

BRIAN SENIOR

CONVENTIONS TODAY



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Introduction

The aim of this book is not to list every convention in current use. Were I to try to do so, the list would run comfortably into four figures and you could use this volume as an aid to body-building. Rather, my intention is to include only the best and (not necessarily the same thing) most popular conventions in any given area of bidding. You might say that these are the conventions that a social or club player might find useful and a tournament player should know about even if he does not actually wish to use them himself.

You will find here some new ideas which are likely to become more popular over the next few years, while one or two well-known conventions whose popularity is on the wane have been omitted.

To a degree, the choice inevitably reflects the personal prejudices of the author. Given the number of conventions in existence, it is almost impossible that any two experts would come up with exactly the same list. If I have omitted one of your pet conventions, my apologies, but then you do not need to read about something which is already so close to your heart. And if there is something here which you consider to be useless, rest assured that there will be plenty of other readers who hold the opposite view.

Each convention is described in sufficient detail that you should understand what is going on if your opponents use it against you or to allow you to give it a try yourself. I do not intend to cover every possible auction in all circumstances, rather give the basic structure plus a general overview. If you decide that a particular convention is worth adding to your system, you may need to discuss with partner some of the more exotic possibilities in the later auction.

I will also, on occasion, point out a particular strength or weakness of a method relative to the alternatives available, though the reader may often be left to work this out for himself by referring to the introduction to each section. But, at the end of the day, it is up to you what you choose to play and what not.

Part 1

The Uncontested Minor

One of a Minor

If playing a four-card major, weak notrump system, there is no particular need for a one of a minor opening to be other than natural, i.e. promising at least four cards. However, five-card major systems, and many strong notrump players, need a way in which to open the bidding with awkward hands that don't fit in elsewhere. Accordingly, one or both minors are played as 'prepared' openings.

Better Minor

Better minor means exactly what it says; with a balanced hand outside the notrump range, the opening bid is made in the better minor, even though that may mean bidding a three-card suit.

Modified Better Minor

In Modified Better Minor, $1\spadesuit$ is only opened with precisely 4-4-3-2 shape, to avoid opening $1\clubsuit$ on a doubleton, otherwise the prepared bid is $1\clubsuit$, even with four diamonds and three clubs. Other players would still open $1\spadesuit$ with that hand but open $1\clubsuit$ with 3-3 in the minors even with substantially stronger diamonds than clubs. Different players have different styles in this area, covering the full range of possibilities, and they will almost all claim to be playing Better Minor when many of them are clearly not doing so.

Prepared Club

The Prepared Club means that the opening bid on these hands is always $1\clubsuit$, i.e. $1\spadesuit$ is always a natural bid. It may churn your stomach to have to open $1\clubsuit$ with a small doubleton, but it does make your bidding after a $1\spadesuit$ opening a lot easier, so there is a significant pay-off to balance the obvious loss when you open $1\clubsuit$. Not only does $1\spadesuit$ promise four cards, but also $1\spadesuit - 2\clubsuit - 2NT$ is no longer needed to show a weak notrump type – all of those start with $1\clubsuit$. This is a significant improvement, as rebidding 2NT with a weak notrump is a quite unattractive prospect – not only does it oblige you to play $1\spadesuit - 2\clubsuit$ as promising at least 11 HCP, but also, after the 2NT rebid, how is responder to know when to bid game and when not when holding 11 or 12 HCP?

Short Club with Transfer Responses and the Unbalanced Diamond

One of the most important advances in bidding in the last few years has been the utilization of a short club opening (which can be made on two

cards) rather than better minor when playing five-card majors. Coupled with the short club, many pairs are now playing a system of transfer responses to 1♣. For the purposes of this discussion, I will describe methods which also use a strong notrump, 15-17, though it is quite possible to switch things around and play short club within a weak notrump structure.

There are certain benefits to playing a short club. Firstly, it means that your 1♦ opening always guarantees at least four cards. Indeed, many of those who have taken up the short club style open all weak notrump types where the long suit is a minor with 1♣, even those including a strong five-card diamond suit and a small doubleton club. This means that their 1♦ opening is known to be either unbalanced or, according to style, 18+ balanced (some pairs still open 1♣ even with the 18+ type), and partner can therefore afford to bid aggressively facing a 1♦ opening. That in turn permits the sequence 1♦ – 1♥/♠ – 1NT to be artificial, as opener is known not to hold a balanced minimum opener so cannot have a natural 1NT rebid. If you choose to take up these methods I will leave you to think up a use for this sequence, but there are a number of possibilities that make good sense. One is to help to differentiate between hands with six diamonds that do or do not also contain three cards in partner's suit.

There is more than one scheme out there after a short club opening. What they all have in common is that a 1♦/♥ response to 1♣ is a transfer, promising four or more cards in the next suit up, while a 1♠ response denies a major, except with specific strong hand-types, usually with longer diamonds.

One of the popular schemes is based around opener differentiating between two- and three-card holdings in responder's suit when holding a weak notrump type. After 1♣ – 1♦, promising four-plus hearts, a 1♥ rebid shows three hearts while 1NT shows a weak notrump with only two. It is easy to see how responder will be better able to pick the correct partscore or compete effectively if he knows straight away how many cards partner has in support of his major.

However, while the above scheme was perhaps the first to gain popularity, the style that is gaining the most adherents today is one in which opener rebids 1NT to show 18-19 balanced and completes the transfer when holding either two or three cards in responder's suit in a weak notrump. This style has a number of advantages and, in my opinion, these outweigh the benefits of the first style I described. Firstly, the fact that a 1NT rebid is so strong makes it much safer for responder to bid on weaker hands than normal, potentially stealing contracts from the opposition when opener actually has a minimum opening. Secondly, a 2NT rebid is no longer required to show a balanced hand without a fit so can be given an artificial meaning. Again, there is more than one possibility here – the one I play myself uses the jump

2NT rebid to show 16+ HCP with nine cards in the two-bid suits – six of opener's suit and three of responder's, or five of opener's suit and four of responder's. Responder describes his own hand further via step responses.

If playing this general style, a 2NT jump rebid after a 1♦ opening can also be used in an artificial sense as opener has denied a balanced hand by his opening bid. One benefit could be that, for example, if a 2NT rebid included hands with a six-card diamond suit and three-card support for partner, then the uncontested auction 1♦ – 1♥ – 3♦ could deny three hearts.

It is beyond the scope of this book to detail an entire system, but these methods appear to have a lot of merit and if you are interested in the system then I would encourage you to look out for a more detailed description elsewhere.

Walsh

There are several artificial responses of 2♣/♦ over 1♣/♦ and 1♦ over 1♣ in existence, but frankly I see very little point in them. Natural bidding generally works at least as well without any worries about remembering the system. One idea that does make some sense is Walsh.

One of the perennial problems associated with playing a prepared club is the question of whether to rebid 1NT to show the general hand-type or to bid a four-card major at the one-level despite having a balanced hand. If you choose the latter approach, how is partner ever to know whether or not 1♣ – 1♦ – 1♥/♠ includes a genuine club suit? Walsh is an attempt to reduce the scale of this problem.

The idea is that, if responder is only worth one bid, he bids a four-card major if he has one even with longer diamonds. If instead he responds 1♦, he is known not to hold a four-card major unless he is strong enough to bid it anyway on the next round, so opener can afford to rebid 1NT to show his balanced hand whether or not he has a major. So a responder with 2-4-5-2 shape would bid 1♣ – 1♥ with a weakish hand, then pass a 1NT rebid, but with 11+ HCP would respond 1♦ then bid 2♥ (forcing for one round) over a 1NT rebid. This is not perfect but, as I believe that letting partner know about your general hand-type is very important, I would suggest that it is the best compromise available.

Inverted Minor-suit Raises

The idea here is to play that 1♣ – 3♣ is preemptive, a weak hand with good trump support and distribution but not very much high-card strength, while 1♣ – 2♣ is forcing for one round, just as if any other suit had been

opened. Likewise, of course, $1\spadesuit - 2/3\heartsuit$. The less natural the opening bid, the more sense it makes to play this way, though even when one of a minor promises four cards there is a fair case for playing preemptive raises as, if you have a fit in a minor, the opposition may well have a fit in a major to be shut out. Also, in traditional bidding, there is no forcing raise in a minor suit. Opposite a $1\spadesuit$ opening, a hand such as:

♠ A K 6
 ♥ 6 5 3
 ♦ A Q 10 5
 ♣ K 8 2

has no sensible response. If $2\heartsuit$ is forcing, you can hear what kind of hand partner holds at a convenient level.

After say, $1\spadesuit - 2\heartsuit$ (inverted), should opener bid a four-card major with a balanced hand or rebid in notrump? The latter makes more sense. If responder has a four-card major he must be strong enough to bid it over a 2NT rebid, otherwise he would have responded in the major in the first place. If he does not have one, there is no point your bidding it, unless you have a shapely hand and want to tell him so.

However, there is a problem with an 'everything natural' approach here. Say that $1\spadesuit - 2\heartsuit - 2NT$ shows a weak notrump type and responder has an invitational to game hand. How does he know whether opener has a good 11 HCP or 14? He will be guessing. Anyone who plays that the inverted raise is game-forcing will not have this problem, but for the majority, for whom the two-level raise is only invitational or better, we need to find a solution to this problem. The solution is very simple – simply switch the meanings of a 2NT rebid and the first-step rebid, so:

$1\clubsuit - 2\clubsuit - 2\heartsuit$ = a weak notrump
 $1\clubsuit - 2\clubsuit - 2NT$ = a $2\heartsuit$ rebid
 $1\spadesuit - 2\heartsuit - 2\heartsuit$ = a weak notrump
 $1\spadesuit - 2\heartsuit - 2NT$ = a $2\heartsuit$ rebid

Now an invitational hand responder can bid 2NT over the artificial rebid and leave opener to bid game with a maximum weak notrump but pass with a minimum. Of course, when opener showed a second suit, he showed extra values, as a minimum unbalanced hand with five diamonds and four hearts would simply rebid $3\heartsuit$ over the $2\heartsuit$ forcing raise, allowing responder to pass in a safe partscore if holding only invitational values.

Those who like to bid stoppers over the inverted raise, rather than suits, in an attempt to avoid playing 3NT when there is a better spot, can still do so, simply switching the meaning of the two bids as above.

Minor-suit Swiss

This is another solution to the lack of a forcing raise of a minor-suit opening. There are a number of variations, as with most conventions. One possibility is that:

- 1♣ – 3♦ = 12/13 HCP and a club fit
- 1♣ – 3♥ = 14/15 HCP and a club fit
- 1♦ – 3♥ = 12/13 HCP and a diamond fit
- 1♦ – 3♠ = 14/15 HCP and a diamond fit

All these bids are forcing to 3NT or four of the minor, though in practice it is rare to stop out of game.

Other variants have all the three-level responses as showing opening values and a fit plus four cards in the suit bid, or just the lowest stopper. However you play around with the bids, Minor-suit Swiss is a pretty ungainly animal. It uses up a lot of bidding space to give a rather imprecise message. Better to play inverted raises or, failing that, just bid naturally but occasionally invent a bid in a three-card holding in the other minor to hear partner's natural rebid at a convenient level.

Strong Club Systems

A very popular tournament method is to play a system where a 1♣ opening is strong and artificial, either 16+ or 17+ HCP, just as a 2♣ opening is artificial in standard methods. This obviously creates a problem showing hands that would otherwise open 1♣, and puts extra strain on the 1♦ opening. Particularly when also playing five-card majors, some pairs even have to open 1♦ with a void! While this may sound strange, it does have some plus features in the freedom it allows in the rest of the system. I would not recommend such a style to a casual partnership, however.

There is no room here to go into great detail about strong club systems, of which there are many. A couple of ideas to help after the 1♦ opening are, however, to play that:

- 1♦ – 1♥ – 2♠ = A raise to 3♥ with an unspecified singleton or void
- 1♦ – 1♠ – 2NT = A raise to 3♠ with an unspecified singleton or void
- 1♦ – 1♥ – 2NT = 5-5 in the minors and a maximum
- 1♦ – 1♠ – 3♥ = 5-5 in the minors and a maximum

In the first two sequences, the next bid up can ask which shortage is actually held. This idea uses two bids which are pretty well redundant in a natural sense, because of the failure to open with a strong club, to improve your accuracy when deciding whether to bid game. As the cost is low, the idea is a good one.

The second two sequences help to show an awkward hand-type. Because the 1♦ opening may be based on a diamond suit, a club suit, or both, there are insufficient natural rebids available to show all the possible hands properly. While a trifle unwieldy, they are still better than nothing and again the cost, except in memory strain, is negligible.

One of a Major

Four- or five-card majors – another of those perennial questions. The trend is definitely towards five-card openings, but four-card majors still have a substantial following and some definite advantages to balance the disadvantages, most of which come in competitive auctions.

There are an unbelievable number of different methods in use, in particular when it comes to raising partner's suit, and I have no intention of trying to list them all. As usual, however, here are the best and the most popular.

The Forcing Notrump

When playing five-card majors, a popular idea is to play a 1NT response as forcing for one round. This helps responder enormously in describing his hand but has one significant weakness – the opener has to find a rebid even when he would prefer to pass, making a final contract of 1NT impossible and forcing him to bid a three-card suit on occasions. A 5-4-2-2 hand is quite happy to rebid, as it always intended to show the second suit (at least, if that suit is lower ranking than the first one), but what about 5-3-3-2? Normally, this shape would either pass or raise notrump. Hands that would otherwise have passed, must now bid a three-card suit. The normal agreement is to bid the lower three-card suit, irrespective of their relative strengths. Hence, a 5-3-3-2 hand rebids 2♦, while 5-3-2-3 and 5-2-3-3 both bid 2♣.

After 1♠ – 1NT – 2♣ – ?

- 2♦/♥ = Long suit but a weakish hand
- 2♠ = A poor raise to 2♠, usually only doubleton support
- 2NT = Balanced 11/12
- 3♣ = Invitational
- 3♠ = Balanced three-card raise, invitational

It is also possible to give meanings to jumps to 3NT and four of a suit. For example, an immediate bid of 4♦ could show a game raise with a diamond singleton; 1NT followed by 4♦ could show the same strength but a diamond void. What scheme you favor is not so important as the fact that the forcing notrump has given you the possibility of showing twice as many different hand-types. Note that an immediate 1♠ – 3♠ is now known to be

distributional, and an immediate $1\spadesuit - 2\text{NT}$ can be used to show a forcing spade raise, a balanced $16+$, or whatever takes your fancy. The advantages are very significant, but the price is also quite high. However, the forcing notrump is quite popular amongst serious tournament players so the overall expert view seems to be in its favor.

Granville

When playing the forcing notrump, this convention inverts the meanings of $1\spadesuit$ and 1NT in response to a $1\heartsuit$ opening. $1\heartsuit - 1\text{NT}$ now promises five spades and $1\heartsuit - 1\spadesuit$ is the forcing notrump type and may include four spades. $1\heartsuit - 1\spadesuit - 1\text{NT}$ shows four spades but not enough to reverse with $2\spadesuit$. Again, opener has to rebid a three-card minor with a 5-3-3-2 hand.

The Jump Shift

Traditionally, a jump shift has shown a strong hand with a strong suit, usually $16+$ HCP. Used properly, this is certainly an aid to slam bidding, as the alternative is a simple response then keep bidding round the houses to make forcing bids. Some players, however, think that strong jump shifts come up so rarely that it is worth giving them up and playing weak jump shifts instead. These can be played over an opening bid in any suit and show a hand similar to a weak two-bid. For example, $1\diamond - 2\spadesuit$, might be:

(a)	\spadesuit	K Q J 10 8 5	(b)	\spadesuit	Q J 9 7 5 3
	\heartsuit	K 6		\heartsuit	8 6
	\diamond	5 3		\diamond	7 4
	\clubsuit	10 4 2		\clubsuit	Q 9 4

There are two styles to these weak jumps. In the more constructive style, (a) would be a maximum and (b) minimum; in the other, more aggressive, style, (a) would be far too good and (b) would be close to a maximum.

The idea in each case is to let partner know about your hand but, more importantly, to preempt the opposition. The weaker your hand, the more likely you are to want to preempt, but my personal view is that the weaker aggressive style is unsound, far too often leading to your playing the wrong partscore. The more constructive style, meanwhile, can be used to aid your own bidding as well as preempting the opposition. If a jump shift is weak, then we can play $1\diamond - 1\spadesuit - 2\clubsuit - 2\spadesuit$ as invitational and a $3\spadesuit$ rebid as forcing.

I am undecided about weak jump shifts. They are at their most effective opposite a $1\clubsuit/\diamond$ opening which will often be a weak notrump type. When playing a weak notrump system, the $1\clubsuit/\diamond$ opening will either be strong or distributional, and in neither case will you be quite so happy to hear partner

preempt you. Perhaps the decision should be made according to your current style when using strong jump shifts. If you use them quite a lot, you will find the price of giving them up too high; if you rarely jump shift, then you will hardly miss them.

Transfer Jump Shifts

Transfer Jump Shifts allow you to have your cake and eat it, in that they can be played as two-way, either strong or weak. Because a bid like 1♦ – 2♦ is needed in a natural sense, there is no spare bid to start the transfers until you get to 2NT. Now, 1♦/♥/♠ – 2NT can show clubs, either 16+ or 6-9, or whatever range you like for your weak version. If happy to play there opposite the weak type, opener simply completes the transfer by bidding 3♣. Responder bids again with the strong hand but passes if weak. The transfers continue, of course. 1♠ – 2NT = clubs; 1♠ – 3♣ = diamonds; 1♠ – 3♦ = hearts; 1♠ – 3♥ = spades; always either weak or strong.

While this all looks very wonderful, in practice it makes constructive bidding more difficult than normal so there is certainly a price to pay. Personally, I would prefer to keep my jump shifts as having only a single meaning.

Baron 2NT and 3NT

Balanced responding hands in the 16+ range are awkward to show. The Baron 2NT response is an attempt to cater for them. The idea is that a 2NT response shows 16+ HCP and opener rebids naturally, with both players bidding four-card suits in search of a fit until 3NT is reached. With 16-18, responder will not be the one to go beyond 3NT, other than to support partner's suit; with 19+ he must be careful to cuebid or raise to 4NT to show his extra values. For example:

♠ K 10 5
 ♥ K Q J 7
 ♦ K 6
 ♣ A J 8 4

Partner	You
1♠	2NT
3♦	3♥
3♠	4♠

You have shown 16+ balanced, then four hearts, then a minimum with secondary spade support. Change the ♣J into the ♣K and you would bid 4♣ over 3♠; not to show the four-card club suit, but as a cuebid in support of

spades. The cuebid shows extra values. Partner can now judge whether to continue.

A 3NT response to the opening bid can be used to show 13-15 with four-card support for the opener's suit. This goes well with preemptive game raises and splinters, for example, to create a unified system of raises to game.

Swiss

Swiss was the earliest solution to the need for a strong, as opposed to distributional, raise to four of a major. Inevitably, there are several versions, most just utilizing responses of 4♣ and 4♦. Possibilities are that the two bids show different high-card ranges, say 13/14 and 15/16 respectively, or perhaps that both show sound opening bids, one with good trumps and one with weaker trumps. Or the difference could be in the number of aces held. The bids used are not needed in a natural sense so the cost is low and, were there not better solutions to the problem, Swiss would therefore be a good idea. If you want something simple, then at least the above versions fit the bill. As a general principle, it is better for 4♣ to show the slightly more encouraging of the two options as it leaves more space in which to explore.

Fruit Machine Swiss

Probably the most popular version in use in today's tournament world. 4♣ shows a high-card raise with two aces plus either a third ace, the king of trumps or an unspecified singleton. 4♦ shows a high-card raise which does not qualify for 4♣.

If interested, opener can bid 4♦ over 4♣ to ask which version is held.

1♠ – 4♣ – 4♦ – 4♠	= King of trumps
4NT	= Three aces
4♥	= Singleton heart
5♣/♦	= Singleton in bid suit
1♥ – 4♣ – 4♦ – 4♥	= King of trumps
4♠	= Singleton spade
4NT	= Three aces
5♣/♦	= Singleton in bid suit

Fruit Machine is an improvement on the simpler versions already mentioned, but the restriction of only being able to show a singleton if holding two aces is a serious flaw.

Learn the Latest and Greatest

The best and most popular conventions in every area of bidding explained. Whatever your preferred system of bidding, you and your partner will inevitably play a number of conventions. This book will not only help you to decide what to incorporate into your partnership's armory, but also help you to understand the many weapons that might be used against you at the table by your opponents.

First published in 2001, this edition has been revised and updated by the author to include many new ideas.



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