

The Five-card Major System

Five-card Majors Part IV

by Neil Rosen

I AM delighted at the interest (panic?!) this series has engendered. I think that this month we will slow down slightly and review some of the material already covered.

Before doing that, however, an area of competitive bidding which ties in wonderfully well when playing five-card majors and a strong no-trump is to play support doubles (see [click link](#) *Jeremy Dhondy's article, February 2014, page 57*) and redoubles.

These apply when partner, as responder, has shown a suit at the one level, with the length of the suit unknown (at least four cards), and enable you to show your level of support precisely so that partner can judge the continuations, whether the opponents continue to bid or not.

Support Doubles: Partner Has Responded and RHO Overcalls

Consider the following auction:

Opener	Opp 1	Responder	Opp 2
You		Partner	
1♣	Pass	1♥	2♦
Dble			

The double here is a *support double*, showing *exactly three-card* heart support. Compare this to the following alternative calls you could make:

2♥ would guarantee four-card support, most usually in a weak no-trump type hand (these auctions are *high frequency*).

3♦ is an unassuming cue-bid (see my article in the June 2012 issue, pages 24-25), showing a good hand with four-card support, 16+ HCP being usual (or even a very good 15, I

suppose) – something like Hand A below:

Hand A
♠ Q 7
♥ A J 8 3
♦ A 5
♣ K Q 10 7 6

3♥ shows a stretched hand with four-card support and a bit of shape (*not* a weak no-trump hand – that would always just bid 2♥ in this situation), something like Hand B below:

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

When do Support Doubles Apply?

They apply when partner has responded at the one level to your opening bid and the partnership is *still able* to play at the two level in the suit bid. Thus in the following auction:

Opener	Opp 1	Responder	Opp 2
You		Partner	
1♣	Pass	1♥	2♠
Dble			

Your double is *not* a support double. It is simply a take-out double – the reason being that there is no security at the three level. However, holding Hand C as responder in the next auction, it would not be ridiculous to compete to 3♥ (I know the 'Law of Total Tricks' says not to, but at least you are guaranteed an eight-card fit).

Opener	Opp 1	Responder	Opp 2
You		Partner	
1♣	Pass	1♥	2♦
Dble	3♦	?	

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

If opener had simply passed over 2♦, you would expect him to have at most two hearts (or a very bad hand) so competing to 3♥ would be much less attractive.

If on the last auction opener had bid 2♥ over 2♦, showing four-card support, it should be very easy to bid to 3♥ (a guaranteed nine-card fit nearly always suggests competing to the three level in competition).

So these are the principles:

1. Support doubles are mandatory at the one level, but optional at the two level: that is, look at your hand – if very poor, do not make a support double at the two level.
2. They apply after partner has responded at the one level and the length of his suit is still unknown (at least four cards).
3. They do *not* apply when the opponents overcall 1NT, when a double should be reserved for penalties. For example:

Opener	Opp 1	Responder	Opp 2
You		Partner	
1♣	Pass	1♥	1NT
Dble			

The double is not a support double it is for *penalties*.

4. They do apply after a 1♣ – 1♦ start

to the auction.

5. They do apply after a 1♥ – 1♠ start to the auction.
6. They do *not* apply if responder has already shown five cards. For example:

Opener	Opp 1	Responder	Opp 2
You		Partner	
1♦	1♥	1♠	2♥
Dble			

The double here is *not* a support double since 1♠ promised at least five cards, as responder would have used a negative double with only four cards in spades in this sort of auction.

7. Support doubles and redoubles, while most commonly used with quite weak hands, are not in fact limited in any way; with a strong hand just start with a double then bid again.
8. Negative inferences apply, so in this auction:

Opener	Opp 1	Responder	Opp 2
You		Partner	
1♣	Pass	1♥	1♠
?			

A 2♣ bid from opener would now *deny* three-card heart support – and should probably be alerted as such. Similarly a jump to 3♣ would also deny three-card support. This added definition is quite an amazing side-feature of playing these methods.

Support Redoubles

Support redoubles work in exactly the same way as seen with support doubles, but obviously apply when the opponents have doubled responder's bid rather than overcalled it. After the following start to the auction:

Opener	Opp 1	Responder	Opp 2
You		Partner	
1♣	Pass	1♥	Dble
?			

Redouble from opener would show three-card support, whereas a 2♥ rebid would promise four-card support.

Here are two problems for you:

Problem 1

♠ J 5 2
♥ 4 3
♦ A J 8 7 3
♣ A Q 7

Holding the hand above, what would you call in each of the following auctions:

- A. **Opener Opp 1 Responder Opp 2**
You Partner
1♦ Pass 1♠ 2♥
?
- B. **Opener Opp 1 Responder Opp 2**
You Partner
1♦ 1♥ 1♠ 2♥
?
- C. **Opener Opp 1 Responder Opp 2**
You Partner
1♦ Pass 1♠ 1NT
?
- D. **Opener Opp 1 Responder Opp 2**
You Partner
1♦ Pass 1♠ Dble
?

Problem 2

♠ A 7 3
♥ A Q 8 4
♦ 3
♣ A Q 7 5 2

Holding the hand above, what would you call in each of the following auctions:

- A. **Opener Opp 1 Responder Opp 2**
You Partner
1♣ Pass 1♥ 1♠
?
- B. **Opener Opp 1 Responder Opp 2**
You Partner
1♣ Pass 1♥ 2♦
?
- C. **Opener Opp 1 Responder Opp 2**
You Partner
1♣ Pass 1♥ 1NT
?

Have you worked out the answers? If so,

check below to see whether you've got them right.

1A: Double – a classic support double, showing three-card support for spades. You should not be ashamed of this 12-count: two aces, a five-card suit and no wastage in hearts all being positive features. I stress this point since the support double was not mandatory here – pass would be acceptable but a little timid.

(This brings me to one last point when playing support doubles: how does the responder bid opposite one? The answer is: as naturally as possible, but sometimes the situation will arise where responder has to repeat his major suit with only four cards, despite knowing that opener only has three-card support. The idea is that this should not be too stressful since the partnership is always still at the two level so no disaster should ensue!)

1B: 2♠ – this is *not* a support double position since 1♠ over 1♥ showed at least five cards in spades.

1C: Pass would be my choice. 2♠ for the gamblers amongst you is possible but very risky here. I would reserve that bid for a hand with four-card support or maybe three-card support and a singleton somewhere. Hearing the opponents bid no-trumps should *always induce a note of caution* in any competitive auction – I am sure you are all aware of this already.

1D: Redouble – a support redouble, showing three-card support.

2A: 2♠ – an unassuming cue-bid showing a good four-card raise in partner's suit, usually with 16+ HCP. Perfect!

2B: You have a choice here: 3♦ (unassuming cue-bid) or even 4♦ (splinter). Very often making a splinter in a suit bid by the opponents proves to be the key to bidding a light but successful slam – where otherwise partner's poor holding in the opponents' suit may have proved sufficiently off-putting to miss out on a slam. I agree 4♦ is light, but am sure it would be my choice at the table.

2C: Matters are quite different after a 1NT overcall, when you should be more cautious. I do not believe a penalty double to be the winning option here, since four-card support is so important a feature to get across. I would recommend 3♥ (or maybe 2NT as an unassuming cue-bid for keen partnerships).

Revision

Let's now review some of the concepts covered over the last few months. A quiz may help lighten the work!

Revision Quiz 1

What do you respond to a 1♣ opening with the following hands?

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

Answers to Revision Quiz 1

1: 1♠. A routine 1♠ in our style. While Acol advocates responding the lower of two four-card suits, this does not apply here. Partner may well have a four-card major – in which case it is imperative to find it directly since if we respond 1♦ opener may have to rebid 1NT not one of his major – and the beauty of the system will evaporate as the 4-4 major suit fit, which was ‘begging’ to be located, will in fact be lost!

2: Still 1♠! We extend the principle from (1) above to include bypassing five or even six-card minor suits in favour of our major. Only with enough points for game (usually 12+ approx.) do I recommend introducing diamonds ahead of your four-card-major.

3: 1NT. In Acol you would be too strong (6-9 points), but here you are safe knowing that if partner is balanced then he will have either 12-14 or 18-19 HCP so there is no problem responding 1NT with up to 10

HCP. A jump to 2NT would show 11-12 HCP here.

4: 1♠. Remember you cannot make a classical ‘jump-shift’ within this system as this would in fact be a ‘weak jump shift’ i.e. a decent six-card suit with 4-9 HCP approximately (see pages [60-61 in the April Online Extra](#)).



5: 2♠. Here is a perfect example of a weak jump shift response to a 1♣ opening – simultaneously describing your hand beautifully *and* putting pressure on your next opponent.

6: 2♣. Virtually unbiddable in Acol where you have to either invent a 1♦ bid or jump to a heavy 3NT. Here we can first bid an inverted (forcing) 2♣ – then 3NT next. No problem at all!

Revision Quiz 2

With each of the hands below, what would you call at your turn in the featured auctions?

Problem 1 ♠ 8 5 2 ♥ A Q J 8 7 3 ♦ K 2 ♣ 7 3	Partner 1♣ 1♠	You 1♥ ?
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Problem 2 ♠ 8 5 2 ♥ A Q J 8 7 3 ♦ K 2 ♣ A 3	Partner 1♣ 1♠	You 1♥ ?
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Problem 3 ♠ 8 5 ♥ A K Q J 8 7 3 ♦ K 2 ♣ A 3	Partner 1♣ 1♠	You 1♥ ?
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Problem 4 ♠ A J 8 5 ♥ A 3 ♦ K Q 6 4 3 ♣ 6 3	Partner 1♦	You ?
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Problem 5 ♠ 8 5 ♥ A 3 ♦ 4 3 ♣ K Q J 10 9 8 4	Partner 1♦	You ?
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Problem 6 ♠ 8 5 3 ♥ K 7 6 ♦ K Q 8 ♣ A Q 9 5	You 1♣ 2NT ?	Partner 2♣ 3♣
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Problem 7 ♠ 8 3 ♥ K 7 6 ♦ A Q 7 6 3 ♣ Q 9 5	Opener Partner 1♦	Opp 1 1♥	Responder You ?	Opp 2
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Answers to Revision Quiz 2

1: 2♥. This hand falls betwixt and between in standard methods: do you slightly underbid with 2♥ or slightly overbid with 3♥?

With the methods proposed in this series, 2♥ shows about 9-11 HCP and at least six hearts, i.e. a fully invitational hand – whilst keeping the bidding low! The reason you can do this, of course, is because you have 1♣ – 2♥ available as a weak jump shift so your hand is known to be better than that.

2: 2♦. You have an opening hand with six hearts. There are two possible options in this situation: a) to jump to 3♥ or b) to bid fourth suit forcing and then 3♥.

When both these options are available (when your side has already bid three suits, not just two), then I favour bidding the fourth suit followed by 3♥ to show an opening hand with six cards in length.

3: 3♥. Whereas, following on from the previous example, you can show a classical ‘jump-shift’ by jumping in your own suit. Typically this shows 16+ HCP with lovely hearts (or whatever suit you responded in; it works the same way with spades and diamonds too!).

4: 2♦. This is a game-going hand and you can easily show it by bidding 2♦ (inverted minor raise) first before introducing your next longest suit (spades) to describe the shape of the hand more accurately than by responding 1♠ – as I suspect most of you do at the moment.

5: 3♣. Remember 1♦ – 2♣ is forcing to game, so you would need an opening hand to do so. I recommend using 1♦ – 3♣ *not* as weak but as *invitational* (at least six clubs, approx. 10-12 HCP) for exactly this reason.

6: 3NT. Partner has shown invitational values facing a weak no-trump. Having already shown a weak no-trump with at least four clubs via your 2NT bid, you can now accept the game invitation with your maximum 14 HCP and bid on to 3NT.

7: 2♥. An unassuming cue-bid, showing at least four diamonds and at least 10 HCP.

Opening One of a Major

Well, well, well – it has taken me till half-way through my fourth article to get on to this vital topic! This month and in the next issue we will be looking at some of the techniques associated with the scheme.

Advantages

By opening 1♥/1♠ with five cards, partner can judge much better on several levels:

- i) Partner can use the ‘Level of the Fit’ principle to be guided as to how far to raise when responding (see later, bottom of the page).
- ii) Partner can judge better how far to compete in contested auctions.
- iii) Making simple raises immediately is much easier than in Acol where you have to bid another suit first. Ambiguity often then arises as to whether the responder actually holds real support or is just grudgingly giving preference at his second turn to bid.
- iv) Playing a system which is used globally allows you to play with (or at least understand more) all sorts of partners and opponents at home, abroad, or even online!

Disadvantages

- i) Lack of familiarity – trust me, it is

well worth the effort!

- ii) The need to play ‘prepared minors’ or ‘short club’.

Before we go on, I wish to dispel one widely held myth as totally false . . .

‘If I open 1♣, I deny holding a five-card major.’

No, you don’t! If you were to hold a hand with six clubs and a five-card major, you should still open your longest suit first – rather than warping the hand by opening your five-card major. (Rant over . . .)

Requirements

Just a normal hand with at least five cards in the major opened. Normal guidelines should help you here (Rule of Twenty, or whatever other judgement guide you already use). One early point to mention is that holding a five-card major but in the range for a strong no-trump (15-17, remember), I think you are much better off long term by opening 1NT and not the major. This is against classical Acol thinking, I know – but it certainly is a winning proposition. Consider these hands:

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

Hand 1: I recommend passing (except in third seat, where opening would be fairly normal).

Hand 2 is a normal 1♠ opening in any seat.

Hand 3 is a choice of opening 1♠ or 1NT. As mentioned, I *definitely* prefer 1NT.

Raising the Major to the Two Level

This is usually done with three trumps (or occasionally four with a poor/stodgy hand). Care should be taken since rather than requiring 6-9 HCP, in practice the raise to

two is much more likely to be based on 5-10 HCP.

Because the length of the suit opened (five) is known, it makes life as responder *much easier* when you have a fit. For example, if partner opens 1♥, you should raise to 2♥ with each of the following hands:

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

Hand A: normal and uncontroversial.

Hand B: no need to introduce spades as you would do in Acol, since an eight-card fit is known (usually only bother with five spades). If partner makes a further bid, he can always introduce a four-card spade suit should he have one, so the spade fit will come to light if game is possible.

Hand C: note that a *balanced* 10-count with three trumps should normally only raise to the two level. This is *very important*: holding a 10-count with either a five-card side-suit or a singleton would make the hand too good for a simple raise to the two level.

Raising the Major to the Three Level

There are various approaches here. I favour using the ‘Level of the Fit’ principle (you bid to make as many tricks as you have trumps between the two hands) to allow you nearly always to bid to the three level (= nine tricks) when the partnership has a combined nine trumps, and often bid straight to the four level (= ten tricks) when ten trumps (or more!) are held.

Standard methods would involve using limit bids as per Acol with either three- or four-card support.

For example:

(turn to the next page)


Answers

1: 2♥. Yes, minimum, but with 5 HCP including an ace it is essential to bid. You might be making game, or certainly you want to make life difficult for your opponents. It is much safer to bid on minimum values when you do have a fit rather than when you do not!

2: 2♥. Maximum this time but still in range. Remember that hands up to 10 HCP should routinely raise only to the two level when balanced.

3: 3♣. Too good for a quiet 2♥ raise this time. A good five-card suit and 10 HCP allows you to make a three-card invitational raise via the Bergen 3♣ bid.

4: 3♦. A limit raise, promising 10-12 HCP with four-card support

5: 2NT. Jacoby game-forcing raise. What? You don't play it? Well, you should! (For an introduction to the convention, see page 38,  October 2012.)

6: 2♠. Bergen mixed raise, showing four-card support and 7-9 HCP. These bids are designed to put maximum pressure on the opponents while having the safety net of a nine-card trump fit.

7: 3♥, weak. These bids are designed to be weak but not totally dreadful! I recommend about 4-6 points rather than 0+ as some people try to play – that just seems to generate bad scores, in my experience.

8: 4♥. With five-card support and a bit of shape (I hate 5-3-3-2 hands doing this), I feel that using the Level of the Fit to jump to the four-level is easily a winning tactic long-term. Either you can make your contract or, if not, you make life fiendishly difficult for your opponents in the auction.

9: 4♥. Yes, 4♥ here too. It is rare to jump to 5♥ since you may well pre-empt your side rather than the opponents if it is your partner who has a good hand.

See you all next time for some more developments with the 1♥/1♠ openings. 



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