

The Five-card Major System

Five-card Majors Part II

by Neil Rosen

THE aim of this series is to challenge you by providing a comprehensive framework for an updated bidding system based on a strong no-trump, five-card majors and two-over-one game forcing.

I do not expect each and every one of you to adopt all of the proposals I make – though in reality the more you try to start with, the better in practice. Leaving out certain chunks – intending to add them later – never seems to work as well as it might. Essentially, what my reader needs is a dose of blind faith: these methods are extremely effective and organised, but changing from a more natural system is always stressful.

Continuations after a 1NT Rebid

Best here is to use some sort of checkback. I refer you to my article in the December 2013 *English Bridge* (pages 44-45) and will test you in  the quiz at the end of this article!

You can choose to use just 2♣ as checkback or the more modern two-way checkback. The reason for having good methods here is because the 1NT rebid occurs with high frequency.

It should also be remembered that I am happy to advocate that you open a fair chunk of your balanced 11-counts; this is much safer than trying to open an 11-count weak no-trump in Acol.

The advantages are:

1. You can bid many marginal/light games (better strategy for teams than pairs perhaps).
2. You can safely enter the auction early, posing the opponents many problems.
3. Using an 11-14 rebid allows many hands to be rebid with 1NT. Providing a good checkback structure is used, this should give you a real edge.

Whether to Open with 11-count Hands

My style is to look at several factors, as follows:

- a) The presence of intermediates (tens and nines) – particularly in long suits.
- b) Vulnerability – be cautious if vulnerable when making very marginal decisions.
- c) Whether a five-card minor is held (providing it contains an honour or two).
- d) A 4-3-3-3 distribution should be downgraded.

So, yes, you should open with Hands A or B below:

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

... but pass with Hands C or D:

Hand C	Hand D
♠ Q 4	♠ A 6 3
♥ K 7 3	♥ K 5 2
♦ Q 7 6 5 2	♦ Q J 5 2
♣ K J 3	♣ J 6 4

The 2NT Rebid

I looked at this in my previous online article in the February 2014 issue, and have also  discussed responder's action on page 39 in this issue. Again, since the responder will *always* show a major first, unless in a game-forcing sequence, opener should by-pass a major. For example, holding Hand E, after the auction has started 1♦ – 1♥, the correct rebid is 2NT (18-19 HCP, remember) not any number of

Hand E
♠ A Q 6 2
♥ Q 8
♦ A J 10 3
♣ A J 7

spades. This is a different approach for those familiar with the Acol style of 'bidding up the line'. Spades will not be lost since responder can checkback.

The key advantage of this approach is that if opener bids one suit and then another, he *always* has an unbalanced hand (usually 5-4 at least but 4-4-4-1 is also possible). This allows both simple and jump preference to be given with no qualms. For example, holding Hand G, after the auction starts 1♣ – 1♥ – 1♠, a 3♣ bid is easy, with no worries about only having three clubs.

Hand G
♠ J 6
♥ K 8 6 5 2
♦ Q 6 3
♣ A 8 5

What to Open with a 4-4-4-1 Distribution

There is *no*, repeat *no*, definitive answer here. Whatever methods you currently invoke should stand you in good stead.

Holding Hand H, I prefer 1♦ to 1♣.

Thus the need for the decent diamond quality *does not apply* to 4-4-4-1 hands, only to weak no-trump balanced hands.

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

The 3NT Rebid

Since a 2NT rebid now covers 18-19 balanced hands, and a 2NT opener is 20-22 HCP, the 3NT rebid is not needed to show a flat 19 as in standard Acol. This allows the rebid to be used to show an Acol-two type hand in the suit opened. For example, holding Hand I, you would open 1♦ and rebid 3NT over partner's 1♥ response.

Hand I
♠ A 5
♥ 6
♦ A K Q 7 6 4 3
♣ A 8 4

Note that a balanced hand is *not*

guaranteed. Responder should not therefore rebid his six-card major as a matter of course, e.g. with Hand J responder should pass 3NT rather than bidding 4♥, as there is no guarantee that the opener has sufficient hearts.

Hand J
♠ Q 7 4
♥ Q 10 8 7 5 2
♦ 5 2
♣ K 3

Using the above method allows slams to be bid efficiently and reduces the burden on bidding with too strong a hand (as in the Acol sequence 1♦ – 1♥/1♠ – 3♦). It also takes away the need to jump into a new (but fake) suit to set up a game-force: after 1♦ – 1♥/1♠, you no longer need to jump to, say, 3♣ with only a three-card suit.

Inverted Minor-suit Raises

These are pretty important within the system base, particularly after 1♣, since it could be only two cards in length.

a) 1♣ – 2♣

This bid should normally show 11+ HCP with at least four (but usually more) clubs. Why at least 11 points?

Well, the bid basically invites to game facing a maximum weak no-trump in opener's hand – the 11-14 balanced hand type being opener's most likely hand type. There is a lot of room here for individual partnership work in developing the continuations. After 1♣ – 2♣, my normal methods are as follows:

2♦ shows a no-trump hand, *without* four clubs (11-14 or 18-19 HCP). This works well since responder can still invite game by bidding 2NT which the opening bidder will accept or not depending on his range. Guesswork is therefore not necessary, unlike in some other systems.

2NT shows a weak no-trump *with* at least four clubs. Responder raises to 3NT if strong enough or, with only invitational values, bids a non-forcing 3♣ (the club fit, remember, is guaranteed) which the opener will pass if minimum or convert to 3NT if maximum.

3NT shows 18-19 balanced, with at least four clubs.

2♥/2♠ is natural, in principle showing a 5-4 distribution.

3♣ is natural and non-forcing, showing at least six clubs and 11-13 HCP.

3♦/3♥/3♠ are splinters, showing a singleton or void in the suit bid with a suitable hand.

Here are some examples where you are East, the responder:

Hand K
♠ A 3
♥ Q 2
♦ Q 7 6
♣ A Q 10 7 6 2

West	East
1♣	2♣
2♦ ¹	3NT

¹ Weak no-trump with fewer than four clubs

Once partner shows a weak no-trump, give nothing away and go straight to 3NT (probably the bid you would have to make on your first turn if not playing Inverted Minor-suit Raises, of course).

Hand L
♠ A 7 3
♥ 6 5 2
♦ A 8
♣ A Q 7 6 2

West	East
1♣	2♣
3♥ ¹	3♠

¹ Splinter

After a splinter bid of 3♥, we can rule out 3NT as an option. Nothing can be lost by cue-bidding the spade ace, as a slam is a real possibility.

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

West	East
1♣	?

Opinions differ here. Many play that you should bid the suits in their most 'natural' order, so longest suit with a good hand, i.e. bid the clubs first then introduce the hearts later. Others play that you always show the major first. I introduce this hand for you to form your own opinions and agreements.

I personally play that you bid 2♣ first, then hearts later – though I confess that for many years I did not!

b) 1♣ – 3♣

The 3♣ response is pre-emptive in nature (again, you normally assume a weak no-

trump opposite) and will usually be passed. The bid shows at least six cards (very, very occasionally five) and about 5-9 HCP. It can be quite weak but remember that opener may have an 18-19 balanced hand, in which case he will now rebid 3NT – so quite weak, yes, but not revolting!

Passed Hand Responses to 1♣/1♦

Again these are all fairly natural but remember to bid a major if you have one, even when holding a longer minor.

A 1NT response is up to 10 HCP (or even occasionally a bad 11-count).

A 2NT response is no longer needed to show a decent 11-12 HCP. 'Why not?' I hear you ask? Well, quite simply because the philosophy advocated here is to open most decent 11-counts in the first place and certainly all 12-counts! So a jump to 2NT in response to either minor is used (as you might after a take-out double) to show a *good raise* in partner's suit, four cards at least in diamonds, but *six* cards in clubs or at least five very good ones (as the clubs could be only two cards, but a diamond opening will usually be based on four diamonds).

This frees up 1♣ – 3♣ and 1♦ – 3♦ to be shaded (again, in practice, similar in nature to the jump raise after a take-out double).

Jump responses in a new suit need to be more carefully thought through. I recommend that they are still 'weak' after a 1♣ opening but 'fit-showing' after a 1♦ opening. I refer you to my article on fit-showing jumps in the June 2013 *English Bridge* (pages 44-45).



Jump Responses – 'Weak Jump Shifts'

Consider these sequences:

Opener	Responder
1♣	2♦/2♥/2♠

Opener	Responder
1♦	2♥/2♠

These responses are known as 'Weak Jump Shifts' (WJS). What that means is virtually the same as for opening a weak two bid, i.e. you have a six-card suit (with some texture) and whichever range you decide to adopt. However, in practice WJS are slightly lighter in values than weak two openers since responder has a safety net

provided by partner announcing opening values.

I suggest the following ranges:

- 4-8 HCP when non-vulnerable
- 5-9 HCP when vulnerable

After responder makes a WJS, the opener treats it as if partner had actually opened with a weak two bid in that suit, i.e. he can raise it pre-emptively (*not* invitational) to the three level, or choose to use the 2NT relay to enquire about the strength of the WJS using whichever methods you usually use after weak two bids.

The idea of playing *weak* responses at both the two and three level is that in practice, when opening a minor, there is a high frequency that you hold a weak no-trump type of hand – so it pays to put maximum pressure on as soon as possible.

Consider the sequences:

Opener	Responder
1♣	3♦/3♥/3♠

Opener	Responder
1♦	3♥/3♠

These are best played as pre-emptive bids showing seven-card suits and 4-9 HCP approximately.

Note, however, that I use 1♦ – 3♣ *not* as a weak jump shift, but as natural and *invitational*. Typically this shows a six- or seven-card suit and 10-12 HCP as, for example, in Hand N:

Hand N ♠ K 7 ♥ 5 2 ♦ J 7 3 ♣ A Q J 8 7 3

In essence this invites the opener, when holding his likely weak no-trump, to bid on with a partial fit for clubs, or with a maximum or suitable weak no-trump. Therefore 9 HCP would be very rare for this bid, unless a seven-card suit was held.

Note again: 1♦ – 3♣ is *not* a Weak Jump Shift.

Responder Rebids His Own Suit

One useful side-benefit of playing WJS is that a simple rebid by responder of his own suit is now known to be stronger than a WJS.

For example in the sequence:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♠
2♣	2♣

The 2♣ rebid is now known to show a stronger hand (about 9-11 HCP with at least six cards) than in standard methods. This is terrific for keeping some auctions in check which would otherwise run away from you in standard methods by being forced to jump to the three-level in your suit at your second turn. For example, holding Hand O, bid 2♥ (WJS) over partner's 1♣ opening.

Hand O ♠ Q 9 ♥ K J 10 6 5 2 ♦ 8 7 3 ♣ 6 2
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However, holding Hand P, if partner opens 1♣, respond 1♥ and rebid 2♥ on your second turn, as follows:

Hand P ♠ Q 7 ♥ K J 10 6 5 2 ♦ A 7 3 ♣ 5 3
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Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1♠	2♥

This shows a constructive hand with 9-11 HCP – which, of course, is akin to a jump to 3♥ in standard methods.

This allows the sequence:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1♠	3♥

To be *forcing to game* (again different to standard bidding).

Note: on this last auction you could bid both 3♥, or 2♦ (fourth suit forcing) followed by 3♥, to show a forcing hand with hearts. The difference is that when you have both routes available, the jump to 3♥ describes a classic *strong jump shift* with very good hearts – a self-supporting suit being the norm.

If there is not a fourth suit forcing bid available, then the jump is simply forcing to game and does not necessarily promise a jump-shift hand. For example, holding Hand Q the sequence 1♣ – 1♥ – 2♣ – 2♥

Hand Q ♠ A 7 ♥ K J 10 6 5 2 ♦ Q 7 3 ♣ A 3
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would be constructive (9-11) so here you can bid a *forcing* 3♥ (just forcing to game with at least six hearts, not necessarily any stronger than that).

Two-over-one Responses

I like to recommend that you play two-over-one as game forcing, as I have mentioned before. This means that any new suit at the two level in response to a one-level opening shows an opening hand and is forcing to game.

Thus 1♦ – 2♣ shows 12+ HCP and is forcing to game. With fewer points you will often have to bid 1NT or 2NT.

Quiz

Make the next bid in the following auctions:

Problem 1 ♠ 8 7 ♥ K 9 6 3 ♦ Q J 8 7 6 2 ♣ 5	Partner 1♣ 1NT	You 1♥ ?
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Problem 2 ♠ 8 7 ♥ K Q 7 6 2 ♦ 4 3 ♣ J 7 4 2	Partner 1♦ 1NT	You 1♥ ?
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Problem 3 ♠ J 7 ♥ K 7 6 5 2 ♦ Q 6 3 ♣ J 4 2	(A) Partner 1♣ 1NT	You 1♥ ?
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Problem 4 ♠ K Q 10 7 5 2 ♥ A 7 ♦ 6 3 ♣ Q 4 2	(B) Partner 1♣ 1♠	You 1♥ ?
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Problem 4 ♠ K Q 10 7 5 2 ♥ A 7 ♦ 6 3 ♣ Q 4 2	(A) Partner 1♣ 1NT	You 1♠ ?
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Problem 5

♠ A 6 5
♥ J 8 7 2
♦ Q 4 2
♣ A J 6

(A)
You 1♣
Partner 1NT
? 2♣

(B)
You 1♣
Partner 1NT
? 2♦

(C)
You 1♣
Partner 1NT
? 3♣

(D)
You 1♣
Partner 1NT
? 3♦

Answers to Quiz

Problem 1: 2♣. Having correctly remembered to introduce the hearts and not the diamonds on the first round (only show the minor first with game-forcing values, remember), you can still arrange to play in 2♦.

Simply bid 2♣ which *forces* the opener to bid 2♦ at this stage. This is often referred to as a 'puppet' to 2♦. Here you will then obviously pass, whereas if instead you bid further, this would be *invitational* to game.

Problem 2: 2♥. Partner has shown a balanced 11-14 HCP hand. My view is that

with decent hearts this hand will nearly always play better in hearts than 1NT. I suggest simply removing 1NT to 2♥ which is just 'to play', i.e. there is no suggestion whatsoever for the opener to continue to bid since you did not use two-way checkback.

Problem 3: (A) Pass. With a poorer heart suit, on this occasion I would recommend pass. 2♥ is clearly an alternative, so award yourself decent marks for that effort as well!

(B): 2♣. However tempting 1NT might look, think again!

- i) Partner nearly always holds at least five clubs on this auction;
- ii) If no-trumps are to be played, it pays in the long run to have the stronger hand as declarer whenever possible.

Thus I recommend 2♣ – a simple preference bid showing approx 5-9 HCP and club preference.

Problem 4: (A) 2♣ (or 4♠!). A close decision here as to whether to force to game or not. If yes, you must be careful to bid 2♦ (forcing checkback) rather than 3♣, since this would now be a slam try. You might just punt 4♠, I suppose.

Assuming you wish to invite, the correct way to do so is to bid 2♣, then 3♣ to show an invitational hand with at least six spades. If you swap the spade queen for the spade jack in the problem hand, you will see a clear-cut example of an invitational hand with a six-card suit which would always follow this route.

(B): 2♠. A perfect hand for bidding a constructive but non-forcing 2♠. It shows

six spades and 9-11 HCP. Perfect! This will gain you many swings against natural methods where you have to jump to 3♣ with this sort of hand.

Problem 5: Please note that here you've become the opening bidder and stopped being the responder.

(A): 2♦. This is forced upon you since partner has 'puppeted' to 2♦. We have no choice at this stage. Partner has either at least five diamonds as well as spades and is intending to pass, or, more usually, an invitational hand is about to reveal itself.

(B): 2♥. Partner has used the game-forcing 2♦ checkback. We have two features of note: the four-card heart suit and the three-card spade support. Following sound general principles you should always bid your lower feature first (a bit like always responding 2♥ not 2♣ to ordinary Stayman when holding two four-card majors).

(C): 4♣. Partner has shown six spades and has made a slam try. Despite only 12 HCP, with the two possibly vital black-suit aces you owe him a cue-bid 'on the way' to 4♣. This does little more at this stage than show a bit of enthusiasm; clearly your next intention will be to 'sign-off' in 4♣, then leaving any further slam overtures to your partner.

(D): 3♣. Partner has shown at least five spades and five diamonds and has made a slam try. In similar fashion to the previous example, you don't want to jump to 4♣ to put the brakes on. Here you have two aces *plus* the queen of diamonds (a golden card on this auction), so you've got nothing to be ashamed of! Let's co-operate somewhat. □



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