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Ask Jerry

Dear Jerry,
My teacher is adamant that it is always right to respond “up the line” in four-card suits when partner opens 1♣. My new duplicate partner strongly expressed her opinion that I should never mention a diamond suit when I also hold a four-card major. I will accept your opinion to break the stalemate.

Bunny

Hi Bunny,
The first thing that strikes me is the terms that each used to express their opinion. Personally, when asked for advice, I studiously try to avoid words like “always” or “never.” The game of bridge is more often about “frequently,” “generally,” and “usually,” and the use of absolute terms sends up a red flag to me. I will make my case and then let you decide.

For many years, it was standard practice to respond 1♦ to an opening 1♣ bid when holding a hand like:

♠9 7 2 ♥K 8 7 5 ♦K J 5 4 ♣J 2.

In theory, the diamond response would leave room for opener to bid 1♥ when holding four. If the opponents remain silent, this works just fine. Unfortunately, opponents – especially modern-thinking opponents – have an annoying habit of intruding on our auctions. If you chose to respond 1♦ on the hand above, and the auction continued:

1♣	Pass	1♦	2♠!
Pass	Pass	?	

How would you feel? And better yet, what would you do? Holding 8 HCP opposite an opening bid, I would feel

like our side possessed at least half the deck and that we should compete to either play the hand ourselves, or at least drive the opponents to a higher level where we have a better chance of going plus. At this point, any action seems fraught with danger.

3♥ would be forcing, a reopening double would suggest more values, and pass seems a little ... wussy?

My theory and the modern style is that after 1♣, if we have a fit somewhere, it is more likely to be in an unbid major than in diamonds. Lacking less than game-forcing values, responder tends to bypass even a five-card diamond suit to respond in a major to prepare for possible interference. Holding a strong hand like:

♠A 4 ♥A J 4 3 ♦A Q 5 2 ♣8 3 2,

it would be acceptable to respond 1♦ because you do not fear being frozen out by opponents' preemption. It might still be best to respond 1♥ here, but 1♦ is certainly an option. If the opponents should intervene

over your 1♦ response, the strength you hold provides follow-up options which include introducing hearts as a forcing bid or reopening the bidding with a double.

Although you didn't ask, on a related issue, holding game-forcing values, tend to bid as naturally as possible after partner's opening bid. Say your partner opens 1♦. Holding:

♠A K 8 3 ♥7 3 ♦9 4 ♣A K 8 5 2,

it makes zero sense to respond 1♠! The failure to bid a major initially does not deny holding one. With your strong hand, bid 2♣, prepared to introduce spades on your next turn. Sometimes the best game or even slam is in the club suit, and bidding spades followed by clubs often obscures your true shape.

Perhaps you should arrange for your bridge teacher and current partner to take a look at my response. At the very least both might be willing to at least modify their absolute opinions. ■

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