

The Five-card Major System

Five-card Majors Part I

by Neil Rosen

WELCOME to a brand-new series of articles for your online magazine. I propose to explore thoroughly the ideas and techniques associated with the system of Five-card Majors and Strong No-trump. I will also develop some ideas in later articles on Two Over One game forcing.

Most bridge players in Britain are brought up with Acol as their bidding base. There is therefore a certain degree of security in playing a system you know and are comfortable with. However, more and more people are now finding that the Five-card Majors Strong No-trump system (I will refer to it as 'Strong and Five' for brevity) provides a better framework for bidding accuracy. Globally this system is used far more than is the Acol system.

If you have not played Strong and Five before, the main principles are that if you open 1NT that's strong (15-17) and if you open a major it must be at least five-cards long. If you don't have at least five cards in a major, you may be able to open 1NT or you should bid a minor (see page 60). Note that the five-card major constraint does not affect the responder, who should bid his four-card major(s) as soon as possible (see page 61).

I intend to review all aspects of this system. Let us start with some well known pros and cons of Strong and Five vs Acol:

Advantages

1. FEWER PENALTIES

You do not concede as many penalties (either doubled or undoubled) as are generated by the use of the weak no-trump.

2. EASE OF RAISES

The knowledge of at least five cards when a major is opened can prove invaluable. You can comfortably raise with three-card support and, perhaps even more importantly, you can more easily make use of the 'Level of the Fit' principle in competition. Just to recap this principle:

With 8 combined trumps, bid to the two level.

With 9 combined trumps bid to the three level.

With 10 combined trumps bid to the four level.

Note that this is a rough guide and other factors must also be taken into account, such as vulnerability, point count, shape of hand etc.

3. EASE OF FINDING MAJOR-SUIT PART-SCORES

Finding major-suit part-scores is *much* more efficient. Here is an example deal from a recent pairs tournament:

Love All. Dealer East.

♠ K 8 5 4 ♥ 10 7 6 3 ♦ K 6 5 ♣ K 9		♠ Q 10 7 ♥ J 4 2 ♦ Q J 10 7 ♣ Q 6 2	♠ A 9 6 3 ♥ K Q 8 5 ♦ 9 2 ♣ A 10 8
♠ J 2 ♥ A 9 ♦ A 8 4 3 ♣ J 7 5 4 3			

As East-West we were able to bid 1♣ (short) – 1♥ – 2♥ – Pass. The result was 2♥+1 for +140, scoring 85% with the vast majority of the field (Acol players) opening a weak no-trump and making fewer tricks. This sort of thing happens *a lot*. Please realise that while you score more in no-trumps – if you make the same number of tricks – the *vast majority* of the time you will make more tricks by discovering your 4-4 fit.

This fundamental truth is an integral part of all bidding systems. Finding an eight-card fit (in particular a 4-4 fit) has always led to improved results. Consider the Stayman convention, used by millions


— they cannot all be wrong!

4. NO-TRUMP REBIDS WORK BETTER

The associated no-trump ranges work better than they do for Acol:

- a) Rebidding no-trumps at minimum level to show 12-14 HCP and jumping to show 18-19 HCP is very efficient and clear.
- b) The problem hands that Acol generates just do not occur.

Consider the following example:

♠ K 10 6 ♥ A Q 10 2 ♦ A K 7 4 ♣ 6 5		♠ 8 5 4 ♥ K 7 ♦ Q 9 8 5 2 ♣ A 6 3
--	--	--

Many playing Acol would bid 1♥ – 1NT – Pass. If playing a strong no-trump, East would invite and West might well accept. This 9-count opposite a 15-16 rebid type hand is very poor for Acol. I accept many of you might choose to respond 2♦ instead because of the five-card suit (I agree!). However, without a five-card suit many 9-point hands will indeed respond 1NT and miss decent games because partner should only raise to 2NT with 17 HCP and not 15-16 HCP.

Playing a style where you include Weak Twos as part of your bidding armoury (the vast majority of you, I expect), it is imperative to respond to partner's one-level suit opening with fewer points than the 6 HCP that are classically recommended. As a consequence, having a 2NT rebid as 18-19, not 17-18 HCP as in Standard Acol, is immensely helpful, because:

- a) The auction will not drive itself too high, i.e. at least 23 HCP for 2NT and 25 for 3NT will be achieved which, as any teacher will tell you, is quite correct and necessary whereas Acol would be driving you to 2NT with 22 and 3NT with 24 assuming a 5 HCP

response. These contracts will regularly fail!

- b) Having *more* room after an 18-19 rebid will often result in the correct contract being achieved.

Some examples are given below:

♠ A Q 7		♠ K 8 6 4 3
♥ K 8 7		♥ 5 2
♦ A K 5 3		♦ 7 6 2
♣ K 5 2		♣ Q 9 4

Assuming you accept a major response with only 5 HCP (you should!) then the 'Acot' auction is 1♦ – 1♠ – 3NT – Pass (oops, too high again!), whereas the Strong and Five auction of 1♦ – 1♠ – 2NT – Pass is now possible.

Change the responder's hand slightly to:

♠ A Q 7		♠ J 9 8 6 4 3
♥ K 8 7		♥ 5 2
♦ A K 5 3		♦ Q 6
♣ K 5 2		♣ Q 9 4

We now have the Acot auction 1♦ – 1♠ – 3NT – ?, where the responder can usually collect a minus score by either passing 3NT or trying his luck in 4♣ with insufficient values. With the Strong and Five opener rebids 2NT (18-19) and responder still has the ability to stop in 3♠ and have a greater expectation of a plus score.

Possible continuations after no-trump rebids will be discussed in a later article in this series.

Disadvantages

1. The pre-emptive effect of the weak no-trump has some real advantages.
2. Needing to use 'prepared minors' or 'short club' when lacking a five-card (or longer) major creates difficulties – particularly in contested auctions.
3. Lack of familiarity with a new system and all the nuances it carries.

Choice of Short Club or Better Minor

If you don't have a five-card major suit and are out of range for opening 1NT, what should you open? Opinions differ here. It is essentially a matter for each partnership

to decide upon. I offer you three mainstream choices. If you don't hold a five-card (or longer) major, open with:

1. (a) Your better minor (longest suit, or the better-looking one if equal length);
(b) Your better minor, but only open a three-card diamond suit if specifically 4-4-3-2, in all other cases open 1♣.
2. A short club, i.e. at least two clubs, with a 1♦ opener guaranteeing at least four cards in diamonds.
3. A short club; now 1♦ still shows at least four cards, but you only open 1♦ with five cards or four very good ones (typically K-J-10-x or better).

The choice is yours... I personally use No. 3, but I prefer 2 or 3 to 1 because at least we know that the diamond suit is *always* real.

You may also choose to open a lot of balanced 11-counts, though this is obviously again a matter for partnership agreement. The crucial difference to playing Acot is that it is much safer to open 1♣ with 11 points than it is to open a weak no-trump with only 11 points. (It is also tremendous fun!)

Consider the hands below:

Hand A	Hand B
♠ A J 6 5	♠ K Q 8 5
♥ K Q 6	♥ K Q 7 4
♦ J 8 6 3	♦ 7 3
♣ Q 2	♣ Q 6 3

With Hand A, open 1♣ (or 1♦ if that's what you have agreed with partner). With Hand B, always open 1♣.

Opener's Rebid

I recommend the style where opener rebids 1NT to show a balanced hand, by-passing any major suits en route (these can be found by Checkback Stayman if necessary). (See my [December 2013 article, pages 44-45.](#))

So on Hand A above:

(a) Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦/1♥
1NT	

(b) Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
2♣	

And with Hand B above:

(a) Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
1NT	

(b) Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
2♥	

(c) Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
2♣	

Thus if you open 1♣ and rebid another suit you are guaranteeing real clubs – usually 5-4 at least, occasionally 4-4-4-1. (Please note that there are no suit-quality restrictions when opening 1♦ with a 4-4-4-1 shape; these apply only if your hand is a balanced weak no-trump.)

Knowledge of real clubs enables responder happily to give simple and jump preference to clubs. Thus holding:

	After the auction:	
	Partner	You
	1♣	1♦
	1♥	?

You can confidently bid 3♣, knowing that partner *cannot* have example Hand B shown earlier.

The 'French' style of bidding is for both opener and responder after a prepared club opening essentially to bid suits up the line, so they would rebid 1♥ without real clubs.

I do not recommend this style.

You will be able to test yourself on your rebids as opener on the next two pages, but first read how to respond to a 1♣ opener and do the relevant exercises so as to make sure you know what both you and your partner are doing!



Responding to a 1♣ opener

1. *It is imperative to respond in a major ahead of a minor (4-4, or even 4-5 or 4-6!), when not holding a game going hand* (up to 11 HCP). The reason for this is so that one of the main strengths of the system, which is locating major-suit fits, can be brought into play. If you were to respond 1♦ and partner then were to rebid 1NT, the major fit could easily be lost. E.g.

♠ J 2
♥ K 8 6 5
♦ Q 8 7 4 2
♣ J 9

This hand should respond 1♥, not 1♦ to a 1♣ opening. Acol players are used to responding with their longest suits and also bidding up the line with two four-card suits but *that needs to change*. These responses where you bid the major first ahead of a minor are named after their originator, Richard Walsh, and are called ‘Walsh Responses’. So, technically, a major suit response to 1♣ should be alerted and explained as ‘could contain a longer minor’ if asked.

2. A 1NT response is *not* 6-9, it is more like 6-10 or even a bad 11 (the sort that wouldn’t wish to raise a weak no-trump to 2NT, essentially).
3. A 2♣ response is ‘inverted’ i.e. stronger than 3♣. It usually shows 10+ points and is basically invitational to game facing a maximum weak no-trump type hand. Individual partnerships can put a lot of work into these auctions.
4. 2♦/2♥/2♠ are ‘weak jump shifts’ – typically similar to a weak two opening. A six-card suit and an agreed range are required (maybe 5-9 or even weaker by choice).
The idea behind all this is that the majority of the times partner opens 1♣ he actually has a weak no-trump hand rather than a club suit.
5. 2NT is natural – a good 11-12

balanced with no four-card major.

6. 3♣ is natural and weakish, at least six clubs and approx. 5-9 HCP.
7. 3♦/3♥/3♠ are all natural and pre-emptive, showing a seven-card suit with approx. 5-9 HCP.

Exercises on Responding to a 1♣ Opener

What do you respond to an opening 1♣ in our new system with the following hands?

Hand 1 ♠ A 6 2 ♥ A 8 5 ♦ Q 6 3 ♣ 9 7 6 2	Hand 2 ♠ A 7 5 3 ♥ 6 5 ♦ A 8 5 2 ♣ 7 6 4
Hand 3 ♠ A J 8 4 ♥ K 7 3 2 ♦ J 9 7 3 ♣ 6	Hand 4 ♠ 6 2 ♥ K 8 5 4 ♦ K 7 6 3 2 ♣ 9 6
Hand 5 ♠ A 5 ♥ Q 8 ♦ A 7 4 ♣ K J 10 6 4 3	Hand 6 ♠ Q 10 7 ♥ Q 6 3 ♦ K 9 2 ♣ K J 10 6

Answers

1. This is a 1NT response in the new style. 10 HCP should routinely be bidding 1NT in response to any suit opening (unlike in Acol where the maximum should only be 9 HCP). It works so well since if partner is balanced, then he will have either 12-14 or 18-19 HCP so there is *never* a problem – unlike in Acol where the opener could still have a balanced 15-16 HCP – a real headache!
2. 1♠. Remember that with all hands below the values to force to game (nominally up to 11 or 12 HCP) you *must* introduce the major suit first. This will reap one of the main benefits of the system – which is to locate more accurately major-suit part-score contracts.

3. 1♥. It is still vital to bid majors ahead of diamonds when 4-4-4-1 or even 4-4-5-0 unlike in Acol – again to give the maximum chance of finding the correct major-suit part-score.
4. 1♥. Four-card majors are bid ahead of four-, five- or even six-card diamond suits (or club suits of course).
5. 2♣. A choice between a ‘forcing/inverted’ 2♣ or just jumping to 3NT. How much nicer effectively to be able to do both by starting with clubs, then potentially bid no-trumps later. Details of the continuations to inverted-minor suit raises will be in a later article in this series.
6. 2NT. Straightforward good 11-12 HCP with a balanced hand, denying a four-card major suit, of course.

Exercises on Opener’s Rebid

Here are some problem hands focusing on what to *rebid* in this new system. Hopefully the style should not prove too complex and totally alien – but let’s see!

Hand 1
♠ A J 8
♥ 6 2
♦ K 7 5 4
♣ A Q 9 3

- | | | |
|-----|------------|----------------|
| (a) | You | Partner |
| | 1♣ | 1♦ |
| | ? | |
| (b) | You | Partner |
| | 1♣ | 1♥ |
| | ? | |
| (c) | You | Partner |
| | 1♣ | 1♠ |
| | ? | |
| (d) | You | Partner |
| | 1♣ | 1NT |
| | ? | |
| (e) | You | Partner |
| | 1♣ | 2NT |
| | ? | |

continued on next page ➔

Hand 2
 ♠ A J 8 4
 ♥ 6 2
 ♦ Q 5 4
 ♣ A J 9 3

- (a) You Partner
 1♣ 1♦
 ?
- (b) You Partner
 1♣ 1♥
 ?
- (c) You Partner
 1♣ 1♠
 ?
- (d) You Partner
 1♣ 1NT
 ?
- (e) You Partner
 1♣ 2NT
 ?

Hand 3
 ♠ A J 8 4
 ♥ 6 2
 ♦ Q 5
 ♣ A J 9 7 3

- (a) You Partner
 1♣ 1♦
 ?
- (b) You Partner
 1♣ 1♥
 ?
- (c) You Partner
 1♣ 1♠
 ?

- (d) You Partner
 1♣ 1NT
 ?
- (e) You Partner
 1♣ 2NT

Answers

Here are my answers to the problems on opener's rebid.

Hand 1:

- (a) 1NT, showing 12-14 HCP (or 11-14 if I convinced you earlier!). Do *not* fall into the trap of raising to 2♦. This rebid describes an *unbalanced* hand, usually 5-4 at least in shape. Balanced hands are balanced, I repeat, *balanced* – and should be bid as such. Let no-one tell you otherwise, please.
- (b) 1NT, again showing a weak no-trump hand.
- (c) 1NT. I know some of you will have been tempted to raise to 2♠ with three nice spades and a small doubleton heart. This is a very sound idea playing Acol but *not* within this system base. This is because the responder often bids a lousy four-card spade suit ahead of an equal or even longer minor (see *Responding to a 1♣ Opener* earlier).
- (d) Pass. Partner has approx. 6-10 HCP. There is *no chance* of game – so do not suggest there is by making an invitational raise.
- (e) 3NT. You are maximum for your 11-14 rebid so on this occasion you can happily accept partner's game invitation.

Hand 2:

- (a) 1NT. This shows the balanced character of the hand. Do not raise diamonds or introduce spades. The spades will *never* be lost here because

partner will bid them instead of 1♦ if weak, or if stronger will bid them next round.

- (b) 1NT, 11-14 balanced. Bidding 1♠ would again suggest 5-4 at least.
- (c) 2♠, a simple raise. This is natural and non-forcing, often leading the partnership to a better part-score than those pairs opening a weak no-trump and playing there.
- (d) Pass. 2NT would show 18-19.
- (e) Pass. Not enough to accept partner's invitation to game on this occasion.

Hand 3:

- a) 1♠, showing five clubs and four spades. Partner is now well placed as to how to continue. Please note that with five clubs and five spades you should generally open 1♠, but opening 1♣ does *not*, I repeat, *not deny a five-card major* as many erroneously think when taking up these systems or indeed when they play against them as well! Thus:

♠ K J 7 6 3
 ♥ 5
 ♦ 4
 ♣ A Q J 9 3 2

This hand would still open 1♣ even when holding a five-card major!

- (b) 1♠, again natural in nature showing a 5-4 shape.
- (c) 2♠, a simple raise.
- (d) Pass. Partner has *denied* spades and you do not have the required strength to reverse (decent 16+ typically)
- (e) Pass. Partner has shown 11-12 HCP balanced with no four-card major. You are again minimum. Generally it is a good idea to bid on with either 14 HCP or 13 HCP and a good five-card suit. □



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