

5-card Majors

Why should you play 5-card majors? Well, I have been playing Acol a lot lately, 4-card and 5-card majors and for me, there is no contest. 5-card majors have a distinct advantage over 4-card major systems. It is easier to judge the fit in the contested auction and, at county level, your opponents will rarely allow you a free run in the auction. This allows responder to raise the opening bid of one of a major on 3-card support and be sure that the all important 8-card, or better, fit exists. The deal below is one of my favourites :-

	West		East	
♠	9		♠	10854
♥	AK1094		♥	863
♦	A1054		♦	QJ932
♣	1095		♣	4
	West	North	East	South
	1♥	double	2♥	double
	3♥	double	all pass	

1♥ showed 10-15 points (don't forget I play Precision so with 16+ I would open an artificial 1♣) with 5+ hearts. 2♥ showed 3-card heart support and very few points. Luckily, North and South both had only four spades each and felt that they could not bid the suit directly and so both of them doubled, for take-out initially. So, confident that partner would not bid this way without a singleton, I re-raised to 3♥ robbing our opponents of as much bidding space as possible, and this was doubled for penalties. 4♠ made at the other table losing just one diamond and two heart tricks, but 3♥ doubled made losing one trick in all four suits. Double game swings win matches.

This deal is a fluke, and you might think that we were very brave in the bidding, but our opponents were vulnerable and we were not and so we could afford to go three down doubled and still show a profit. If we had been vulnerable, we would not have been as brave but, if you are thinking that the West hand is not strong enough for an opening bid, think again. In the modern game, opening bids get weaker each year and I would never consider passing a hand like this, at any vulnerability.

If you who have studied the 'Law' you will understand this better but, in short, with an 8-card fit it is in responder's best interests to raise to the 2-level, with a 9-card fit to the 3-level and to the 4-level with a 10-card fit. But the phrase 'in your best interests' does not necessarily mean that you are going to make your contract, only that you should show a profit most of the time. The Law is worth a little study because it has its flaws but, if opener's 1♥ opening bid only guarantees four hearts, with only three hearts, responder may not be in a position to raise the heart suit for fear of ending in a 4-3 fit with very few points.

Value and pre-emptive raises.

So, how does responder show a full value raise to the 2-level? The raise in the example above was not intended to necessarily end up with a making contract. In most cases, the final contract will not make but will show a profit most of the time, so long as we use these ideas with caution. But opener needs to know when responder's raise is pre-emptive or full value. It is easy to show the difference when responder is considering a raise to the 3-level. Many of you will already use a 2NT response, or something similar, to show a value raise to 3 of opener's major. Therefore, a direct raise is pre-emptive and there is no ambiguity. If we modify the hand above a little, we have :-

	West		East	
♠	9	♠	10854	
♥	AK1094	♥	8632	
♦	A1054	♦	QJ92	
♣	1095	♣	4	
	West	North	East	South
	1♥	double	3♥	?

North/South are even less likely to find their game whereas, in the previous example, a good pair might well have found it. The same number of tricks are available in both cases. That will not always be the case and a 9-card fit will usually generate more tricks than an 8-card fit. In fact, if the outstanding trumps split 2-2 in the second example, 10 tricks will be made.

Dealing with the take-out double.

The ability to make value and/or pre-emptive raises unambiguously is vital in the contested auction. This can be done in an uncontested auction, but it is not so easy in the contested auction. Even the take-out double changes the dynamics of the auction. We may just have sufficient strength for game to be on and even a slam may be possible with good distribution, but a part-score is a more likely result, and any convention has to cater for all possibilities. Too often, each pair tries to outbid their opponents until the bidding gets too high and someone gets doubled. Nobody ever seems to know when to give in. But there is a better way to deal with the take-out double, a way that not only allows us to give pre-emptive and value raises but also allows responder to compete effectively with weak hands, or stronger hands, with no support for opener. So, when 1♥ is doubled for take-out, responder bids :-

- 1) Pass shows no interest in a higher contract.
- 2) Redouble shows about 9+ points with less than 3-card heart support and less than 5 spades.
- 3) 1♠ shows 5+ spades and is competitive only but has less than 3-card heart support.
- 4) 1NT shows 5+ clubs, any strength.
- 5) 2♣ shows 5+ diamonds, any strength.

- 6) 2♦ is a value raise to 2♥.
- 7) 2♥ is a pre-emptive raise.
- 8) 2♠ is weak with 6+ spades and no heart support.
- 9) 2NT is a value raise to 3♥ or higher.
- 10) 3 of a new suit is pre-emptive.
- 11) 3♥ is a pre-emptive raise.

This comes at the cost of just one natural bid, i.e. 1NT. However, a balanced hand can redouble to show values but with no 5-card suit, and then rebid in no trumps later if appropriate. A natural 1NT bid has limited value anyway and the redouble is more flexible and often allows the possibility of finding a better contract or paves the way for a profitable penalty double.

The 2NT response shows a value raise to the 3-level or higher and is quite a common way of showing a value raise to the 3-level or higher. It gives us additional space and so a new suit will be a cue bid showing a control in the bid suit and slam interest.

The important features of this convention are the transfers, the 2♦ value raise and the 2♥ pre-emptive raise. Now we have a system that can compete with a good fit but poor values or to actually know for sure that we have the balance of power so that we are not talked out of anything. If responder has no support but a 5+ card suit of his own, he shows it via a transfer. Opener is forced to accept the transfer and responder can pass with a weak/competitive hand or he can bid on with a stronger hand. At least, this is how it works in a Strong Club system. You may have to modify it slightly to cater for the fact that your opening bids may be wider ranging than a Precision opening bid of one of a major. In an Acol based system, you may have to allow opener to show a stronger hand by accepting the transfer with a jump, for example.

A similar table can be constructed for when the opening bid is 1♠ but there is no 1-level suit bid left, but the transfers will deal quite adequately with that. So, if we modify the example above yet again, we might have :-

	West		East
♠	9	♠	J85
♥	AK984	♥	QJ6
♦	A1054	♦	KQJ92
♣	1095	♣	4

	West	North	East	South
	1♥	double	2♦	pass
	2♥	pass	3♦	pass
	4♥			

The 3♦ rebid shows a source of tricks and is similar to the 'fit jump' convention. But, as opener has good diamonds as well, he can count on 5 diamond tricks with at least 4 heart

tricks and a club ruff or 2. Declarer should make 11 tricks with a total of 21 high card points, not bad.