

What is a “short club” and why should you avoid it?

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Bridge has a lexicon of its own, and at times the semantics become rather confusing. Fortunately, we can turn to ACBL and its convention card/alert chart standards for official definitions of terms that players often misunderstand. For this article, I have selected the “short club” as the topic of exploration. I am piggybacking this column on the recent Bridge Bulletin article by Larry Cohen (February 2017 issue, p. 32).

In the Standard American and 2/1 Game Forcing systems that predominate U.S. clubs and tournaments, it is common to open 1♣ with as few as three clubs. Doing so is a necessity of the five card major system and is seldom problematic, since our emphasis ultimately lies in trying to play in a major suit or no-trump. That said, we still need some structure associated with our minor suits for the times we do want to play our contracts there, be they partscores, games, or slams.

Cohen’s article, which focus on the 1♦ opening, reviews the standard practice of opening 1♦ when we are 4-4 in the minors but 1♣ when we are 3-3 in the minors. Many players have asked me over the years why we bid this way, and Cohen answers the question well: following this standard means that our 1♦ opening nearly promises (close to 97% of the time) a four card suit. When a major fit cannot be found, the responder can comfortably take a preference to diamonds with just four card support because it is safe to assume an eight card (or better) fit.

The club suit, in contrast, is a little more ambiguous. Since a 1♣ opening is more commonly a three card suit, many players will refer to that as a “short” opening; however, that terminology is incorrect. As defined by ACBL, a 1♣ opening that promises at least three clubs is *natural* – and completely normal. The definition of a “short” club is a suit that could be opened with just two (or fewer) clubs. If a partnership chooses to play a true short club system (which is legal in ACBL sanctioned events), then the 1♣ opening must be announced every single time with a “may be short” qualifier.

What does a partnership gain by playing a short club system? Well, the primary beneficiary is the diamond suit, as there is now no longer a need to open 1♦ with a three card suit. With 4-4 in the majors, 3 diamonds, and 2 clubs, you now open 1♣ instead of 1♦. But the benefit is minimal, as all you have done with your diamond suit is increased the odds of a four card (or longer) diamond suit from 97% to 100%; in the meantime, your 1♣ opening has become even more ambiguous. In reality, you give up more than you gain.

Does a short club system (or, for that matter, a short diamond system) make sense? The quick answer is yes, it does, but only within the context of an overall bidding system that differs significantly from what the vast majority of U.S. players choose to play. If you decide to adopt a completely different bidding system – like Precision or Polish Club – then you will become intimately familiar with short minor suit openings. But as long as you are playing SAYC or 2/1 Game Forcing, most experts will tell you that opting to play a short club is an extremely poor choice that is systemically inferior.