

Should I Play My Jump Shifts Weak or Strong?

The answer, unequivocally, is "yes". Okay, I'm equivocating... But it's really not critical which style you employ, as long as you structure the rest of your system around it, and your partner is comfortable with your approach.

The Weak Jump Shift

In most common systems, when you respond 1♥ or 1♠ to your partner's minor suit opening, you are describing a hand with 6+ points and a four-card (or longer) major suit. This familiar response is a staple of many of today's systems. But much of modern bidding is based on the theory that shape is more important in determining the playing strength of a hand than is a scattering of queens and jacks. And so, the adoption of a "weak jump shift" (WJS) has appeal to those that like to make frequent pre-emptive bids.

Although individual treatments differ, the most frequently used style of WJS involves a jump to 2♥ or 2♠ after partner's opening of 1♣ or 1♦. While such a jump is nearly always considered weak and pre-emptive in a competitive bidding situation, many players extend that meaning to the use in a non-competitive auction.

This form of (alertable) bid requires a hand containing about 2-5 HCP (less than a simple 1-level response) and a six-card (or longer) suit. For obvious reasons, the suit has no particular texture implied. It serves a pre-emptive purpose in the event that the opposition would like to get into the auction, and it serves as a warning to partner that your hand has little value unless your six-card suit is permitted to be trump. Unless partner has significant extra values, this bid is usually passed.

Some players like to extend the use of the WJS to bids of 2♠ over a 1♥ opening, or to bids of lower suits at the 3-level after an opening bid at the 1-level. While there can be made an argument that there is a slight advantage to the former treatment, there is great risk (and virtually no gain) in the latter.

It is usually agreed that the WJS is pre-emptive when used by an unpassed hand. With a passed hand, it is not uncommon to use a jump shift response to show a hand that was reluctantly passed in first or second seat, and which now looks very much like an opening hand. This is always a matter of partnership agreement, and if you wish to use WJSs, you must discuss this aspect before moving on.

The Case For the Weak Jump Shift

The advantage(s) of the WJS are (i) the pre-emptive effect upon the opponent's possible entry into the auction, and (ii) the severe caution it places on partner regarding looking for some higher contract that does not exist.

The Abandonment of the Strong Jump Shift

Many 2/1 players have shunned the strong jump shift (no known useful acronym) as they feel it is "outdated" and not flashy enough. As a result, they find that, as a responder, they sometimes lack the tools to describe a particular hand, particularly when the hand is strong and/or distributional. Many players use the WJS without consideration of the fact that responder NO LONGER HAS ANY GAME-FORCING initial bid. If your partnership wants to play WJSs, you MUST play the artificial Fourth-Suit-Forcing (FSF or 4SF) to game. But this bid is an inquiry about opener's holding; it does not permit the responder to fully describe the nature of his hand. Additionally, the length of time that it takes to unfold this sequence makes the process subject to pre-emptive or other nuisance interference by aggressive opponents.

Because of this, there is a significant minority of tournament players that still prefer to use the strong jump shift in its traditional manner, signifying a strong suit and more than simple game-forcing values. In much the same manner as the 2/1 response to a major-suit opening, the overall strength of the combined hands is immediately known, greatly reducing the incentive for the opponents to interject themselves in your strong auction.

The Conclusion?

Play whatever makes you and your partner most comfortable. All roads should similarly get you to the right contract. But, by all means, discuss jump shifts in uncontested auctions with your partner(s), and make certain you understand all of the followup auctions that can result.