



Barry Rigal

# Five-card Majors is the better system

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at [elena@ebu.co.uk](mailto:elena@ebu.co.uk)

BRIDGE is a game of errors. An effective system reduces opportunity for error. Five-card majors allow little room for flexibility in opening a hand; four-card majors give you a choice – requiring you to use judgment. I know I'd rather not have to use my judgment if I can help it!

Five-card majors leave you better placed in competitive auctions. Let's see how:

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

|      |       |      |          |
|------|-------|------|----------|
| West | North | East | South    |
| 1♥   | 2♦    | 2♥   | All Pass |

Playing four-card majors, East will sell out to 2♦. After all, if you bid 2♥ with the East cards, you might find yourself facing a 3-4-3-3 15-count (or heaven forbid, a 3-4-4-2 pattern). The same West hand, with a more aggressive North:

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

|      |                 |                   |          |
|------|-----------------|-------------------|----------|
| West | North           | East              | South    |
| 1♥   | 3♦ <sup>1</sup> | Dble <sup>2</sup> | All Pass |

<sup>1</sup>Weak  
<sup>2</sup>Negative

I have been fair; I could have given East a singleton heart. But West with his balanced defensive hand will be able to pass the negative double, following the Law of Total Tricks. Partner could have three hearts –

but if so he'll have extras. 3♦ rates to be down 300; 3♥ might be defeated on trump promotions. If the jump was intermediate, a penalty of 500 is more likely (as declarer will be short of entries to dummy). However, if playing four-card majors, West cannot pass 3♦ doubled: the risk of missing a 5-3 heart fit is just too high; the extra definition of the opening bid prevents you from telling the same story twice.

It is considerably safer to raise a five-card major pre-emptively. In Acol a pre-emptive raise is more dangerous – partner could be balanced with extras.

While Acol has the edge in being able to raise a minor – raising a possibly three-card minor with four trumps is safe enough – a 1♣ opener delivers length most of the time, 1♦ 95% of the time. (And unless you open all 4-3-3-3 hands with a major – not recommended – Acol has the same problem too.)

Five-card majors allow you to select a rebid, confident that you have told your story already.

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

|      |       |      |          |
|------|-------|------|----------|
| West | North | East | South    |
| 1♥   | Pass  | 1NT  | All Pass |

Few Wests will pass 1NT if four-card majors are in use, but if the no-trump response is semi-forcing (many play it as forcing but I like to pass with balanced minimums) the five-card majorite can pass. On any simple auction, a five-card majorite *never* needs to rebid his suit to show five.

The rebid for a pair playing four-card majors in a 2/1 auction is often a problem. You have to rebid 2NT with or without

stoppers, or repeat a weak five-card major. This problem arises less frequently when you use minor-suit openings for balanced hands. It is more efficient to open balanced hands with cheap calls than expensive ones. Beginning balanced good hands with a major takes up the room for low-level exploration (the same principle is behind a strong club, by the way).

In Acol responder frequently bids a new suit or 1NT in response to a major, then gives preference both with three or two trumps, and less than invitational values. Would you pass or bid with:

|             |
|-------------|
| ♠ 5         |
| ♥ Q 8 5 3 2 |
| ♦ A K 3     |
| ♣ A K 10 4  |

|      |       |      |       |
|------|-------|------|-------|
| West | North | East | South |
| 1♥   | Pass  | 1NT  | Pass  |
| 2♣   | Pass  | 2♥   | Pass  |
| ?    |       |      |       |

Knowing you are facing only two trumps would persuade you to pass, wouldn't it? If responder always raises a major with three trumps and a smidgen of shape, he's really playing five-card majors!

Another advantage of five-card majors and a strong no-trump is that with a balanced hand when you bid a suit you are either too good or not good enough for 1NT. So you do not have to worry about differentiating the two strong balanced hand-types (15-16 and 17-18 balanced).

The fact that responder can raise directly with constructive hands and support, but go through 1NT with minimum raises, will help to avoid getting overboard too often. You may play in 1NT when facing a balanced minimum, but that is where Acol would leave you.

Four-card majors are quick and dirty; they may disrupt the opponents but detract from your own scientific auctions. When even Bob Hamman has switched to five-card majors, you know the cause is lost!

# Four-card Majors is the better system

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR).  
Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.



Paul Bowyer

THE DEBATE

THE battle between those who believe an opening bid of 1♠ or 1♥ should only be made on a five-card suit and ACOL-style players who happily open 1♠ or 1♥ on four-card suits has been raging on and off for as long as I can remember – and I started playing bridge in 1966. The war may have raged on for years but really it hasn't been won by either side. I am, however, going to start with an admission that may surprise you. If you are playing five-card majors and partner opens 1♥ or 1♠, you have a small but definite advantage over a player whose opening bid may only contain a four-card suit. There, now, I said it would surprise you. But wait. Firstly the advantage is indeed small – it is nowhere near as large as the proponents of five-card majorism will like to have you believe. And there is a downside to these methods – a big downside that five-card major proponents like to brush under the carpets and pretend is not a problem. It is simply what happens when you open the bidding with 1♣ or 1♦. If you are playing five-card majors and 'better minor', then the following hands have to be opened with 1♦ and 1♣ respectively:

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

(Of course, if you play a 15 – 17 No-trump and that would be your choice on Hand 1 then amend the values slightly to be less than that. The point is still valid.) Some players choose to play that 1♦ always shows diamonds so would open 1♣ on both these hands. 'I shot an arrow in the air – where it lands I know not where.'

Now, the average five-card major fan will ignore this gaping hole in his bidding system and pretend that this makes no difference at all. What rubbish! I have seen countless match-points (of all types) leak away on hands like this for a variety of reasons. Firstly, I have seen a number of disasters where a five-card major adherent has opened 1♣ and the next thing he knows the opponents are in 3NT with partner on lead. Does partner lead your 'suit' which may be purely notional? Or does he try his own? A guess – and where you guess you often guess wrong. Even where the opponents gain the contract in a suit, partner has no clue whether to try his suit, your 'suit' or an unbid suit simply because your opening bid has told him nothing at all. Where playing four-card majors a 1♣ opening bid shows clubs (curiously, it usually turns out to be five, the more so if your style is to open 1♠ or 1♥ with four of a major and four of a minor) and partner knows that will be a decent lead.

Secondly, what do you do when holding a hand like Hand 2 above and you open 1♣ and hear a 1♠ response. Easy, I hear you say, you raise to game. What could be easier? Well, nothing, except how does partner know if and when to advance to a slam? There are many hands that depend on a fit and playing 'better minor' partner is completely in the dark. A holding of, let us say, Q-x-x in partner's suit is likely to be golden – if partner can be trusted to have the suit. If partner might have nothing at all in the suit, then you are reduced to guesswork. In short, you don't know if you are on your arm or your elbow. Consider Hand 3, for example:

Partner opens 1♣, you respond 1♠ and partner raises to 4♠. How do you value

| Hand 3       |
|--------------|
| ♠ A Q 10 8 2 |
| ♥ 4          |
| ♦ K Q J 8    |
| ♣ Q 9 4      |

this hand? Well, if partner has Hand 2 above, then 5♠ is precarious and may go off on a club lead. Give partner a decent club suit, however, and this club holding is likely to be useful to you and slam may well make. If you are playing 'better minor', you have to shut your eyes and guess as partner's two bids have contributed little to your understanding of his hand.

There are other good reasons to play four-card majors. Basically, you open 1♥ and 1♠ more often than a five-card majorite, making it more awkward for the opponents to enter the auction and also often leading to speedier auctions. If you hold Hand 4, for example, would you rather have your right-hand opponent open 1♣ (or 1♦) where you can overcall 1♥ and maybe win the auction, or would you rather have your right-hand opponent open 1♠ where a 2♥ overcall is dangerous to the point of lunacy? Opening 1♠ when you can is likely to give the opponents these headaches. Moreover, what auctions are the hardest to defend against? The answer is: fast ones. If the opponents bid, for example, 1♠ – 3♠ – 4♠ you have no idea what to lead and how to defend. That sort of auction will come up much more often if you play four-card majors than if you play five-card majors.

I throw in my lot with S.J. Simon who wrote long ago that the best way to find a major suit fit was 'to bid 'em'. Quite. □

Do suggest topics for this column and we will try to set up the relevant debate.