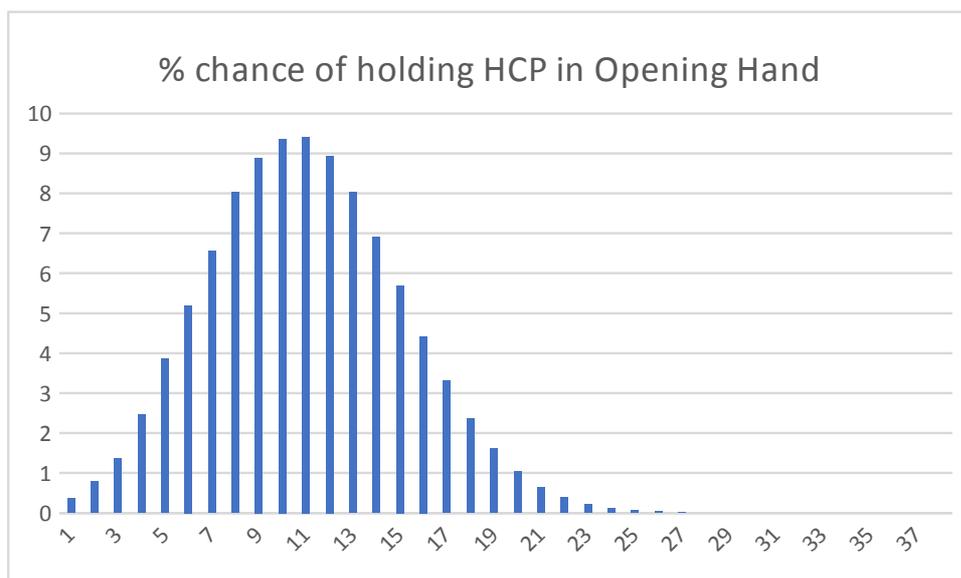


NORMAL EXPECTATIONS by Arthur Bennett

Tell me, do you ever overbid? I bet you do. We all do and often the reason is that we are not using a tool that is at our disposal. That tool is the Principle of Normal Expectations. Here's how it works.

All systems have sets of Normal expectations. When the Precision system was invented, its authors deliberately tried to tighten up those Normal expectations with the concept of Limited Opening Bids. Thus when you open 1D, 1H, 1S or 2C in Precision, you are saying that the HCP expectation for these bids is 11-15 and that in the case of 1H, 1S and 2C the suit will be at least 5 cards long. Conversely when you open 1C in Precision you are promising more than 15 HCP. When you open 1C, 1D, 1H or 1S in ACOL the High Card Point Count is more open-ended and it is never quite so clear whether the suit is 5 cards long or only 4. Nevertheless, regardless of the system you play, the reality of the situation is that the Normal Expectation of most opening bids will be the same. Your hand will not miraculously get better because you are playing Precision rather than Acol.



You will notice from the above graph that 26% of the time you will pick up an opening hand of 11-13 HCP and that hands with more HCP get progressively rarer. Totally regardless of system, the Normal Expectation for an opening bid of 1D, 1H, 1S (and 1C in ACOL or 2C in Precision) is 11-13 HCP.

Your bids have other aspects of Normal Expectation as well. Are you familiar with the concept of Loser Count. Let me explain. Imagine you have a Yarborough of 4333 shape and the potential enemy lays down AKQ in each of

the 4 suits. Ah-ah, he gloats, you have 12 Losers. But now let's give you this hand:

♠AK765 ♥4 ♦Q6 ♣A8754

Now he can't cash the Ace and King of spades and the Ace of clubs or even the Queen of diamonds because you have them, so in no-trumps you now have only 8 Losers. Now assume that you are going to insist that either spades or clubs will be trumps. When he now tries to cash the AKQ of hearts, he can only cash one of them before you ruff in, so now you have only 6 Losers.

The Normal Expectation for an opening bid is SEVEN losers. If the hand has more losers you probably shouldn't have opened. If you have fewer losers, that is a potential bonus.

Your opening bid will also have an Normal Expectation in terms of the length of your opening suit. Three level pre-empts promise a 7 card suit, weak two bids a 6 card suit, and if you are playing Precision or Standard American, your 1H and 1S bids promise 5 or more cards in the suit. Even in Acol, although you are not actually promising 5 cards, the Normal Expectation of the 1H and 1S openings is that the suit is 5 cards long rather than 4. The reason for this is that with only 4 cards you are more likely to have opened 1C, 1D or 1NT rather than 1 of a major.

So, you should sit down with your regular partner and work out the Normal Expectation for all your opening bids and all your competitive calls. For example you could agree that your opening 2H bid has this Normal Expectation. This might not be exactly your agreement of course.

SIX hearts exactly. 6-10 HCP and at least 5 of the points should be in the heart suit. Having 4+ cards in the other major is forbidden. In the three outside suits you may hold at the most 1 King or 1 Ace (that is 1 Ace or King in total, not one of each).

Some bids in any system have very closely defined Normal Expectations. 1NT is such a bid (12-14 HCP balanced, no 5 card major and no more than one weak doubleton).

The takeout double is another (10+ HCP, short in their suit, at least 3 cards in each unbid suit and preferably 4 cards in any unbid major.)

So if they open 1S, these are some hands you absolutely cannot make a takeout double on because they do not match the Normal Expectation.

A) ♠AKJ76 ♥T7 ♦A984 ♣32; B) ♠AJ7 ♥T97 ♦A98 ♣AQ32; C) ♠76 ♥AQ876 ♦A98 ♣A32; With A you would PASS. With B you would overcall 1NT and with C you would overcall 2H.

Whatever your opening bid or competitive call is, your partner will respond against the Normal Expectation of your bid. If for example you open 1H with this hand: ♠A76 ♥AQ876 ♦Q98 ♣32

He might respond 2H with ♠94 ♥K54 ♦K742 ♣J854 and you will pass.

Or he might respond 3H with ♠94 ♥K54 ♦K742 ♣A854 and you will pass.

Or he might respond 4H with ♠94 ♥K54 ♦K742 ♣AK54 because he has 13HCP and a 7 Loser hand and he knows that 7 Loser opposite 7 Loser almost guarantees game.

Things get more interesting when the bidding gets to be competitive. As a rule of thumb you should not bid again as Opener unless your hand has more values than the Normal Expectation. Conversely if you do choose to bid again this is not just to be competitive. It definitely shows a better hand.

When you have opened with a known suit length and the bidding has become competitive, do not bid one more of your suit unless you have more cards in your suit than the Normal Expectation. If you have more values but not more length you should double. This double is not simply penalty. It says to your partner, I have more HCP strength than my Normal Expectation. I would like you to decide whether to bid one more of our suit or another suit or to convert my double to penalty.

Let's look at the Principle of Normal Expectation in action on some real boards.

♠ KJ2
 ♥ 52
 ♦ 10832
 ♣ J952
 ♠ 43 ♠ 965
 ♥ A1098 ♥ J763
 ♦ J74 ♦ KQ6
 ♣ AK87 ♣ Q64
 ♠ AQ1087
 ♥ KQ4
 ♦ A95
 ♣ 103

Board 2 : Dealer East : NS vulnerable

You are West. South opens 1S and you have a perfectly good takeout double, but it is nothing special. You have a 12HCP, 8 loser hand (what as an opener you would classify as a weak opener). You are short in their suit, have 3+ cards in the other three suits and you have 4 cards in the unbid major. You double.

North raises his partner to 2S. East feels he has enough to bid 3H against the Normal Expectation of your double.

South has MORE than his Normal Expectation (2 more HCP and 1 fewer Loser, although positionally he is sitting under the double). He bids 3S (but should actually double and his partner should bid 3S)

You are still a very ordinary takeout double hand. If East has the expected 4 hearts you have an 8 card trump fit and TNT says that is only good enough for the 2 level. Your action should be PASS.

At the table West bid 4H and earned himself a bottom board.

If you really wanted to bid on, you could double. This would show a better than ordinary opening double (which you don't have!) and would invite East's cooperation in your choice of contract. As it happens East would pass and you would get a top board.

♠ Q8
♥ KQ64
♦ K84
♣ AKQ7

Board 1 : Dealer North : Love all

Two passes to you and you to bid. What is your assessment of your hand?

19 HCP balanced. You open 1C with the intention of rebidding 2NT. It's an okay hand but opposite a yarborough from partner it would be lucky to generate 5 tricks.

Your worst fears are confirmed when North overcalls 2 spades. Your Queen of spades has just become worthless and the rest of your shape is well – shapeless.

Your partner, East passes over the 2S and you now have some more information. Your partner does not have enough strength or shape to make any kind of squeak over 2S.

Nevertheless you re-open with a double and I think most people would agree with you because you clearly have MORE than the Normal Expectation.

East replies 3H and it is important to recognize that he is no longer bidding 3H against the Normal Expectation of your 1C opening bid. He knows you have a better hand and still chooses to bid 3H and not 4H.

Your clear cut action is now PASS.

At the table West raised the contract to 4H and went light.

♠ Q63
♥ K73
♦ K103
♣ A965

Board 7 : Dealer South : All vulnerable

South opens 2H (a weak two) in front of you. How do you assess your hand and what action should you take?

You have 12 HCP, an 8 Loser hand and the very worst shape 4333. You are vulnerable. It is a hand you would not probably want to open 1D on. You have no 4 card majors.

As a double it is very bad because two of the three suits you are promising have only 3 cards in them. You have wasted values for a takeout double in the King of their heart suit.

All bids have an NORMAL EXPECTATION. The Normal expectation of a non vulnerable take out double at the 1 level is about 10-12 HCP with the correct shape. The Normal Expectation of a vulnerable take out double at the 1 level is about 11-13 HCP with the correct shape. The Normal Expectation of a non vulnerable take out double at the 2 level is about 13-15 HCP with the correct shape. The Normal Expectation of a vulnerable take out double at the 2 level is about 14-16 HCP with the correct shape. This does not mean that you should never double with a point less or even two points less if the shape is excellent.

At the table East doubled vulnerable at the two level with about 4 points short and with the worst possible shape. His partner with a 17 count confidently bid 6S and was very lucky to go only 1 light. If you pass, Your partner will double and against your Normal Expectation of that vulnerable double, you will bid 3NT making 5 or even 6 for a top board.