

The Balanced Heart

Introduction

The popularity of 5-card major bidding systems, at least in this country, implies that experts assign a high priority to early knowledge of the length of the suit Opener chooses to bid first, but only if that suit is a major. No such priority is assigned to opening bids in a minor suit, where a 1C or 1D opening is frequently based on a 4-card suit, or even, especially in the case of 1C, a 3-card suit. This distinction between major- and minor-suit opening bids can be blamed on the scoring system, which requires eleven tricks for a minor-suit game, but only ten tricks for a major-suit game and nine tricks for a notrump game.

Since reaching minor-suit games is a relatively minor objective of a bidding system, this lack of equal treatment is understandable. Yet early clarification of minor-suit length can be of great assistance in reaching other high-priority contracts such as minor suit slams, as well as major suit and notrump games or slams, where early knowledge of a long minor suit can suggest a source of tricks, and thus lead to a game of slam which might otherwise be unbidable.

This article will describe a convention, *The Balanced Heart*, that brings minor suit openings closer to parity with their major-suit brethren, by using a 1H opening bid to describe any hand with no suits longer than 4 cards that is worth opening but is too weak to open at the two-level (via a traditional 2NT or Forcing 2C). Specifically, a 1H opening shows a hand with 11-19 HCP and 4333, 4432, or 4441 shape. This definition immediately poses four questions: (1) Why 1H, rather than 1NT or some other suit bid? (2) How can the convention cope with the wide HCP range, when traditional NT methods are usually limited by ACBL edict to a range of 3 or 4 HCP? (3) Does inclusion of the unbalanced 4441 shape pose any insurmountable problems? And (4) How can a traditional 1H opening bid be shown? The answers to the first three questions will become obvious after the Balanced Heart response structure has been described, but let's tackle the fourth question first.

There are at least two reasonable answers. The simplest is to use a 1NT opening to show a traditional 1H opening. This can work tolerably well, but the loss of two bidding steps by opening 1NT instead of 1H must be considered a disadvantage, since neither a 1S response (with 4+ spades) nor a forcing 1NT response is available. A theoretically better approach recognizes that the 1H opening is two steps under the 1NT bid it replaces, and extends that two-under idea to the other 1-level opening bids. With this approach, 1C shows 5 or more hearts (5+), 1D shows 5+ spades, 1H is the Balanced Heart, 1S shows 5+ clubs, and 1NT shows 5+ diamonds. This approach makes two additional bidding steps available for major suit openings; the corresponding loss of bidding room for minor openings is compensated by the avoidance of the length ambiguity that plagues the traditional 3+ card minor suit openings, where the opening shows 3-5 cards unless the suit is rebid to show 6+. No matter which approach is used, the main advantage of the Balanced Heart is to guarantee that all minimum-level suit opening bids, minors as well as majors, guarantee a 5+ card suit, thus making it easier to count winners when making critical partscore vs game vs slam decisions.

The key to handling the wide HCP range is the use of a 1S response to 1H as a relay, asking Opener to clarify his strength. Opener rebids 1NT with 11-14 HCP, or rebids 2NT with 18-19 HCP. With the 15-17 HCP range, Opener begins the search for a major-suit or NT game by responding in a suit at the two-level, using a structure that might be termed Reverse Stayman, since the search is initiated by Opener rather than by Responder. With the 4441 shape in all three strength ranges, Opener initially treats his hand as balanced with a small doubleton in his short suit, and hopes to show his singleton later. With that background, we can proceed to a description of the response structure.

Responses to the Balanced Heart Opening

P – Shows a weak hand with 0-5 HCP and at least 4 hearts. This is harder to penalize than the alternative weak response of 1NT (see below).

1S – This is the key bid, a relay showing 6+ HCP and asking Opener to describe his strength.

1NT -- Shows a weak balanced hand with 0-5 HCP. With a weak 4441 or a weak doubleton, Opener will bid the suit below his shortage to begin a scramble. If 1NT is doubled, Opener passes with 15-19 HCP; Responder then passes to play there, Redoubles with 3+ clubs, starting a scramble, or bids a 5+ card suit. With 11-14 HCP Opener Redoubles with 3+ clubs, starting a scramble, or bids his cheapest 4-card suit. In scramble mode, both partners keep bidding until a 43 or better fit is found.

2C, 2D, 2H & 2S – These are weak unconditional transfers (to D, H, S & C) with 0-5 HCP.

2NT – This shows 15+ HCP and is absolutely game-forcing, with slam potential opposite 15+, and perhaps even opposite some good-fitting weaker openings. In response to 2NT, Opener has two options:

(a) He can use the Reverse Stayman structure (see below) at the 3-level regardless of strength, planning to take aggressive action later with 15+ HCP.

(b) With any 4441 shape, he can bid the suit below his singleton at the 4-level. Thus 4C shows 1 diamond, 4D shows 1 heart, 4H shows 1 spade, and 4S shows 1 club.

Note: All hands with potential game interest must start with either the 1S range ask or the 2NT response (unless strong enough to force to game with no slam interest)..

Opener's Rebids after the 1S Relay

1NT – This shows 11-14 HCP with any 4333, 4432, or 4441 shape. With less than game-forcing strength, (6-12 HCP) Responder can pass, bid 2C to ask Opener to bid 4-card suits up the line, or bid 2D, 2H, 2S, or 2NT as weak unconditional transfers to 2H, 2S, 3C, or 3D. These bids all deny game interest. Stronger hands (13+ HCP) use the traditional Stayman/Jacoby structure, but at the 3-level; they are game-forcing, and any later new-suit bid by Responder is forcing and shows slam interest.

2C, 2D, 2H, & 2S (Reverse Stayman) – These all show 15-17 HCP and deny a 5+ card suit.

2C – Asks Responder for a 4-card major. Responder bids 2D with 4 hearts, 2H with 4 spades, 2S with no 4-card major, or 2NT with both. Other options for Responder are 3C = Mini-Gerber with Roman (0 or 3/1 or 4/2) responses, 3D to show 5+ hearts, 3H to show 5+ spades, or 3S to show a slam try with 44 or better in the minors. Note that this 2C rebid covers the 4441 shape, which will always include a 4-card major.

2D – Denies a 4-card major. Shows 4333 shape with 3 cards in each major. Responder can then bid 2H, 2S, or 2NT as weak sign-offs, 3C as Mini-Gerber, 3D or 3H as Jacoby transfers, or 3S as a slam try with 44 or better in the minors.

2H & 2S – Denies a 4-card major. 2H shows 2344 shape with 2 spades, while 2S shows 3244 with 2 hearts. Now 2NT by Responder is a signoff with 6-8 HCP, 3NT is to play, 4NT is invitational, and 4C is Gerber with Roman responses. Any suit bid here by Responder is an unconditional 4-suit transfer (S→C, C→D, D→H, H→S). Once Opener accepts, the cheapest bid by Responder is then Roman KeyCard for that suit, with 0314 responses. Any other non-jump rebid by Responder is natural and forcing to game.

2NT – This shows 18-19 HCP with any 4333, 4432, or 4441 shape. The traditional Stayman/Jacoby structure applies here. **3C** is Stayman; **3D & 3H** are Jacoby Transfers, **3S** is Minor Suit Stayman, asking for a 4-card minor; 3NT is to play; **4C** is Roman Gerber as defined above; **4D & 4H** are Texas Transfers; **4S** is artificial, showing an unspecified 6+ card suit headed by the AKQ, to which 5C is a length ask, with step responses showing in order 6, 7, and 8 cards in the suit; and **4NT** is invitational with a balanced hand, allowing Opener to pass with minimal slam interest, or to bid 4-card suits up the line in hopes of finding a 44 fit for slam.

3C, 3D, 3H & 3S – These responses occur rarely, but show 18-19 HCP with 4441 shape and the singleton in the suit above the suit bid (or in clubs if 3S is bid). Responder can then use a bid of Opener's singleton as Roman Gerber, asking for aces.

Handling Defensive Interference Over the 1H Opening

Over Interference by Opener's LHO – Over any 3-level interference, a Double by Responder is for penalty. At the 1- and 2-level, Responder's Double replaces the 1S relay, but now shows 10+ HCP instead of 6+ . Then a minimum NT bid by Opener (or a pass of a call by RHO) shows the weak hand, a NT jump show the strong hand, and a suit bid shows the 15-17 hand (using the Reverse Stayman structure if a 2C bid is still available; otherwise, any new suit bid is natural, and a cue-bid show both majors, with Responder transferring to confirm a 44 fit). Any Double by Opener is for penalty, and denies the 12-14 HCP hand.

Over Interference by Opener's RHO – A pass by Opener shows the weak hand, a Double shows the strong hand, and a minimum NT bid, or a suit bid, shows the 15-17 HCP hand, with traditional Stayman/Jacoby in action after the NT bid. If a 2C bid is available, the Reverse Stayman structure applies; otherwise all suit bids are natural, showing 4-card suits up the line.

When Opponents Intervene Over Opener's 1NT Rebid

1NT/Dbl/? – **Redouble by Responder** shows at least game invitational strength. It is our hand. We'll double the opponents or play game if possible, and otherwise play a partscore. They won't play an undoubled contract. **An Immediate Suit Bid** by Responder shows a 5+ card suit, and Opener will usually pass. **Pass** by Responder denies a 5+ card suit, and asks Opener to bid a 3+ card club suit or to Redouble (SOS), after which both players will bid 4-card suits up the line until a 43 or 44 fit is found.

1NT/Any Non-Jump Bid/? – **Double** by an unpassed Responder is for penalty, but Opener may remove the Double with a singleton. A passed hand Double by Responder is negative, with 0-2 cards in their suit, hoping for a plus in a partscore. Thus, **Pass** by Responder suggests strongly that we should stay out of the auction, although a later penalty double at the 3-level is a possibility. **Any Non-Jump Suit Bid** by Responder shows a 5+ card suit with game-invitational strength; Opener will raise with 3-card support and a maximum. **Any Jump in a New Suit** by Responder shows a 6+ card suit and is preemptive. Any **NT Bid** by Responder is natural; Opener will usually pass (since no Double by Responder), but is permitted to try 3NT with a maximum. A **Cue-Bid** by Responder asks Opener to bid 3NT with a stopper in their suit. A **Jump Cue-Bid** by an unpassed Responder (very rare) is a slam try with a monster hand.

1NT/Any Jump Bid/? – All bids are natural. A Double is for penalty, and a new suit shows 5+ cards there; Opener will frequently pass, but can raise with 3+ card support and a maximum, or raise preemptively with 4-card support and a minimum.

When Opponents Intervene After the Response to Opener's 1NT Rebid

The Response was a 2C bid (denying a 5+ card suit) – Opener doubles with a maximum, or passes with a minimum.

The Response was a 2-Level Transfer – Opener doubles with 1- or 2-card support and a maximum, passes with 1- or 2-card support and a minimum, bids NT with 3-card support, and raises with 4-card support.

The Response was a 3-level Game Force – Opener bids 3NT or game in Responder's suit, and Doubles if unable to bid game or if expecting a penalty worth more than game.

Defense Against the Balanced Heart

In the Direct Seat – Traditional methods such as DONT or Cappelletti should suffice. Opener could be strong, of course, but if so Responder may well be correspondingly weak. And of course, waiting one round until Opener's strength is clarified is often a good tactic. A lead-directing double of 1H is always possible.

In the Fourth Seat – Traditional methods here are fraught with danger because of Opener's possible strength; waiting until Opener clarifies his strength is usually the best tactic. With distribution, being weak rather than strong could be an advantage, since then partner will be likely to have some strength sitting over Opener. A lead-directing double of the 1S relay is always possible.

Alerting Requirements

(1) The 1H opening must be alerted, and explained as showing 11-19 HCP and denying a 5+ card suit.

(2) The 1S response must be alerted as an artificial relay requesting strength clarification, and Opener's rebid must then be alerted, with appropriate explanations when asked.

(3) All other responses must be alerted. The 2-level transfer responses require an alert rather than an announcement, since the failure to use the 1S relay denies 6+ HCP.

(4) All Reverse Stayman rebids by Opener require an alert and appropriate explanations.

(5) In general, natural bids by either partner showing a 4-card suit require an alert only if they show a specific HCP range or show a singleton in the next suit.

(6) Natural bids by Opener showing a 3-card suit must be alerted and explained.

(7) Natural bids by Responder showing a 5+ card suit should be alerted if Opener has previously denied holding 4 cards in that suit.

The Balanced Heart in Action

Naturally, the most common Balanced Heart openings will be of the weak 11-14 HCP variety. When Responder is also weak (0-5 HCP), no game is likely even if the opening is strong, so the emphasis is on scrambling to a safe spot and avoiding a penalty greater than the value of the opponents' potential part-score, game, or slam. We'll show a variety of sample auctions in order to illustrate the response structure, starting first with those auctions that do not begin with the 1S relay because Responder has 0-5 HCP.

Example 1 (EW Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ K3	♠ 1065	1H	P
♥ Q93	♥ J1086		
♦ A953	♦ 874		
♣ A1052	♣ K97		

This is probably our best spot, and NS are probably cold for at least 120 or 140 in spades or NT.

Example 2 (None Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ K964	♠ 1075	1H	1NT (0-5 balanced)
♥ J632	♥ A109	P	
♦ KQ	♦ 1072		
♣ A106	♣ 8743		

This is about as bad as it gets. Probably down 3, and the NS limit may be 2NT or 3D.

Example 3 (None Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ K1063	♠ Q874	1H	1NT (0-5 balanced)
♥ Q862	♥ J10	2C (4414)	2S
♦ J	♦ 9864	P	
♣ AK93	♣ 1062		

West corrects to 2C because of his singleton D. Probably down with good defense, but NS have a partscore in diamonds or in NT.

Example 4 (None Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ AQ82	♠ J43	1H	2C (0-5, T→2D)
♥ 963	♥ 1052	2D	P
♦ QJ8	♦ K109432		
♣ AK5	♣ 10		

Makes 2 or 3, while NS can make something between 2C and 4C.

Example 5 (Both Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ J63	♠ 1074	1H	2S (0-5, T→3C)
♥ Q73	♥ KJ4	3C	P
♦ A54	♦ --		
♣ KQ93	♣ 10876542		

East transfers to 3C, which makes or goes down 1, while NS can make 4 or 5 diamonds.

The Weak Notrump

By now, I'm weary of all those poor hands East has been holding. Let's give him enough for a 1S relay response, and first show a few examples of a Weak 1NT rebid by West. Ultimately, we'll finish by giving West a few of the stronger 15-17 or 18-19 HCP hands.

Example 6 (EW Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ K73	♠ 62	1H	1S (relsy)
♥ AK103	♥ J4	1NT (11-14)	P
♦ K104	♦ 9874		
♣ 854	♣ AKJ76		

East is happy to pass 1NT, but will run to 2C if doubled.

Example 7 (Both Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ AJ85	♠ Q10	1H	1S (relsy)
♥ 106	♥ AJ742	1NT (11-14)	3C (GF Stayman)
♦ A743	♦ --	3S (4S)	4C (5+ C)
♣ KQ9	♣ AJ19865	4D	4H (5H, since West denied 4H)
		6C	P

East bids clubs, then bids hearts after West denied 4 hearts, thus showing 65, and West goes to slam because of his good clubs and two side aces. Starting with a 3D transfer would make it hard to find 6C.

Example 8 (None Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ A963	♠ 84	1H	1S (relsy)
♥ QJ107	♥ 5	1NT (11-14)	3NT
♦ K874	♦ QJ5	P	
♣ Q	♣ AKJ9643		

With a likely 7 club tricks and a possible entry in diamonds, East just gambles on the NT game. A spade lead could beat it, but a red suit lead is more likely.

Example 9 (EW Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ KQ10	♠ A8	1H	1S (relsy)
♥ QJ10	♥ A64	1NT (11-14)	3S (MSS, game-forcing)
♦ K975	♦ A632	4D	6D
♣ K105	♣ AQ98	P	

With all 4 aces, East tried for a minor suit 44 slam, and chose the Minor Suit Stayman route. He got there but. the slam needs 32 trumps and a heart finesse because West's hand is so bad despite its 14 HCP.

Example 10 (Both Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ J653	♠ KQ107	1H	1S (relsy)
♥ AKQ7	♥ 53	1NT (11-14)	3C (GF Stayman)
♦ J6	♦ Q95	3H (4H, 1-4 S)	3S
♣ K63	♣ AQ75	4S	P

West showed 4 hearts, then raised to 4S when East showed 4S.

Example 11 (EW Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ AK107	♠ Q853	1H	1S (relsy)
♥ 1076	♥ Q3	1NT (11-14)	3C (GF Stayman)
♦ QJ9	♦ AK10864	3S (4S)	4S
♣ A76	♣ Q	P	

East plans to bid 3NT unless West shows spades, but is pleasantly surprised.

The Strong Notrump Jump

Enough of the Weak Notrump! Let's move on to the strong variety, and then finish up with some examples of the 15-17 HCP version, where the response uses the Reverse Stayman structure.

Example 12 (EW Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ AQJ4	♠ 1096	1H	1S (relsy)
♥ AQ64	♥ K7	2NT (18-19)	P
♦ KQ	♦ 7532		
♣ 975	♣ K432		

East's weak spot cards deter him from trying for 3NT.

Example 13 (EW Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ K103	♠ A42	1H	1S (relay)
♥ A4	♥ Q1095	2NT (18-19)	3C (Stayman)
♦ AK75	♦ QJ94	3D	3NT
♣ KJ109	♣ Q7	P	

West's 3D denied 4 hearts, and East is not strong enough to try for 6D, even though it could make on a good day.

Example 14 (Both Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ QJ92	♠ AK7	1H	1S (relay)
♥ KQ3	♥ 87	2NT (18-19)	3NT
♦ AK2	♦ J1094	P	
♣ A104	♣ QJ62		

An easy one. Note that we've right-sided this contract vis-à-vis the standard auction of 1C/2N/3N. This helps compensate for the occasional wrong-siding of spade contracts after the 1S response.

Example 15 (NS Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ Q93	♠ 1072	1H	1S (relay)
♥ Q3	♥ AK	2NT (18-19)	3NT
♦ AKQ9	♦ J107542	P	
♣ AQ84	♣ 103		

We want to be there even though a spade lead *might* defeat it.

Example 16 (NS Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ 4	♠ KQ3	1H	1S (relay)
♥ A953	♥ K104	3H (18-19, 1444)	3S
♦ AJ43	♦ KQ1097	4H (3 aces)	6D
♣ AKQ8	♣ 96		

Instead of 2NT, West jumps in the suit below his singleton. East asks for aces with 3S and West shows 3, so he assumes that West's remaining 6 HCP will be enough for slam.

The 15-17 HCP Version

At last we reach the key issue. Can the Reverse Stayman structure hold its own against the traditional Stayman/Jacoby structure? Let's find out!

Example 17 (NS Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ A107	♠ 83	1H	1S (relay)
♥ AQ85	♥ 1093	2C (15-17, M?)	3NT (no major)
♦ KQ103	♦ 975	P	
♣ Q7	♣ AKJ53		

3NT tends to show clubs (since 3C is Mini-Gerber and 3D would show diamonds). 3NT makes easily on any non-spade lead, and has good chances even with a spade lead (44 spades, or split aces).

Example 18 (EW Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ A654	♠ 32	1H	1S (relay)
♥ K	♥ AJ7532	2C (15-17, M?)	2D (T→2H, 4+H)
♦ A1064	♦ QJ5	2NT	3H (5+H, probably 6)
♣ KQ62	♣ J4	P	

With no interest in spades or NT, East transfers to hearts and then rebids them, so West subsides.

Example 19 (Both Vulnerable)		West	East
♠ AJ9	♠ Q753	1H	1S (relay)
♥ KQ96	♥ 8743	2C (15-17, M?)	2D (T→2H, 4+H)
♦ KQ76	♦ 98	2H	P
♣ 83	♣ A75		

East could raise to 3H with 8+ HCP, or to 4H with 10+ HCP, so West has no need to bid beyond 2H.

Example 20 (None Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ AJ	♠ K10985	1H	1S (relay)
♥ AQ97	♥ KJ104	2C (15-17, M?)	2NT (4+ H & 4+ S)
♦ QJ8	♦ 107	3H	3S (5+ S, forcing)
♣ K1085	♣ Q7	4H	P

East shows both majors first, then a 5th spade with a non-minimum, and West places the contract.

Example 21 (Both Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ AQ107	♠ 986	1H	1S (relay)
♥ Q973	♥ J2	2C (15-17, M?)	P
♦ J8	♦ K6		
♣ AK8	♣ Q95432		

West might frown when he hears East's Pass, but the frown will turn to smiles when he sees the dummy. Clubs is best even if Opener has a singleton club.

Example 22 (NS Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ AQ6	♠ J	1H	1S (relay)
♥ KJ10	♥ Q952	2D (15-17, 3343 or 3334)	P
♦ A72	♦ K109543		
♣ J972	♣ 85		

West shows 4333 with no 4-card major, and East knows he can pass safely without missing a game.

Example 23 (EW Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ K87	♠ AJ942	1H	1S (relay)
♥ AJ2	♥ 94	2D (see #22)	2S (5+ S, min)
♦ A73	♦ J96	P	
♣ KQ109	♣ 632		

Since East could jump to 3S to invite game, West is free to pass despite his maximum 17 HCP.

Example 24 (Both Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ KJ	♠ 82	1H	1S (relay)
♥ KQJ	♥ 92	2H (15-17, 2344)	3C (T→3D)
♦ A954	♦ KJ1072	3D	P
♣ K1053	♣ A872		

West showed 2344. East transferred to diamonds, and settled for a partscore that's hard to reach after a 15-17 1NT opening. 3NT needs a good guess in diamonds, as well as a favorable lead.

The Strong Response (15+ HCP)

Finally, we'll show a few examples in which Responder chooses not to use the 1S relay in order to suggest immediately the possibility of a slam if Opener is not minimum.

Example 25 (None Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ K1093	♠ Q64	1H	2NT (15+)
♥ J10	♥ AQ2	3C (any M?)	3S (no major)
♦ AK107	♦ Q4	3NT	P
♣ K82	♣ AJ764		

East showed 15+ . West showed interest in a major. East's 3S denied one, and West signed off in 3NT. With nothing extra, East subsided.

Example 26 (NS Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ QJ96	♠ AK72	1H	2NT (15+)
♥ AK6	♥ Q10	3C (any M?)	3H (4+S)
♦ J643	♦ AQ109	4S (4S, < 15)	4NT (RKC)
♣ K4	♣ AQ2	5D (1KC)	5H (Q ask)
		6S	P

East shows 15+ with 4 spades. With just a Weak NT, West signs off in 4S, but East persists with RKC, and bids the slam after West shows 1KC and the trump Q, but the better 6NT is missed.

Example 27 (Both Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ KQ	♠ A542	1H	2NT (15+)
♥ K43	♥ A8	3H (2344)	4C (T→4D)
♦ J954	♦ AKQ732	4D	4H (RKC)
♣ AK107	♣ 4	4NT (1KC)	5NT (all KC)
		7D	P

After West shows 2344 shape, East transfers to diamonds, uses RKC, and confirms holding all the keycards, and West bids the grand on the basis of his 3 side kings, but misses the optimum 7NT, since East might hold only 5D, so a S ruff might be needed.

Example 28 (None Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ Q92	♠ AKJ7	1H	2NT (15+)
♥ AQ108	♥ 54	3C (any M?)	3H (4+S)
♦ J104	♦ AK9	3NT (11-14)	4NT
♣ K102	♣ AJ75	P	

With 20 HCP, East tries for 6S, but settles for an invitational 4NT when West denies interest. With only 12 HCP and 4333, West has an easy pass.

Example 29 (NS Vulnerable)

		West	East
♠ AJ82	♠ Q10	1H	2NT (15+)
♥ J1095	♥ A84	3C (any M?)	3S (no major)
♦ Q63	♦ AJ102	3NT	P
♣ A6	♣ KJ104		

Another easy one. East shows 15+ and West asks for a major. East denies a major and West signs off in 3NT. East has nothing extra and passes.

Critique – The Good and the Bad

Let's examine the bad side first. To begin with, most spade contracts are wrong-sided when Opener should be declarer, but that can be a minor problem, and sometimes an advantage, for the majority of cases in which Opener is weak. In addition, opening 1H instead of 1NT makes it slightly easier for the opponents to compete (via a 1S or 1NT overcall). This slight loss of the preemptive value of a 1NT opening is partially compensated by the fact that such early intervention carries the risk that Opener holds one of the stronger hand types rather than a weak NT. Finally, adding the 4441 shape to the hand pattern mix can be troublesome, but most of the time the singleton can be shown if necessary (for instance the jump to the 4-level by a 17-18 HCP opener to show a singleton in the next higher suit), and in any case 4441 hands occur only about 3 percent of the time.

On the good side, the main advantage of the Balanced Heart comes on those hands where it is not used, since all other one-level opening bids show at least a 5-card suit, thus bestowing the admitted advantage of a 5-card major structure upon minor suit openings as well. In addition, the limitation to three hand patterns (4333, 4432, and 4441) adds greater precision to some sequences, when compared with the traditional Stayman/Jacoby structure (which must allow for Opener's 5-card minor). Most notable in this regard are the ability of an Opening Bidder with 15-17 HCP to show 3343 or 3334 shape with a 2D rebid, or to show 2344 or 3244 shape with a 2H or 2S rebid.

In the long run, however, the increasing competitiveness of modern bidding means that the true worth of any bidding innovation can only be seen after extensive testing at the table. This document has provided only a few suggestions in this competitive bidding arena, which is an obvious target for my ongoing research as I continue to seek the elusive *Bridge Utopia*.