pre-empt.

11. Kxxx, Qxx, KQx, Txx
    Classic weak balanced minimum 3rd seat opener. Open 1C and expect to pass partner’s 1H or 1S bid. Compare with Hand 10. It’s very important to have the 4-3 or better in the majors when you open such trashy hands. (A problem like xxxx, KQxx, AJT, xx is too easy: a clear 1D opener in 3rd seat, again planning to pass Pard’s 1H or 1S response.)

12. ATxxx, KJxxx, x, xx
    Now come several hands with a common theme. Here, with Hand 12, the danger in opening 1S and rebidding 2H is that you could get too high if partner takes you seriously. Although a nice hand, I wouldn’t recommend that YOU open this hand if vulnerable. (I confess, I probably would.) I expect Experts will be divided about whether to open 1S in 3rd seat. However, in any case, you wouldn’t want to open with a weak two bid in either suit - why pre-empt yourself and partner out of a 10-card fit in the other major?

   “It can’t be wrong to pass hoping to come in later.” Yes it can. Two ways. First, if Pard holds a poor minimum, say, x, Qxxxx, xxxx, Axx, you can make 4H almost 100% of the time! Second, suppose you pass in 3rd seat and it goes 1NT on your left and 3NT on your right. Now Pard, on lead with KQx, xxx, Qxxxx, xx will not lead a spade, and they will make 3NT.

13. ATxxx, KJxxx, Qx, x
    Now the hand is strong enough to open 1S and plan to rebid 2H (if, say, partner rebids 1NT). After 1S, if partner used Drury 2C to show a limit spade raise, I would even bid 2H (natural, a mild game try) rather than sign off with 2S.

14. Txxxx, QJxxx, Ax, x
    Here we are back on safe ground. The opponents have 23 points or more between them. I would open 2H if not vulnerable, 1H if vulnerable versus vulnerable. (If vul vs their non-vul, I pass, but I have admiration for a 1H opening here also.)

15. JTxxx, QJxxx, AQ, x
    Open 1S planning to rebid 2H. Maybe a little better than Hand 13, and certainly worth competing at least to 2H. If Partner has as little as x, Kxxx, Kxxxx, xxx, you might even make 170 (and the opponents can probably make 3NT). I would open this 1S in first seat as well.

16. xx, x, AQxxx, Jxxxx
    If you open weak 2D, here is a hand for it (unless vulnerable). Othersise pass.

17. xx, x, AJT98, Jxxxx
    If not nul vs. vul, I would open 3D.

18. xx, x, AJTxxx, Qxxx
Open 3D. Not even close.

19. KQxxxx, xx, x, Kxx
   Open 3S at equal vulnerability. If not vul vs. vul, consider 4S (improve the suit to KQT9xx, xx, x, Kxx and 4S is clear).

20. AKJx, x, Kxxx, xxxx.
   Here is a 1S opening on a four card suit. Classic example. Yes, you might miss a minor suit contract but you know what suit you want partner to lead. A 1D opening is almost as attractive because it is so flexible. (If partner answers 1NT to 1D, you may bid 2C. This is perfectly safe as the opponents should be bidding hearts) If you open 1C (worst choice) and the auction goes like this:

   Pard   RHO   You   LHO
   P      P     1C   Dbl
   P      2C    P     3H
   P      4H.

   I would bet 10-to-1 you won’t like partner’s lead.

21. xx, AQJx, Kxxxx, xx
   Open 1H. Similar theme to Hand 20. You can rebid 2D in a pinch. If you open 1D you have no good response to 1S or 1NT.

22. xx, AKJx, xxxx, xxx
   I once saw an expert bid 2H in 3rd seat with this. I certainly don’t recommend it. Just pass. Open 1H on Monday night only.

23. Qxxxx, x, x, KQxxxx
   Just pass. This may be a gross misfit - don’t walk into a -1400 score. Listen to some bidding before you come in to the auction. When I had this hand, the opponents bid to 6S down only one. My RHO has passed an 11-count and they found their 4-4 spade fit after a precision 1C on my left.

24. Qxxx, QJxxxx, Qx, x
   No aces, no kings, and partner is a passed hand. Seems ideal to bid pre-emptively since the opponents ought to have enough for a game - BUT there are two big minuses. First, your suits are awful, and if you open 2H, you might miss a spade fit. (I wouldn’t consider 2H in first or 2nd seat.) At favorable vulnerability, however, there is a lot to gain with a 2H opening despite the risk of going for a number. How low do you go? A pass is recommended if vulnerable. Too risky.

25. JTxx, AQTxx, xx, xx

   This is a much more attractive 2H opening than the previous hand. Here and in Hand 24 you might lose the spade suit if Partner has, say, Axxxx, xx, Qxx, xxx. But you were never going to play the hand in spades. The opponents will drive to 3NT or a minor suit game or slam. With Hand 24, your chances against 3NT are very poor. But with Hand 25, there is some hope, and here you do want partner to lead a heart from xxx, say; also, the opponents might find it awkward to get to 3NT from the better side. In Hand 24, likely either side will want to get to 3NT.

   Good luck.