4-4-4-1 - teacher

Context

This is a short topic.
By all means combine it with another topic if you wish, but I prefer simply to combine it with a play session on random deals which will inevitably revise much of what has gone before.

Teacher style

In the following notes and in the accompanying commentary, I recommend my preferred style of dealing with hands of this shape.
It might not be the traditional style you were taught but it is becoming increasingly mainstream.
By all means teach your own preferred style if you wish – it will still work just as well as it ever did.

Strength

This hand shape can become powerful once a fit is located, but in the first instance it has only limited playing strength lacking, as it does, any long suits.
Do not add on points initially for the shortage (you may well add on points for the shape once a fit has been located.)
Instead, there is something to be said for taking off a point just for the shape alone in the absence of strong redeeming features.
Broadly speaking this boils down to:-

an opening bid on a 4441 hand requires a minimum of 13 points;
it will usually be wrong to open such a hand on 12 points.

Traditionally

Guidelines for opening this hand-shape went along the lines of:-

open the suit below the singleton, and/or
open the middle of 3 touching suits.

My preferred style

Better, in my opinion, is the modern style in which you always open a minor.

Thus, with:-

a singleton spade open 1♦;
a singleton heart open 1♦ (or 1♣);
a singleton diamond open 1♣;
a singleton club open 1♦.

The advantage of this method

is that whenever you open one of a major and rebid in a new suit you will guarantee at least 5 cards in that major.

The downside

Is that with a singleton club and 13 or 14 points, when you open 1♦ and partner rebids 2♣ you will have to rebid 2♦ on your 4-card suit.

Feels unnatural doesn't it, but partner is unlikely to hold a 4-card major, and a bid of 2♦, even on a misfit, is unlikely to be punished.

With 15 points or more you may prefer to misrepresent the shape just a little with a rebid in no trumps.

In fact

The only difference is likely to be when holding a singleton club, when you will open 1♦ rather than the traditional 1♥. This creates the problem outlined above, but in return when I open 1♥ and rebid 2♦ I will guarantee at least 5 hearts.

Some might also traditionally have opened 1♠ on the hand with a singleton diamond.

I now open 1♣ with this hand.

To cover this situation it is important that in the sequence 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 1♠ the 1♠ bid should be played as natural guaranteeing a 4-card suit. I may be getting a little ahead of the course here, but it is increasingly becoming the norm that the 4th suit at the 1-level should be played as natural and forcing for one round. The sequence 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 2♠ can then be played as your agreed version of 4th suit forcing in which the spade bid may not be genuine and the sequence will be forcing either to 2NT or to game according to the partnership method.