

CLUTCH

The bane of those playing four-card majors is an opening hand with 4-4 in the majors and a minimum or near-minimum opening bid. If you open 1♠, you can lose the heart suit. If you open 1♥ you likely will not have a suitable rebid if responder bids two of a minor. A 2♠ rebid shows five hearts and four spades, while 2NT or a minor suit raise shows extra values.

Clutch ameliorates this problem by opening 2♦ with 4-4 in the majors. The convention is named after “Mr Clutch,” the name given to Jerry West of the Los Angeles Lakers, whose number was 44.

Since the bidding is starting at the two level, the suits should not be very weak. It may be better to open 1♣ with 4=4=2=3 and club strength, or even 1♦ with 4=4=3=2 and diamond strength. Clutch denies diamond shortness, since a 4=4=1=4 hand is opened 1♣. Since Clutch shows a limited hand, responder can pass with short majors and long diamonds.

A sub-minimum hand, as when opening third seat, should use Clutch only when not vulnerable, and with two decent majors.

Responses to Clutch:

-- 2♥ or 2♠ must be passed, since responder may be completely broke. With 3-3 in the majors, the correct response is 2♥ when lacking the requirements for a pass or a higher response. Knowing this opener may choose to use Clutch with

-- 2NT must be passed, as opener has shown his strength fairly well and responder may be desperately seeking a landing place.

-- 3♣ must be passed, as responder could have a bad hand with long club suit. With too good a hand for that, responder must bid an invitational 4♣ or take a chance with 3NT.

-- 3♦ is forcing for one round. It implies a solid suit and no club stopper, or a semi-solid suit with a club stopper. If opener has the king or ace of diamonds he can bid 3NT, knowing that responder has a club stopper. If responder's hand or suit isn't good enough for this bid, she can pass 2♦.

-- 3♥/3♠/4♦ is invitational.

-- 4♥/4♠ could be weak (preemptive) or strong (not good enough for slam). Not Alertable.

The jump to four of a major is analogous to a jump raise to game of a weak two bid in a major, either weak or strong. If an opponent starts questioning the bid, give the same response as you would when partner raises a weak opening to game. You don't know what responder has, and you don't care because you are barred from further participation in the auction. This is a big plus for Clutch, as it gets the partnership to the four level quickly. Added to the preemptive value of a 2♦ opening, the jump to game can make life difficult for the opposition.

It is barely permissible to use Clutch with a 4=5=2=2 hand when the hearts are weak and the spades are not strong enough for a 1♠ opening. It may not be used with a singleton diamond, however.

If RHO intervenes with a double, presumably showing diamonds, a redouble is “to play.” Responder has long diamonds and enough strength to think there are eight tricks to be had with diamonds as trump. All other responses are the same as over a pass, except that 3♦ asks for a diamond stopper. If the double is passed around to opener, he should redouble to show three diamonds (responder may have enough to pass this), otherwise he must bid 2♥

If RHO overcalls, a double is penalty of course. If the overcall is passed around to opener, he must pass since he has already shown his hand.

When in doubt whether to use Clutch or not, don't. With ♠ 9xxx ♥ AKJx ♦Ax ♣ xxx open 1♥, planning to rebid 2♥ if responder bids two of a minor. With ♠ Q10xx ♥ K10xx ♦AJ ♣ Axx open 1♣ (but rebid 1NT if the response is 1♦, because a one-level suit rebid implies at least four clubs).