



Ask Jerry

Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions.
Send your questions to askjerry@jerryhelms.com.

Dear Jerry: I held this hand in third position. After both partner and my right-hand opponent passed, I opened 1♣. The opponents then got to a heart contract and made it when partner led a club away from the ♣K. We got a bad result. Partner said I should have opened 1♦ since that was my 'better' minor. Do you agree?

—J. P., Houston, TX

Dear J. P.: Interesting. I don't agree with either you or your partner! Let's start with your partner's comment.

I don't like the term 'better' minor, just as I don't like the term 'short' club. Playing five-card majors, the standard agreement when you don't have a five-card or longer major suit is that you open your longer minor. With four cards in both minors, you can open either 1♣ or 1♦; it's a matter of style. My preference is 1♦. With three cards in both minors, you the standard agreement it to open 1♣.

So the only time you would open 1♦ on a three-card suit is when you have a hand like this with exactly 4=4=3=2 distribution: two four-card majors and only two clubs.

So, following the guidelines, you will sometimes open one-of-a-minor with three low cards. That may work badly if partner happens to lead that suit on defense, away from an honor, but that's just the "rub of the green." It may work out well by deterring the opponents from leading that suit when you become declarer, or it might even 'steal' the suit away from the opponents. So you should at least break even in the long run.

That having being said, you are always free to exercise your judgment during the auction.

For example, if I picked up this hand and had to chose an opening bid in third position, I probably would choose to open 1♦ rather than 1♣. I don't expect to win the auction and, if partner is on lead, I'd really like a diamond rather than a club. I'm just choosing to treat my three-card suit like a four-card suit.

However, I think your partner is stretching to say that your ♠K-10-4 was strong enough to choose that suit ahead of clubs. I'd still open that hand 1♣ in first or second position.

But now let's turn to your choice of opening 1♣ in third position. You have a much better option. You should open 1♠, even though you play five-card majors! It's not even illegal if you have checked the '5' box on the convention card. Look at the section on major-suit openings:

MAJOR OPENING		
Expected Min. Length	4	5
1st/2nd	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3rd/4th	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The fine print says 'Expected Minimum Length.' It says nothing about 'guaranteed' minimum length. You are free to open 1♥ or 1♠ on a four-card suit any time you feel like it! Of course, if you do this all the time, especially when you are in third or fourth position, you should then check the '4' box.

So you should definitely have opened 1♠ with your hand, rather than either minor suit. If your side ends up defending, you'd certainly like a spade lead. It also takes more room away from the opponents; they can no longer overcall in a suit at the one level. And it may deter them from bidding notrump, worried that you have a five-card suit to run.

Of course, partner is going to 'expect' you to have five spades. But so what? You have opened a little light anyway, and you have a hand with which you can pass any natural response from partner such as 1NT, or 2♦, or 2♥. You're just hoping for a small partscore.

What if partner raises to 2♠ with only three-card support? You'll just have to play the hand well. You probably need some practice playing in 4-3 fits anyway; it's good for your card play. Besides, the opponents don't know you have only four spades and may misdefend.

What if partner has a strong hand in support of spades and wants to jump to 3♠ or 4♠? If partner likes to do that sort of thing after you open in third or fourth position, I would suggest you agree to play the Drury convention. It's quite simple...as long as you remember to use it when responder is a passed hand.

DRURY CONVENTION

After an opening bid of 1♥ or 1♠ in third or fourth position, a response of 2♣ is artificial, asking about the quality of opener's hand.

In the popular 'reverse' Drury style, opener simply rebids the major at the two level with a minimum or sub-minimum hand. Anything else promises a full opening bid.

So now you can deal easily with the hand you actually held. After two passes, you open 1♠, a little light in terms of both high cards and length. You plan to pass any response by partner unless it's the 2♣ Drury bid, in which case you will rebid 2♠ to avoid getting too high. And, if the opponents get into the auction, your partner will lead a spade. What could be better!

—JH ♠