

FIVE vs FOUR

Those who refuse to open the bidding with a four-card major ("five-card majorites") have become a big majority in the United States. In other countries (e.g., England) they are a minority. Let's look at the advantages of each policy, first describing them briefly:

Four-Card Majors

-- A four-card major suit may be opened, but only if there is a suitable rebid. For convenience of rebid, a three-card club suit or, rarely, a three-card diamond suit may be opened. In third or fourth seat, when opener can pass a new suit or notrump response, rebid considerations do not apply.

-- The bidding may be opened light with distributional hands, but not with balanced hands, using playing tricks as the main criterion. At least two defensive tricks are required. A 12 HCP balanced hand may be opened if honors are working together (♠965 ♥AK43♦75 ♣KQ52) but not if they are scattered (♠K65 ♥A943 ♦K5 ♣Q752), recognizing that honors in combination are worth more than isolated honors. Lead direction is an important consideration.

-- A 1NT rebid shows 13-15 HCP, leading to a 16-18 HCP range for opening 1NT, 19-20 HCP for a jump rebid of 2NT, and 21-22 HCP for opening 2NT.

-- Bidding very weak four-card suits is avoided by both opener and responder. Raises with good three-card support (J10x or better) are therefore acceptable. With a singleton or void even three small cards are good enough in a pinch.

-- One-over-one responses are not necessarily "up the line." Responder can skip over a very weak suit when the hand calls for a better bid. Conversely, good diamonds are bid in preference to a weak major when responding to 1♣.

-- Reverses by opener are not forcing after a one-over-one response if responder's suit is four long, but are forcing after a two-over-one response. In any case, opener may pass if responder makes a discouraging rebid, but may not pass responder's rebid of his suit (which he must rebid with more than four, as a first priority).

-- Reverses by responder are forcing, but not forcing to game. Again, if opener makes a discouraging rebid, responder may pass.

-- Two-over-one responses do not promise another bid. With a shaded response, responder may pass on the next round if opener does not make a strength-showing rebid.

-- After a two-over-one response, opener's rebid of 2NT or raise of a minor suit implies extra strength (but a heart raise does not). Bidding a new suit at the three level is not only forcing, but promises another bid if responder doesn't bid game..

The general philosophy is one of bidding real suits, with a minimum of forcing sequences.

Five-Card Majors

-- A major suit opening promises five or more cards in the suit, and a 1NT response is forcing. After a 1NT response, opener may rebid his suit only if it is at least six long, so with 5-3-3-2 shape he must bid a three-card minor if he can't raise notrump. Many players use the Flannery 2♦ opening with 4-5 in spades-hearts. Three-card minor suit openings are routine. Lead direction is not a consideration.

-- The bidding may be opened light with balanced hands, using HCP as the main criterion. Any 12 HCP hand may be opened, some say any 11.

-- A 1NT rebid shows 12-14 HCP, necessitating a 15-17 HCP range for a 1NT opening, 18-19 HCP for a jump rebid of 2NT, and 20-21 HCP for a 2NT opening.

-- One-over-one responses (and opener's rebids) in four-card suits are made "up the line," without regard to suit strength. Partner must usually have four trumps to raise, but three-card support can be shown in competition by a support double (or redouble). For most players, only the major suits are bid up-the-line, and a diamond suit of any length or strength may be bypassed in favor of a four-card major when the hand is not strong enough to reverse (game-forcing) later.

-- Reverses by opener are forcing after any response, and promise another bid even if responder makes a minimum bid.

-- Two-over-one responses require near opening bid strength, since responder promises to bid again over opener's minimum rebid. A two-over-one response usually leads to game, even when opener is minimum. Many play it as forcing to game.

-- After a two-over-one response, opener's 2NT rebid or raise of any suit does not imply extra strength.

-- Reverses by responder are forcing to game.

The general philosophy is one of finding 4-4 major suit fits and avoiding 4-3 fits, regardless of suit strength, with a maximum of forcing sequences.

Despite popular opinion that this philosophy is the driving force behind five-card majors, the main motivation actually was to avoid the bidding problems associated with two-over-one responses.

By opening minor suits more often, and using a forcing 1NT response to a major opening, two-over-one responses could be restricted to good hands that present fewer bidding problems.

Strong notrump openings are assumed for both systems. Many of the drawbacks pointed out here for each system do not apply if weak notrumps are employed. Those interested may wish to do their own system evaluations, with the inclusion of weak notrumps. Other system revisions would certainly be in order, since the two systems described here could no doubt be improved in many ways. The "baseline" systems I have assumed include the most popular practices, not necessarily the best. Okay, here goes:

Four-Card Major Advantages

I have found 23 reasons for opening four-card majors:

1) A major suit fit is shut out less often. Overcalls, preemptive or not, interfere greatly with the bidding of five-carders when they have opened a minor instead of a major. For instance, suppose the bidding goes:

South	West	North	East
1♦	2♣	Pass	3♣
Pass	Pass	Pass	

If South has a four-card major, North-South may easily have missed a major suit contract. Don't negative doubles take care of such situations? Not always. For one thing, negative double sequences are not very accurate. The double is a wide-range call that does not give much information as to responder's strength or distribution. Also, responder may be unable to make a negative double when it would pay to do so. In the auction above, for instance, North needs both majors to make a light negative double of the 2♣ overcall.

With four-card major openings, a major can be shown right away. Responder can then raise with support, and one or the other can usually compete at the three level if necessary.

2) Responder's 1♠ response with 5-4 in the majors will not shut out the heart suit when opener has 4-4 in hearts-diamonds, because the opening bid would normally be 1♥. Responder is therefore not reluctant to pass a 1NT rebid, especially since opener does not need four spades to raise. When a five-carder responds 1♠ to a 1♦ opening with ♠A9873 ♥K654 ♦87 ♣Q5, a 1NT rebid by opener makes responder wonder, "Does partner perhaps have four hearts, or maybe three-card spade support?" There is no way to find out without going to the two level (with an abominable 2♥ bid), and 1NT may be the only good contract.

3) Responder can have more confidence in a minor suit opening. For example, she can make the expert response of 2♣ to a 1♣ opening with ♠-J843 ♥75 ♦K87 ♣QJ84. Raising clubs immediately gives an accurate picture of the hand as a whole, which may enable opener to compete at the three level if the opponents bid. Certainly responder cannot go to 3♣ after responding 1♠. In a five-card major system North must respond 1♠ instead of 2♣. He must then sell out to an opposing two-level bid, since going to 3♣ would require a better hand. Result: Opener leads ♠K from Kx, allowing the opposing contract to make, and misses a good 3♣ contract.

4) Since three-card club suits are opened less often, and three-card diamond suits hardly ever, there is little danger of playing a 3-2 fit when a minor opening is passed out. It is less tempting to make an ultra-weak response to a minor opening, as five-carders seem compelled to do.

5) The lead-direction value of opening bids and responses is greater. The opening lead is the most important defensive play in bridge, especially in matchpoint games. When opener is free to open a four-card major, he can more often select an opening bid that suggests a good lead. He can open 1♠ with ♠AKQ3 ♥10874 ♦A7 ♣843, 1♥ with ♠10874 ♥AKQ3 ♦A7 ♣843 (yes, there may be a rebid problem), and 1♣ with ♠10874 ♥A743 ♦87 ♣AKQ.

When responder is free to bypass a suit, even a major, she can answer opener's 1♣ with 1♦ holding ♠J874 ♥92 ♦AK32 ♣832, 1♠ with ♠AK32 ♥92 ♦-J874 ♣-832, and 1NT with ♠8765 ♥Q87 ♥-K92 ♣A32, in each case making the best bid for the hand without violating any arbitrary rules for responding.

6) Since opening bids and responses show the location of high card strength more often than those of five-carders, the task of hand evaluation and determination of the offensive/defensive potential of the partnership is facilitated. A singleton in partner's suit is probably bad for offense, good for defense, and a holding like Qxx suggests a good fit. Contract placing, doubling, sacrificing, and other bidding decisions are more precise than when xxxx suits are bid routinely.

7) It's nice to know that the opponents are very unlikely to run partner's suit off the top in a notrump contract, whether it is an opening minor suit bid or a one-over-one bid by either partner. Bidding a suit like xxx or xxxx does not stop the suit.

8) Negative doubles at the one level need not require a major suit. After a 1♦ opening, responder can double a 1♠ overcall negatively with ♠-J73 ♥K87 ♦A83 ♣J653. Five-carders must have a heart suit for this double, because opener may well have hearts, while four-carders normally open 1♥ with both red suits.. Even when the opening is 1♣, a four-carder's negative double need only imply, not promise, four hearts. He would double with ♠-32 ♥-Q8 ♦AQJ876 ♣J42, (a hand that five-carders must pass), planning to follow with a non-forcing diamond bid if partner bids hearts.

9) Four-carders can often play in notrump with a 4-4 major suit fit when notrump is a superior contract. This happens when one or both partners avoid bidding a weak major when notrump looks attractive. It is almost impossible for five-carders to play in notrump with a 4-4 fit in a major, because they are bidding distribution instead of real suits. To a lesser extent, the same is true of 5-3 fits.

10) A 1♥ or 1♠ opener can pass a 1NT response, which five-carders play as forcing. As Goren put it, the best place to play an indifferent hand is in a contract of 1NT.

11) Since 1NT responses to a major are not forcing, they imply a balanced hand. Opener can make a jump rebid in a suit with KJ9543 without worrying much about a void or singleton opposite. Also, he can raise notrump with fair assurance that responder likes notrump all right. Five-carders might find a 0-2-6-5 hand opposite their spade jump or notrump raise.

12) Opening a four-card major will often keep the opponents out of a good notrump contract, perhaps out of a notrump game. They can't be sure the major is only four long, and they are unlikely to have much strength in the suit. Sometimes the four-card opening will steal their trump suit (although admittedly it might keep them out of trouble in that suit). When a four-card major is raised with three-card support, the opponents may misjudge their fit. Looking at three cards in the suit, each will assume the other is short.

13) A four-card major suit opening has preemptive value, since it shuts out most of the one-level overcalls. The opponents will get into the bidding less often, and usually will have to bid at a higher level when they do..

14) Immediate raises of a major suit opening are much more common. Responder can jack the bidding up to a high level before fourth seat can draw a breath:

South	West	North	East
1♥	Pass	2♥/3♥/4♥	?

With five-carders the bidding is more likely to go:

South	West	North	East
1♣/1♦	Pass	1♥	1♠/2♣/2♦/Dbf

Fourth seat finds it easier to enter such auctions, and if hearts become trump the contract is probably wrong-sided (played by the weaker hand).

15) Four-carders can open 1♠ with ♠KQJ3 ♥A10873 ♦K6 ♣J4, or 1♥ with ♠Q874 ♦AKJ53 ♦82 ♣Q2, hands that five-carders cannot handle well without resorting to the Flannery Convention (2♦ opening shows five hearts and four spades). Reason: A forcing 1NT response to 1♥ leaves them without a rebid, since 2♥ would show six hearts and the hand is not strong enough to reverse with a 2♠ bid. If not using Flannery, they must rebid in a two-card club suit. Four-carders don't need Flannery as much, and can use the 2♦ opening for another purpose.

16) Knowing that responses in bad four-card suits are uncommon, opener can raise with three reasonable trumps. Five-carders avoid the three-trump raise, a good bid that has both preemptive and constructive value. Good 4-3 fits are played more often by four-carders, and the bad 4-3 fits that five-carders sometimes find are avoided.

For instance, four-carders can freely raise a 1♠ response to 2♠, after opening 1♦ with S-KJ7 H-43 D-A874 C-KQ83. A five-carder usually rebids 1NT. What a terrible bid:

-- Because of the weak hearts, any notrump contract should be played from the other side.

-- Responder may have to pass 1NT when holding five spades, or raise notrump with a hand that belongs in spades: ♠AQ104 ♥87 ♦K96 ♣AJ54

-- If opener gets a chance to show spade support later, responder won't know how good it is. A delayed raise shows anything from AKQ to 432. Responder will have difficulty evaluating the potential of ♠-Q6532 ♥A87 ♦Q105 ♣A4 when she hears a delayed raise of spades after opener has rebid 1NT. Opener could have the hand above, or he could have ♠-864 ♥KQJ2 ♦K963 ♣-KQ. A four-carder would just raise 1NT to 3NT, knowing that opener either lacks adequate trump support for spades or has a hand that is better suited to notrump play: ♠K74 ♥K106 ♦A963 ♣KJ5

-- An opponent may back in with a 2♥, after which two bad things can happen. They find a good 3♥ contract (after opener bids 2♠) or responder ends up playing a 2♠ contract with 5432 opposite KJ7.

-- Five-carders must resort to the "support" double (or redouble) to show three-card support for responder over an intervening overcall. Four-carders retain this opportunity for a lucrative penalty double.

Lately more and more five-carders have taken to raising with three-card support, avoiding these problems but creating others.

17) There are fewer rebid problems. After opening 1♦ with ♠-Q108 ♥KQJ3 ♦A9876 C-4 and getting a 1S response, the hand is not nearly good enough for a 2♥ reverse. The poor five-carder must take a guess whether to lie with a 2♠ raise (showing four) or make the wretched rebid of 2♦. If the response is 1NT, opener must guess whether to pass or bid 2♦. How much easier it is to open 1♥, planning to raise a spade response, pass a heart raise, or bid 2♦ when the response is 1NT or 2♣.

18) Opener's rebid after a two-over-one response is straightforward and informative. A 2NT rebid or minor suit raise implies extra values, and a reverse is always strong:

Opener	Responder
1♦	2♣
2♥/2♠/2NT/3♣ all show extras	

(In a pinch, four-card support, or two of the top three honors, constitute enough "extra values" for a minor suit raise.) Most five-carders play that none of these bids shows extras. That makes them all wide-range bids, violating the good bidding principle that opener's second call should clarify his strength. showing it.

19) Since light two-over-one responses are fairly safe, responder can show his hand more accurately when holding one. He can respond 2♥ to a 1♠ opening with ♠-3 H-AQ976 ♦-K10873 C-84. Five-carders must respond 1NT, then pass a 2♠ rebid, perhaps finding later that opener has support for hearts and a better heart contract has been missed. And how does a five-carder bid a hand such as ♠A1085 ♥6 ♦J62 ♣AJ987 when partner opens 1♦? He responds 1♠, then raises a 1NT rebid to 2NT, perhaps missing a superior minor suit contract. He can't bid clubs, then spades, because that is a game-forcing sequence. A four-carder bids clubs, then spades, then raises diamonds if they have been rebid, giving opener an accurate picture of the hand. And she can pass if opener's third bid is 2NT or 3♣.

Light two-over-one responses start the auction on the path of a suit contract when responder's hand suggests that direction. They also have preemptive effect, as they may force an opponent to come in at the three level instead of the two level, or not come in at all for fear of being sandwiched between two strong hands.

20) Reverses can be played as non-forcing after a one-over-one response, and need not promise another bid. In an effort to solve their rebid problems, five-carders play all reverses as forcing. Not only that, but they promise another bid if responder makes a minimum rebid:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♠
2♥	2♠/2NT/3♦ are all forcing!

Opener is expected to bid on after any of these minimum rebids, which restricts reverses to powerful hands since it is hard to stop below game. That brings trouble with hands like ♠2 ♥AQJ3 ♦KQ1087 ♣A42. To open 1D and reverse with a 2♥ bid after a 1♠ response is safe enough if 2♥ is not quite forcing and if opener can pass a discouraging rebid by responder. But if both hands have to keep going, the partnership could get too high. As a result, five-carders generally make the bad rebid of 1NT (or 2♣, which is a joke) with such hands.

21) Opening four-card majors will often result in the stronger hand becoming declarer in a major suit contract. When a minor suit is opened instead, responder often ends up playing a major suit contract with a weak hand opposite a strong dummy. Contracts fare better when played by the stronger hand. The opening lead must come up to declarer's strength, which is not exposed for all to see during the play of the hand.

22) With a little too much for a single raise of opener's major, responder can make a temporizing bid in a fair suit at the two level. When responder follows with a raise of opener's first suit, the latter may be able

to bid game on the basis of a fit with responder's suit. Five-carders play this sequence as forcing, so they must use the less informative limit raise with such hands.

23) Light opening bids based on good distribution are safer. It is easy to stop bidding in this system, even after a two-over-one response. Five-carders find it difficult to stop at a low level if opener can't rebid 1NT, because their bidding sequences (especially after a two-over-one response) roll along with a momentum that is difficult to brake. They often get too high with misfit hands.

Five-Card Major Advantages

Now for the arguments in favor of opening five-card majors. Probably because of my obvious bias, I have found only 21:

1) Opener will not preempt his side out of a heart fit when he is 4-4 in the majors. When a four-carder opens 1S with ♠AQ96 H-10874 ♦-AQ ♣-763, he must pass a 1NT response. If responder has four or five hearts, notrump is probably wrong.

2) Responder can raise a major suit opening to any appropriate level with three small trumps, perhaps even preempting, knowing opener has at least five. She can raise with a doubleton honor in a pinch, as when an opposing overcall prevents a forcing 1NT response. Four-carders must respond 1NT to a 1♠ opening with ♠543 ♥Q7 ♦A87 ♣Q6432, and have to make a dangerous raise to 2♠ if 1♠ gets overcalled with 2♥. If a 1♥ opening gets overcalled with 2♦, they have to pass but five-carders can bid 2♥ knowing that opener has at least five..

The three-card raise is especially valuable after a third or fourth seat opening, when a new suit bid is not forcing. It also permits opener to bid game without revealing more about his hand. Four-carders often tell too much in their quest for the right contract, not knowing whether the raiser has sufficient trump support or not. They have a terrible problem when a passed hand has weak three-card support for opener's major and doesn't raise. A common result is opener's passing of a new suit or notrump response, down one or two, when more tricks could be made in opener's major.

3) The forcing 1NT response permits stopping at two of a minor when opener has only three cards in the suit. Opener must have a six-card major to rebid it, and must therefore bid his lower ranking three-card minor if he lacks values for any other bid. When responder has good length in the minor and a singleton or void in opener's major, she can pass. The resultant 2C or 2D contract is one that four-carders could never reach.

4) The forcing 1NT response enables responder to show a long suit in a weak hand without worrying that opener will pass 1NT:

Opener	Responder
1♠	1NT
2♣	2♦/2♥ - long suit, weak hand

One trouble with this approach is that responder sometimes doesn't have a good continuation after bidding 1NT. Suppose the opening is 1♠, responder bids 1NT with ♠3 ♥J8765 ♦K65 ♣AJ83, and opener rebids 2♦. Opener could have only three diamonds and also three hearts, but a 2H bid at this point might well catch opener with one heart and four or five diamonds. A four-carder has no problem passing 2♦, knowing that opener has at least four diamonds.

5) When opener rebids his major after a 1NT response, responder knows that the suit is six long. This is not much of a plus, since four-carders seldom make such a rebid with a five-card suit.

6) Responder can show a "false preference" for opener's major in an auction such as this:

Opener	Responder
1♥	1NT
2♦	2♥

Responder may have more diamonds than hearts. Knowing that opener has at least five hearts (and may have only three diamonds), she is pretty safe in making the 2♥ preference with as little as a doubleton heart and three or four diamonds. Four-carders would hesitate to bid 2♥ with such a hand, since opener could have four (strong) hearts and five (weak) diamonds.

7) Responder can differentiate between a light raise and a sound raise of opener's major, for all raise levels:

Opener	Responder
1♠	1NT
2♣	2♠/3♠/4♠

These raises can all be played weaker (in trumps or high cards) than the same bids made directly over 1♠. Opener no longer has to guess whether responder is stretching or has a sound bid. A drawback is that a responder who bids 1NT with a light raise is letting the opposition come into the bidding at a convenient level. For this reason, many five-carders do not play "constructive raises," so maybe this is not an advantage after all. Others play "Bergen Raises," using 3♣ and 3♦ as artificial responses that aid in clarifying raises as to high card strength and trump length, but lose the valuable natural meaning of those responses.

8) The wide range of a 1NT response has another rather subtle advantage. Suppose the bidding goes:

South	West	North	East
1♠	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♠	?		

If North-South are playing non-forcing 1NT responses, West knows that North is limited to 9 HCP, and also knows that South has a minimum hand. He will therefore be able to stick in a "reopening" overcall or double with little danger, realizing that the opposing strength is limited. If the 1NT bidder could have up to 11 HCP, however, such a "butt-in" bid is very dangerous. If West chooses to pass because of this danger, the burden is on East to reopen, and East might not have the wherewithal to do so.

9) Strong two-over-one responses permit both partners to show their distribution at leisure, without worrying that the other will make a premature pass. One drawback to this approach, however, is that neither partner knows when the other has extra values. In high-level competition two expert five-carder pairs got into the same trouble with the same hand:

Opener	Responder
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♠AK763	♠ J5
♥83	♥K1075
♦AK2	♦QJ5
♣QJ5	♣AK64

The bidding at both tables started like this:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2♣
3♣	3NT
4♦	

Both openers bid over 3NT because they had additional strength not shown by the 3♣ raise. Responder could have extra values too, and a slam might be missed. One responder now bid 4♠, the other 4NT. Both contracts were defeated, with 3NT ice cold. A four-carder would have passed 3NT, having shown at least some extra strength with the club raise. (A 2NT response would have kept both pairs out of trouble, but they were probably using that response as an artificial Jacoby raise).

10) With the 1NT forcing response, a passed hand seldom needs 2♣ as a natural response to a major opening. Accordingly, the popular Drury convention can be used without much inconvenience. Using Drury, a passed hand responds to a major with an artificial 2♣ to find out if opener has a full opening bid. Four-carders usually find that Drury interferes with their bidding too much (due to the lack of a forcing 1NT response), and don't use this valuable convention.

11) The forcing nature of reverses makes it convenient to show a powerful hand without resorting to a space-consuming jump reverse, or a jump raise with only three trumps. Jump reverses are therefore freed for some conventional purpose, such as a splinter bid (showing a singleton in the jump suit and great support for responder).

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
2♥	2NT
3♠	

Opener has S-KJ7 H-AQJ5 D-2 C-AKJ87. A four-carder would have a problem with this hand, because 2♥ would not be forcing. He would probably jump to 3♥, then guess whether to pass or bid 4♠ if responder bids 3NT. He could easily go wrong (but might end up in a great 4-3 spade fit).

12) Five-carders can use a short-suit game try or other conventional rebid when partner raises a major suit opening:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2♠
3♦	

The 3♦ bid could be played as a short suit game try, showing a singleton. Responder may be able to bid 4♠ on the basis of a good fit (strength outside of diamonds), even with a fairly light raise. Conversely, a bad game may be avoided when responder signs off with 3♠ because of bad duplication in the diamond suit,

even with a good raise. Others play 3♦ as a "trial bid," seeking a diamond fit (or it could be a tactical bid with weak diamonds), but four-carders can do that too. Four-carders can't use the short suit game try, however, because 3♦ has to be natural when the final contract may not be in spades.

13) Good 4-4 fits are missed less often. A four-carder, after opening 1♣ with ♠-J873 ♥AK3 ♦76 ♣AJ84, is supposed to raise a heart response instead of rebidding 1S. Showing heart support after rebidding 1S would show a slightly better hand, so they take the risk of playing 4-3 hearts instead of 4-4 spades. Five-carders would rebid 1♠, so a spade fit would not be lost. They do lose the ability to distinguish between a good three-card raise and a minimum one, since their subsequent 2♥ bid could be either.

Similarly, up-the-line responding with hands such as ♠-AK32 ♥-9654 ♦-32 ♣J76 ensures that a 4-4 heart fit will not be missed. Four-carders respond 1S with such a hand, regarding the hearts as too weak to bid.

14) The bidding can never go:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2♣/2♦/2♥
2♠	Pass

When four-carders have an auction like this, they may be playing a 5-1 trump fit. And if the response was in a minor, they might be missing a 5-3 or even 6-3 fit in that suit, since opener needs extra values to raise. Five-carders bid a forcing 1NT with hands that are not good enough to bid twice, so this auction never happens.

15) Bidding short minor suits and weak suits of any strain may deflect the opponents from their best opening lead. Sometimes their trump suit is stolen. The downside is that partner may go wrong when she is on lead, so this is a doubtful plus.

16) Five-card majors are much better for weak players. The opening bid and response are mostly automatic, requiring little if any thought. It is on the second round that difficulties arise. If the opponents get into the auction, neither opener nor responder may have to solve a rebid problem. There are fewer opportunities to go wrong in the early bidding.

With four-card majors, the thinking starts with the opening bid and first response, both partners considering their next bid before choosing the first one, perhaps taking lead direction into account. This process takes good judgment, which weak players do not have. A "pro" would never play four-card majors with a "client."

17) Hands with five spades and five clubs can be opened with 1♠ without worrying that a weakish responder will get in the way with a 2♦ or 2♥ response, forcing opener to the three level if he wants to show the clubs. With light two-over-one responses, a four-carder may choose to start with 1♣ to keep the bidding low, after which he may have difficulty showing the spade length. If he opens 1♠ he may have to rebid 2♠ after a 2♦ or 2♥ response, because 3♣ requires a strong hand. A good club contract could be missed.

18) The 1-2-3 sequence in a major can be played as preemptive rather than invitational:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2♠
3♠	- not invitational

Opener has long spades and a weakish hand. He figures that the opponents will reopen if he passes the raise, and that they can probably make some contract. He therefore bids 3S, preemptive, knowing that he may have stolen the hand even if 3S doesn't make.

Four-carders usually treat this sequence as invitational, while confirming a holding of at least five spades.

19) A two-over-one responder can rebid 2NT as a forcing bid, giving opener room at the three level to describe his hand further. A four-carder who responds 2♣ to 1♠ with ♠J2 ♥A72 ♦AJ8 ♣QJ876 must jump to 3NT when opener rebids 2♠, since 2NT would not be forcing. If opener has a hand such as ♠K108762 ♥Q2 ♦K32 ♣A3 he has to pass 3NT, although a spade contract would be superior. Since five-carders play 2NT as forcing, opener can bid 3♠ to show a six-card suit, and responder will then bid 4♠.

20) Opening a three-card minor with 4-4 in the majors will sometimes set a spade trap for the opposition:

South	West	North	East
1♣/1♦	Pass	1♥	Pass
2♥	Pass	Pass	?

If East thinks it is fairly safe to double or bid with four spades, he may find that South has 4-4 in the majors. Since four-carders generally open 1♠ with such hands, East is less likely to get burned by reopening this auction against them.

21) Light opening bids with balanced hands are safer, opener starting at a low level with 1♣ or 1♦. Four-carders must pass a promising hand like S-J873 H-K876 D-A32 C-A6 in first or second seat, because a 1♠ opening is too risky and a 1♥ opening leaves them with no rebid if partner bids two-over-one. Of course the light opening potential affects notrump bidding ranges, culminating in two dangerous overbids: the jump rebid of 2NT with 18 HCP, and the opening bid of 2NT with 20 HCP.

Conclusions

Counting one point for each advantage gives a score of 23 to 21 in favor of four-card major openings. That would not be a fair evaluation, however, because the advantages are not of equal importance. A weighting factor (scale of 1 to 10?) should be applied to each one before adding the score, an exercise left to the reader. The weighting should be different for rubber bridge, matchpoint, and IMP games.

No doubt I have missed some advantages/disadvantages of both approaches, and (as in the case of weak notrumps) many of the arguments would be inapplicable or modified for various bidding systems. Readers will please not point out that the assumed principles and treatments ascribed to each system are in some cases inferior to their approaches. I had to assume something for these "baseline" systems, so I tried to incorporate features that seemed most popular, not necessarily the best. It is well worth the effort for players to make their own list and evaluation, so that they are aware of what they are gaining and losing when adopting a particular bidding system.

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