Conventions Today

Brian Senior

CHESS & BRIDGE LTD
Foreword

There are millions of bridge players all over the world, but the vast majority of them have never read a single book on the subject!

However, if you have the desire to increase your knowledge and improve, then your watchwords should be ‘read and play’.

The Better Bridge Now series provides you with the perfect opportunity to develop your bridge skills, by covering all the essential elements of the game.

No matter what system you employ, conventions will play a part. It was therefore an obvious choice for the Better Bridge Now series to include a title on the subject.

Brian Senior has long been recognised as one of the world’s best player/writers, and in this book he breaks new ground by not only describing the most important conventions in modern use, but also by suggesting which will pay dividends.

This book will not only help you to decide what to incorporate into your partnership’s armoury, but also help you to understand the many weapons that might be used against you at the table by your opponents. It may even inspire you to create a convention of your own!

Thanks must go to the American Contract Bridge League for providing many of the photographs.

If by some chance you don’t find your favourite convention in this book, please let us know! You can email the London Bridge Centre at bridgeshop@easynet.co.uk

Mark Horton
Editor
Better Bridge Now
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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 Auction
One of a Minor

If playing a four-card major, weak no-trump 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 no-trump 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 no-trump 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♦ is only opened with precisely 4-4-3-2 shape, to avoid opening 1♣ on a doubleton, otherwise the prepared bid is 1♣, even with four diamonds and three clubs. Other players would still open 1♦ with that hand but open 1♣ 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♠, i.e. 1♦ is always a natural bid. It may churn your stomach to have to open 1♣ with a small doubleton, but it does make your bidding after a 1♦ opening a lot easier, so there is a significant pay-off to balance the obvious loss when you open 1♠. Not only does 1♦ promise four cards, but also 1♦ – 2♣ – 2NT is no longer needed to show a weak no-trump type – all of those start with 1♠. This is a significant improvement, as rebidding 2NT with a weak no-trump is a quite unattractive prospect – not only does it oblige you to play 1♦ – 2♣ 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?

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 $1\spadesuit - 1\diamond - 1\heartsuit / \clubsuit$ 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 $1\diamond$, 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 $1\spadesuit - 1\heartsuit$ with a weakish hand, then pass a 1NT rebid, but with 11+ HCP would respond $1\diamond$ then bid 2\heartsuit (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 $1\spadesuit - 3\spadesuit$ is pre-emptive, a weak hand with good trump support and distribution but not very much high-card strength, while $1\spadesuit - 2\spadesuit$ is forcing for one round, just as if any other suit had been opened. Likewise, of course, $1\diamond - 2/3\diamond$. 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 pre-emptive 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 $1\diamond$ opening, a hand such as:

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<tr>
<td>♠</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♥</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>♦</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♣</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
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has no sensible response. If $2\diamond$ is forcing, you can hear what kind of hand partner holds at a convenient level.

After say, $1\diamond - 2\diamond$ (inverted), should opener bid a four-card major with a balanced hand or rebid in no-trump? 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.

**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 No-trump

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 no-trump. 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♣ – ?

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<tr>
<td>2♣</td>
<td>A poor raise to 2♣, usually only doubleton support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2NT</td>
<td>Balanced 11/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3♣</td>
<td>Invitational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3♠</td>
<td>Balanced three-card raise, invitational</td>
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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 favour is not so important as the fact that the forcing no-trump 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♠ – 2NT 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 no-trump is quite popular amongst serious tournament players so the overall expert view seems to be in its favour.
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 armoury, but also help you to understand the many weapons that might be used against you at the table by your opponents.

Brian Senior is a leading International player/writer and authority on the game who has represented England, Northern Ireland and Great Britain. His recent titles include: For Love or Money and The Amazing Book of Bridge.

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