

4 Card Majors

At the end of one Monday session a group of players were discussing the hands and I was asked to comment upon boards 25 & 26, and in particular my opinion of the correct opening bid when playing a 4 card major system. I guess that the asker did not really expect 2 pages!

Hand A (25) Hand B (26)

♠ 86	♠ J92
♥ A872	♥ AK76
♦ KQ764	♦ AQ
♣ K9	♣ A753

I said that 1♦ is correct with Hand A and that 1♥ is correct with Hand B. I.e. you do not open a 4 card major if you have a 5 card minor but you do open a 4 card major if you have just a 4 card minor. Hans (from Holland) was present and predictably said that that was totally wrong and that with a 4 card minor and a 4 card major you always open 'up the line' and open the minor. Well I'm used to this sort of thing by now, so I wandered off and got the latest issue of UK's 'Bridge Magazine'. I come prepared. They have a bidding quiz every month with a reasonably sophisticated version of Acol; the rules are spelled out and the very first line says '*4 card majors with a major bid before a minor and ♥'s before ♠'s*'. So, pretty clear, eh?

Hans said that 'nobody bids like that any more'. Now I guess that Hans can call John G, Eddie, Phil and Chuck 'nobody' – they all opened 1♥ with Hand B on Monday (Chuck's partner insisted upon playing 4 card majors), and I don't really mind what anybody calls me, but isn't it going a bit far to call the whole of the UK 'nobody'? What Hans really meant, of course, is 'nobody in Holland bids like that anymore'. This statement is largely correct.

So Acol is a 4 card major system and it means just that, open a 4 card major (if 1NT is not an option) unless you have a longer minor. With Hans' variation I believe that he will only open a 4 card major if exactly 4333 (then 1♠) or 3433, 4432, 4423 (then 1♥). Now Hans' system is very playable but it can hardly be called a 4 card major system! In fact, it is the system advocated by Dutch experts such as Westra/Leufkens and I call it 'Dutch' Acol. It differs from Acol in two very important points – it has a strong NT and a 4 card major is very rarely opened. I really can't see the point of a system that only occasionally opens a 4 card major; surely it's better to do it most of the time (Acol) or never (play a 5 card major system)?

Time for some history. Acol was originally 4 card majors with a variable NT (weak when non-vul and strong when vul). It became apparent that the strong NT with 4 card majors combination was unsatisfactory, and so the Brits changed to weak NT throughout. And what did the Dutch do? They borrowed Acol from the Brits but tried to 'improve' it by changing to a strong NT throughout. After a number of painful experiences they realized that this did not work (I give a couple of examples of why overleaf). So they changed the bidding style to avoid opening a 4 card major whenever possible – what a mish-mash. I much prefer the British solution, or the straightforward American approach. If 4 card majors don't work with the strong NT then they don't work with the weak NT – so don't mess about, play 5 card majors (America) or play a weak NT (Britain).

Dutch Acol vs Standard American

Standard American (5 card majors and a strong NT) is the complete opposite of Acol. Dutch Acol is very far removed from Acol, and in fact it is virtually the same as Standard American. As far as I can see, the only difference between Standard American and Dutch Acol is the opening bid on these 4 hand shapes (4333, 3433, 4432 and 4423) when outside the range of 15-17 pts. So which is the best opening? Playing Dutch Acol you open a major and this means that all minor suit openings promise a 4 card suit. Playing Standard American you open a minor and this means that all major suit openings promise a 5 card suit. So it boils down to: which is most important for partner to know – that you opening minor suit is always 4+ cards or that your opening major suit is always 5+ cards? I think it's obvious, but who am I to argue with the likes of Berry Westra? I'll leave it up to you.

The 4441 Type Hand (playing 4 card majors)

So, let's forget about Dutch Acol (it is not a 4 card major system) and consider a system such as Acol where you frequently open a 4 card major. Whenever you open 1♥/♠ then you obviously need to have a rebid in mind. When you open a 4 card major you cannot then rebid another suit as that would promise 5 cards in the major; thus whenever you open a 4 card major then your rebid is always NT unless you can support partner.

Hand L	Hand M	There is just one problem, the 4441 type hand – notoriously difficult in any system. If the hand is outside your 1NT opening range Acol players open 1♥ (1♠ if 4144) and then rebid NT if partner bids the singleton. I hate to bid NT with a singleton in partner's suit but there's no alternative here. But the main problem is when your 4441 type hand is within your 1NT opening range: - Obviously you cannot open 1NT with a singleton and you cannot
♠ AQ76	♠ AQ76	
♥ A872	♥ A872	
♦ K984	♦ AQ84	
♣ 9	♣ 9	

rebid NT as that would show an incorrect point count; so in this situation you have to open a 4 card minor even though you have one (or two) 4 card majors. Suppose you play Acol (weak NT), then with Hand M you can open 1♥ as you have a 2NT rebid (15-16) if partner bids 2♣. But with Hand L you have to open 1♦; if partner is inconsiderate enough to respond 2♣ then you have no option but to lie with a rebid of 2♦. If you open 1♥ and partner responds 2♣ then 2♦ would promise 5♥'s. Sometimes you have to lie, and it's better to lie in minor suit length than to lie about your major suit length or your point count (by bidding NT out of range).

Playing a strong NT you have the same problem but the other way round – you open Hand L with 1♥ but you have to open Hand M with 1♦.

So, playing 4 card majors, you do not always open a 4 card major – with a 5 card minor open the 5 card minor, with NT shape within your 1NT range open 1NT and with 4441 type hands within your 1NT range open a minor.

Now most experienced Acol players know all this, but my advice is to play 5 card majors! You can play 5 card majors with a strong NT (Standard American, 2/1 etc.) or with a weak NT (no name as far as I know). 4 card majors work reasonably well with the weak NT (Acol) but I personally detest the fourth combination (4 card majors with a strong NT), *it does not work* – that's why Berry Westra and co. developed 'Dutch Acol' which rarely opens a 4 card major. If you don't like to open 4 card majors (I concur), then play 5 card majors!

So what's wrong with the 4 card major and strong NT combination?....

Hand Nin short, lots. Just take this hand as an example; if you play this system, then
♠ AJ76	1♠ is the opening with this hand. A 1♠ opening takes up a lot of room and a
♥ J82	2♣/♦ response is quite likely. This is a balanced hand in the 12-14 point range
♦ A97	and so a NT rebid is called for, so 2NT in this case. If partner has responded on
♣ K92	11 points (or, heaven forbid, 10 points) then 2NT is in real danger of going
	down. Playing a sensible system it's easy to stop in 1NT. And consider this sequence a
	little further; suppose that responder has a good 11-12 points. He

will then raise your 2NT bid to 3NT which will not make. Why have you got into this pickle? Because the wrong hand is doing the inviting. It should be the 11-12 point hand inviting the hand with the 12-14 point spread. The whole mess is caused by the initial opening on a 4 major card suit (in conjunction with the NT rebid being just 12-14 points). It simply does not work, and this example is just the tip of the iceberg.

Best to open 1♣, keep the bidding low.

Standard American is the system to play. And when you've mastered that, move on to the best 'basically natural' system of all – 2/1.