



BY JERRY HELMS

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Ask Jerry

Dear Jerry,

I was taught that in order to open “light” in the third seat, you must have support or at least tolerance for the other suits. In third seat, holding:

♠A K 5 4 ♥K 7 4 3 ♦J 9 5 ♣7 2,

I opened 1♦, partner responded 1♠ and RHO overcalled 2♥. I passed, thinking that if I took two bids, I was promising a full opener. They made 2♥, and partner insisted I owed her a raise. May I have your opinion, please? Thank you.

Susan

Hi Susan,

There are multiple issues contained in what seemed like a straightforward simple question. For starters, you do owe partner a raise. I think you have misvaluated the worth of your hand. You have 2½ quick tricks, four-card support for partner’s suit, a ruffing value in clubs, and likely a well-placed ♥K. You have a hand that some players might have opened in first seat. So, think, “Support with support.”

You are correct that when opening light in third seat, you should be prepared for most responses that partner might make – but this is only part of the issue. Charles Goren once said it was permissible to open “a queen light in third seat.” His words, not mine ... “A queen light” sounds like some sort of diet beverage to me! In his era, you needed 13 to open, and 14 or more was preferred. Therefore, he expected 11–12 to open in third position. With the modern trend towards lighter and lighter initial action, this needs to be amended.

A factor that needs to be considered is that when your partner passes, and you choose to make a “light” opening bid, there is an excellent chance the opponents may end up playing the contract. For this reason, I strongly prefer a light third-seat opening bid should be made only on a suit that you would not mind seeing partner lead. Although your hand looked close to a full opening bid, I would actually have opened 1♠, not 1♦. Yes, I play five-card majors; yes, opening 1♠ might cause us to miss a heart fit ... blah, blah, blah. But if partner is on lead against any final contract, a diamond doesn’t feel like what I would like to see led.

I firmly believe it is important to get us involved in the auction in third seat whenever possible. In keeping with a more modern approach, if the bidding went Pass–Pass to you, what would you bid holding:

♠A 6 3 ♥K Q 10 8 ♦J 7 6 ♣8 7 6?

I would consider it completely normal to open 1♥! This fits the “queen light” Goren approach. It has tolerance for all of the unbid suits, and it is clearly a suit I would like to see partner lead if we defend. This is particularly advisable if your partner uses some form of Drury that allows partner to show support for hearts when holding a maximum passed hand yet still stay at the two level! If you’re not familiar with Drury, I strongly advocate that you research this tool and add it to your arsenal.

While I’m on the subject of third-seat openers, after two passes, holding:

♠9 4 ♥9 8 2 ♦5 4 ♣K Q 10 8 5 2

At virtually any form of scoring, or

any vulnerability, I cannot imagine passing! Integrate what you see in your hand with what the auction has told you thus far. Pass by your partner suggests at most 10 or 11 points in his hand. Adding that to the 5 points in your hand makes me think there’s an excellent chance that the opponents hold game values. How could I possibly let them cheaply explore for their best fit and appropriate level when I have a perfectly logical alternative: 3♣ here seems automatic. Yes, traditionally a three-level bid showed a seven-card suit. Well, you almost have a seven-card suit. Removing 11 steps of bidding, and making the opponents start at the three level rather than at the one level seems a very good idea to me. If and when the opponents buy the hand, a club lead certainly seems what you would like. Is there a downside? Of course! Sometimes you play 3♣, doubled or undoubled, and go down too many. Sometimes you jostle the opponents into a better spot than they might have reached left to their own devices. The upside, however, far outweighs the downside.

As a personal philosophy, the bad results I create from bidding too much never haunt me as much as the bad results I get from not bidding enough. Perhaps this is supportive of one of my favorite Jerry-isms: Look for reasons to bid before settling for excuses to pass. ☺