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IN order to recommend Benji Acol, two fundamental questions must be asked:

- What is Benji Acol?
- For whom am I recommending it? My answers will follow at the end.

Acol started with a basis of Strong Twos and Weak Threes. However, it became fairly obvious that Weak Two bids are highly effective. As with all pre-emptive bids, they deprive opponents of space for scientific bidding, but it is also very true that in competitive auctions the side that stakes its patch early has the advantage.

Game All. Dealer West.			
♠	J		
♥	K 9 6 3 2		
♦	A 9 8 5 3		
♣	K J		
♠	K Q 10 7 6 5	♠	A 8 4 2
♥	4	♥	8 7 5
♦	K 6	♦	Q J 4 2
♣	9 4 3 2	♣	A 10
		♠	9 3
		♥	A Q J 10
		♦	10 7
		♣	Q 8 7 6 5

## Auction 1

West	North	East	South
Pass	1♥	Pass	3♥
Pass	4♥	All Pass	

## Auction 2

West	North	East	South
2♣	Pass	4♣	All Pass

This hand is fairly mundane, but look at the difference between the two auctions.

In Auction 1 West is not playing Weak Twos, and East-West end up frozen out of the auction. In Auction 2 it is North that is

## Benji Acol is a good system

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frozen out. East, realising that his side has a ten-card fit, bumps up the bidding to the level of the fit.

Both 4♥ and 4♣ easily make. Of course, either auction may follow a different path: for example, in Auction 2 North may overcall 2♣ with 3♥, but still North-South will not be allowed to buy the contract in 4♥.

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Weak Twos became popular. Some partnerships play three Weak Twos, but they then have the problem of fitting all their strong hands into two bids: 2♣ and 2NT. Others play their Weak Twos as part of a Multi 2♦, and play all other two-level openings except 2♣ as weak two-suiters. This needs a lot of work, particularly in defining strong hands. Benji Acol is an excellent compromise. You use opening 2♥ and 2♠ bids as Weak Twos. That still leaves 2♣, 2♦ and 2NT available for the strong hands. You don't have a weak 2♦ bid available, but since that takes up less space, it is the least effective of the three commonly played Weak Two openings.

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Benji is often regarded as sacrificing the definition of strong hands for the pre-emptive gain of the Weak Twos. However, reducing five strong opening bids (2♣ through to 2NT) to three (2♣, 2♦, 2NT) actually increases your definition for balanced hands. You now have three ways of starting a strong balanced hand (2NT, 2♣ and 2♦) instead of two (2NT and 2♣). I suggest you use 2NT as 20-22, 2♣ followed by a 2NT rebid as 23-24 and 2♦ followed by a 2NT rebid as 25-26. In Acol you would have to open a balanced 25-26, with 2♣ and rebid 3NT over 2♦, an ugly, space-consuming bid that makes it impossible to use Stayman and transfers below

the level of 3NT. Balanced hands of this strength do not often occur but when they do, they frequently need the space for discussion towards the best slam.

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So, let's answer the questions at the start. To answer i):

- I am recommending Benji Acol where Weak Twos are sensibly defined as a good six-card suit and not much outside, and where the partnership puts some reasonable work into discussing how to deal with the strong hands. I am not advocating a style of random Weak Twos, particularly in first or second seat.
- I am not advocating the nonsense of an opening 2NT bid as showing 19-20 points. It always mystifies me why anybody would choose to open a balanced 19 points at the two level. This is not an integral part of Benji.
- I am not advocating the regrettably common habit of opening a Benji 2♣ with pre-emptive hands, for example: ♠K 7 2 ♥7 ♦AK J 8 7 5 4 2 ♣7 5.

Good bridge dictates opening this with a high-level diamond pre-empt. Even if you can find a way to describe this as eight playing tricks, it is not a hand of power and quality that can be represented as an Acol-two bid. Those who play Benji Acol need to recognise that not only is opening this hand 2♣ bad bridge, it is not a permitted method (see the EBU *Orange* and *Tangerine* books).

To answer ii): I am recommending Benji Acol for improving partnerships who want to put opponents under pressure but don't have the time available to discuss more complex systems. □

# Benji Acol is not a good system

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR). Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

OLD fashioned players liked to have all of their two-bids to show strong hands. Along came the all conquering Americans with their fancy systems and their devastating new weapon (I'm talking about the 1940s here), Weak-two Bids. The choice faced by contemporary players boiled down to two options: should a two bid (especially in a major) show a good hand or a weak hand? S. J. Simon in his classic *Design for Bidding* (1949) agonised long and hard about which was better, Strong Twos or Weak Twos, and eventually came down on the side of Strong Twos – largely (I suspect) because he was one of the originators of the Acol system with its Strong Two basis.

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Anyway, one solution, proposed by Albert Benjamin back in the 1970s, was that Acol players could have it all. You could have your Weak Twos and your Strong Twos – hence the system known as Benjaminised Acol was born. Does it work? Is it effective? The answer, I'm afraid, is No. With a capital N.

Why not? Well there are two main reasons. The first is that the whole idea and rationale of Strong Twos is woefully misunderstood. If you ask the average proponent of Benji Acol what a Strong Two bid is, he (or she) will tell you blithely that the 2♣ opening bid 'shows eight playing tricks'. Delve deeper, if you like, and you will discover that the meaning seems to be precisely this: opener is promising exactly eight tricks in a one-suited hand. Now I can say with some authority that this interpretation is *not* what the originators of Acol had in mind (and I have S. J. Simon's book in front of me as I type). In fact, the rationale for opening a two bid is that you are scared that a one bid may be passed out and a game missed. Simon gives Hands 1, 2 and 3 as examples:

<b>Hand 1</b> ♠ A K Q J 6 3 ♥ A 5 2 ♦ A J 8 ♣ 4	<b>Hand 2</b> ♠ A Q J 7 6 2 ♥ K Q J 10 8 6 ♦ Q ♣ Void
<b>Hand 3</b> ♠ A K Q 5 2 ♥ A K Q 8 4 ♦ 3 ♣ 9 3	<b>Hand 4</b> ♠ 7 5 ♥ A 9 ♦ A K Q 9 7 6 5 ♣ 10 3

He states quite categorically that Hand 4 is *not* an Acol 2♦ opening bid: 'It can open 1♦ and rebid 3♦ without fear of missing anything.' Now, times change, fashions change and you may feel that the views of a man who died fifty years ago are of little importance today. Maybe so, but the point I am trying to make is worth consideration: Strong Twos are designed to cope with difficult, strong hands that are nearly impossible to deal with by conventional means (and by that I mean, in general, a one-level opening bid).

Note that true Acol two-bids are 100% forcing and show eight playing tricks or more, and may well be two-suited. The flaw in Benji twos is that few practising pairs seem to know whether, say, 2♣ – 2♦ – 2♣ is forcing (it should be!) or whether 2♣ – 2♦ – 3♣ is forcing. And if the latter sequence is forcing, what is the negative response? If it isn't forcing, what does responder need to have a shot at 3NT? Or to try a suit of his own? Questions, questions, questions. And so few convincing answers. It is all very well to play these systems, but you need to do an awful lot of work on them to make them effective.

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The second charge levelled at Benji is that it



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THE DEBATE

is ineffective against opposition bidding. It will be fine on the first example above (Hand 1, a single-suiter) but is a potential nightmare on the two-suited hands (Hands 2 and 3) if the left-hand opponent decides he's going to muddy the waters. If you open 2♣ and hear 2♦ on your left followed by a playful raise to 4♦ on your right, you are not going to be a happy bunny. At least if you start with 2♣ (strong) you can rebid 4♥; after a 2♣ start you are hamstrung. It is even better to open 1♣ rather than 2♣ on these hands – at least if you are given another chance you can get over your hand type with a 4♥ rebid.

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There are also hands where the Benji 2♦ (artificial, forcing to game) opening bid mucks up hands and that's when the opener has a strong hand with hearts. One simple example will suffice:

♠ A ♥ A K J 8 7 3 ♦ A K Q J ♣ K 6
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There is a considerable disadvantage if you hold this hand and you play Benji Acol rather than ordinary Acol. After a 'normal' 2♣ opening bid, the auction can start 2♣ – 2♦ – 2♥ and there is room to breathe. After a Benjaminised start of 2♦ – 2♥ – 3♥ we are already too high too quickly (Nurse! Get the oxygen!) and we may also have got this hand played by the wrong player.

Not good. Not, in my view anyway, a very satisfactory system. □