

A minor matter by Derrick Browne

Over recent months, this column has featured occasional articles on “what you should play”, based partly on material from the larryco.com website, following an offer by Larry Cohen. This week’s focus is on which minor to open.

Standard 5-card major openings are assumed. Holding opening points but no 5-card major (and the wrong strength to open 1NT), open the longer minor suit. Let’s start by considering which minor to open when holding three cards in each.

The following paragraphs paraphrase Cohen:

In Standard, with 3-3 you “always” open 1C. Is there an exception? Yes – with the A-K-Q of diamonds and the 4-3-2 of clubs, I would open 1D. What about the A-K-10 of diamonds and the Q-4-3 of clubs? While 1D could work better (especially if partner is on lead), I’d open 1C. Other than when holding really lopsided honour differences, I prefer 1C on 3-3. That way, partner knows I have four diamonds if I open 1D.

What’s this, you ask? Does 1D guarantee four cards? Just about. There is only one exception: 4=4=3=2 in that order. So, a 1D opening is a 3-card suit only if you happen to have exactly two 4-card majors and a doubleton club. When you open 1D, you’ll hold this exact shape only about 3% of the time. Accordingly, you should assume that a 1D opening contains four diamonds.

How many clubs should you expect for a 1C opener? While it can be made with only three, the odds may surprise you. Here is the expected club length for a 1C opener, using Standard American guidelines:

Three cards: 17%. Four cards: 26%. Five cards: 38%. Six cards: 15%. Seven cards: 4%.

So, a 1D opener is almost always four, and 1C will be at least a 4-card suit over 80% of the time.

Some players aren’t happy with the fact that 1D could (3% of the time) be a 3-card suit. Accordingly, they won’t open 1D when 4=4=3=2. With that pattern they open 1C and partner alerts that this could be short. This strikes me as shortsighted: to raise the probability of four diamonds from near-certain (97%) to absolutely certain (100%), the proponents of this method must now cope with the possibility that a 1C opener may contain only a 2-card suit.

What about 4-4 in the minors? There are three differing schools of thought, but no right answer. Some experts espouse opening 1C (to leave the most room). Others advocate 1D (to be able to bid clubs next without reversing), while still others open the stronger when holding 4-4 in the minors. I have no recommendation on this – other than it isn’t very important. If you must know, I use the third style (bid the better suit).

We’ll hear more of Cohen’s views in future columns, but now here is a deal from the finals of the recent NEC Cup:

Dealer South, nil vul.

	NORTH		
	S AJ3		
	H Q87543		
	D —		
	C A985		
WEST		EAST	
S 9542		S QT6	
H AT92		H J6	
D J8		D KQ9654	
C J73		C K2	
	SOUTH		
	S K87		
	H K		
	D AT732		
	C QT64		
WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
Zmudzinski	Sementa	Balicki	Duboin
			1D
Pass	1H	Pass	2C
Pass	2S	Pass	2NT
Pass	3C	Pass	3D
Pass	5C	All pass	

At the other table, South stopped in 3C. The play, however, was the same at both tables. A spade was led, SJ from dummy, covered by the queen and king. The HK was led next, so when West won the HA and led another spade, knocking out dummy’s ace, the HQ could be cashed to discard the spade loser from South.

After that, a third round of hearts was led from dummy, and ruffed. The DA was cashed, followed by a diamond ruff, spade ruff, and another diamond ruff (while West pitched his last heart). Dummy led a heart from this position:

	NORTH	
	S —	
	H 87	
	D —	
	C A9	
WEST		EAST
S 9		S —
H —		H —
D —		D KQ
C J73		C K2
	SOUTH	
	S —	
	H —	
	D T7	
	C QT	

Both declarers ruffed with the CQ in hope of avoiding an over-ruff. Now a diamond was led from South and West had to ruff with the CJ to force out the CA. However, the last heart was now led from dummy and declarer could not be prevented from scoring the C10. That was 11 tricks made at both tables, but 6 IMPs to Duboin for being in game. His team went on to win the event by 2 IMPs.