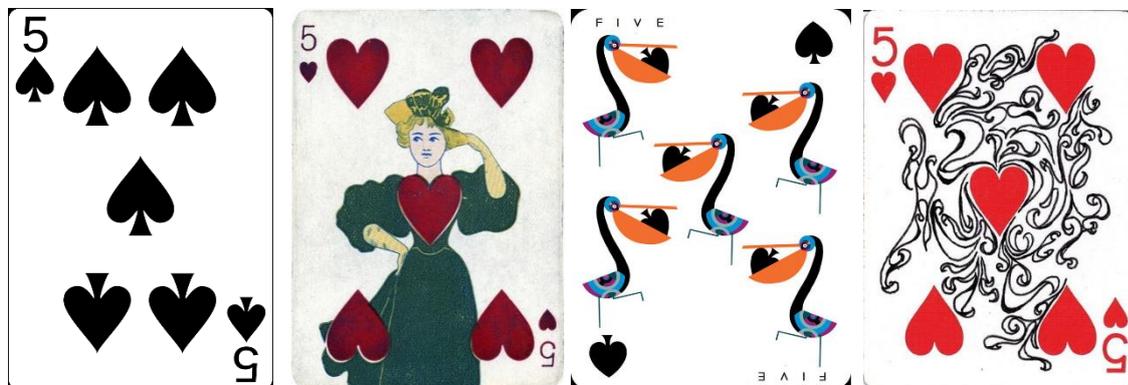


## Five Card Major Suits.

Apropos of nothing whatsoever, what do you call the arrangement of the spots on the 5 of spades or the 5 of hearts?



It's called a QUINCUNX. Now there's a handy word for Scrabble, but what I am actually trying to do is to hypnotise you into recognizing the fact that you hold exactly 5 cards in a major.

I bet that when you were taught bridge, you were taught 4 card major standard ACOL. Perhaps somebody said, "Other clubs seem to be teaching ACOL. Perhaps we should as well." Or "Somebody told me that ACOL is the most popular system in Britain and by colonial extension, New Zealand."

There are in fact many bidding systems but the two most widely used, especially by people learning bridge, are American style Five Card Majors (SAYC) and UK Standard English (ACOL).

As a rough guide: If you live in UK, Ireland or New Zealand you are more likely to be playing Acol with Four Card Majors and Weak No Trump (12-14). If you live in USA and most of the rest of the world you are more likely to be playing American style Five Card Majors with Strong No Trump (15-17).

Back in the day, it didn't seem important to New Zealand bridge teachers that hundreds of thousands of players in the rest of the world were playing 5 card major type systems, after all, we were never going to play against or with such people, were we? And then along came Corona virus, social distancing and (fanfare of trumpets!) Bridge Base Online, and oh dear, oh dear, they all apparently play something called SAYC (Standard American Yellow Card) or sometimes Two Over One Forcing.

ACOL wasn't always the beginners' system in New Zealand. When I and my wife first learnt bridge at Napier Bridge Club more years ago than you have had hot dinners, we were taught a 5 card major system which we always referred to as Goren. In the good old days when schoolteachers actually had official lunchtime breaks, they were encouraged to eat, drink, smoke and generally relax after the arduous of the morning and before the arduous of the afternoon. Nowadays weak teachers' unions, have allowed the sanctity of the lunch hour to be abused. I dare say you would receive at least a verbal reprimand if you were seen to be doing the crossword during your break before scurrying into some dark workroom. In the 70's Both Napier Girls' High School and Colenso High School had bridge tables going at lunchtime. Aspiring young players rushed to claim a seat where Viv Nelson was holding court and teaching Goren to all and sundry. At Colenso we had no doyenne to teach us and the standard of bridge was much lower.

Nowadays when we wish to play bridge during the Corona virus epidemic, we turn on our computers in the privacy of our own homes and log onto Bridge Base Online. We soon discover that the koine of international bridge is S.A.Y.C. (Standard American Yellow Card). I love that word koine. It was the name of the officially accepted dialect of ancient Greek that would have been understood in all different dialect regions. At ancient Greek bridge tournaments everybody spoke the Queen's English because you could not guarantee that your Geordie, Glaswegian or Strine would be understood. So, it is for this reason that New Zealand bridge teachers have been remiss in not teaching their students S.A.Y.C.

But there is a much more important reason why S.A.Y.C. and its ilk are superior to ACOL. This is, because when you open 1H or 1S in S.A.Y.C. you are telling your partner that you have at least FIVE cards in the suit. In ACOL this is not necessarily the case. The suit could be only four cards long. Why this matters is because of the aforementioned Law of T.N.T. Boiled down to its simplest, the Law states that, unless you have an excess of H.C.P., you and your partner are good for playing at the level of your combined trump fit. If you have 8 trumps between you, you are good for the 2 level (8 tricks), 9 trumps for the 3 level (9 tricks) and if you have a combined 10 trumps in a major, you should be in game (10 tricks).

This is your hand: ♠Q86 ♥JT6 ♦A7652 ♣Q7

You are playing ACOL and your partner has opened 1H and it is you to bid.

Repeated for convenience: ♠Q86 ♥JT6 ♦A7652 ♣Q7

Do you bid 1NT, 2D or 2H? If you bid 1NT or 2D, the opposition will come in with 2S. If your partner now passes, do you want to bid 3H? I think not.

Playing S.A.Y.C. you KNOW that your partner has FIVE hearts, so you know that you have an 8 card FIT. The LAW supports you to the 2 level, so, look no further and confidently bid 2H. Whatever happens now, you don't intend to bid again. You have done your duty. You can go and have a cup of coffee.

Playing ACOL there is a deplorable tendency to bid other suits when you have already found a trump fit. Your 2D bid might have aided them in their correct choice of a lead. Loose lips sink ships!

Your partner has opened 1H again, the only bid he seems to know, and you hold a somewhat better hand: ♠974 ♥Q764 ♦KJ53 ♣74

Playing ACOL, you would undoubtedly bid 2H because of your known 8 card fit, but playing S.A.Y.C. you ought to bid 3H because of your known 9 card fit. Of course, your partner must have been trained to recognize that such a 3 level raise is not invitational. If the hand were genuinely invitational such as:

♠A74 ♥Q764 ♦KJ5 ♣T93,

He would probably have bid 2NT which by partnership agreement could have that meaning. So, with the first hand you have bid 2H (ACOL) or 3H (S.A.Y.C.) and the next player holds this hand: ♠AJ986 ♥8 ♦A62 ♣K854

He will certainly bid 2S over 2H, but he will think twice about bidding 3S over 3H. This is not a matter of whether your 3H will make or not. It is more a matter of whether their 2S will make, in which case you going 1 light in 3H will be a good result.

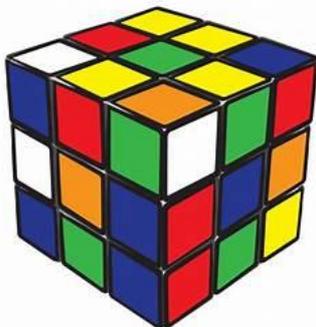
Now let's escalate things up even more. Your boring old partner opens 1H and his is your hand: ♠T943 ♥K8762 ♦K65 ♣7

This has a mere 6HCP, but crucially three of them are in your partner's suit and with a known 10 card fit, you should most certainly bid 4H. The Law does not guarantee that you will make your contract, but it does guarantee that 4H making or breaking will be a good board.

ACOL players are not stupid. They have heard of the Law as well and because of the acknowledged advantage of showing a FIVE card suit by opening 1H or 1S, they are considering changing this aspect of their system

To make 1S in ACOL promise five spades is no great deal, because in a sense it already does. This is because with only a 4 card spade suit you are quite likely to have used an alternative bid such as 1C, 1D, 1H or 1NT, which means that when you can't open one of those bids, the 1S opening will invariably promise a five card suit. So, it's only a tiny but important change when you and your partner promise that 1S will ALWAYS promise a FIVE card suit.

It is just as good an idea to make your 1H opening promise FIVE hearts as well.



Fine, but changing one bid is a bit like moving just one tile in a Rubik's cube – other things get moved around as well. No longer can you open 1H on:

♠AK4 ♥Q764 ♦KQ5 ♣K93

Prior to your 1H change when you opened 1C or 1D it usually meant you have at least 4 cards in that suit. In order to accommodate your revised meanings for 1H and 1S, you have also now to adopt the SHORT CLUB, where your 1C opening now says very little about your club suit. It could be natural, or you could have as few as two. Needs must when the devil drives (whatever that means!) Even with both 4 card majors you might have to open 1C because your hand is too strong for an ACOL 1NT opening: ♠AK94 ♥KJ76 ♦KQ5 ♣93.

I know you think that 1C is a horrible bid, mainly because it tends to ensure that your partner plays any major contract rather than you, which is painful to contemplate.

If you play ACOL with 5 card majors, there are other ramifications. What do you now do for instance if you hold this hand: ♠QJ4 ♥AKJ64 ♦KT8 ♣93

And you open 1H whereupon partner bids 1NT? What is your rebid? You want to bid again because you are stronger than partner expects and because you are not at all sure about no-trumps. You can't bid 2H, because that suggests that you have a minimum distributional hand with SIX hearts that can't stand no-trumps. Therefore, already having told partner about your FIVE only hearts, you could now bid 2NT to alert him to your good opener.

Let's give you a completely different hand: ♠K87 ♥AQT986 ♦5 ♣K93

Your partner bids 1NT. Perhaps he has a 5 card diamond suit, but not enough points to bid 2D, in which case 1NT could be an okay spot. You don't know that he has diamonds however, so you have to take out insurance by bidding 2H. In all probability partner will like your 2H even less than your 1H, but he will pass even with a singleton. To pull your partner's 1NT back to your opening suit shows at least SIX cards in the suit and generally a minimum hand. Note, that if the 2H bid has that meaning it cannot possibly also mean a maximum hand with only five hearts.

Some ACOL players have been taught to always bid their longest suit first which is generally a good bit of advice. Consider this hand however when you are already a passed, your partner has just opened 1C and it is you to bid.

♠94 ♥Q764 ♦K9 ♣KQJ93

If you bid 2C as a passed hand, your partner will read you for about 10-11 HCP with a decent club suit. Unfortunately he has opened on this hand:

♠AK43 ♥KJT5 ♦5 ♣T82

I think he will consider 2C to be an acceptable port in a storm and pass. What a pity when you can make game in hearts! Playing 5 card majors, you should be strongly inclined to always bid any major at the one level if you have the chance. Over the opening 1C you bid 1H. What could go wrong? Well he could like hearts and raise you. He could bid 1S and you could now bid 2C. He could bid 2NT which you would raise to 3NT.

Moral: because you no longer open 4 card majors, you have to go to more trouble to sniff out a 4:4 major fit when partner opens 1 of a minor.