

## Foreword

It is easy to dismiss Marvin French as a crank or a curmudgeon or as the contrarian that he certainly was but this does not do justice to the man's life. Marvin was Life Master 1023<sup>1</sup> achieving the rank in 1956, "when it was hard" as he liked to say. This was not a boast, just a fact not well understood by many who started playing later, particularly after the great masterpoint inflation that kicked off shortly into the new millennium. Marvin was a force on the west coast bridge scene. Local San Diego Diamond LM, Anne Terry, never one to withhold an opinion positive or negative, called Marvin the "best of the best." D22 Director, Ken Monzingo said, "Like him or not, he was a unique man. A leader, not a follower. A brilliant man of honesty and integrity."

Marvin made significant contributions to bridge literature and less known contributions to bidding theory. He was a contributor to [\*Bridge World\*](#), *Popular Bridge* (published in the 1960s and 1970s), and the D22 [\*Contract Bridge Forum\*](#), and editor for the latter prior to Joel Hoersch. For many years Marvin maintained his own website where he posted his writings on bridge, blackjack, and literature. His 90 page [\*Squeeze Refresher\*](#) (*For Good Players*) is undoubtedly the best reference that is available for free.

Sometime in 2011 I got to know Marvin better because we started exchanging e-mail on various bridge topics in part because I had been reading his website and had taken some interest in his discussion of [\*four card vs. five card majors\*](#). We almost played a double session at the 2012 San Diego regional. Roger Zellmer, one of Marvin's regular bridge

---

<sup>1</sup> A pleasing and easy to remember number for all conversant in binary.

partners and long-time blackjack sidekick suggested I had saved myself some grief but I have come to regret not partnering once with Marvin.

I told Marvin that I had vacuumed up a copy of Evan Bailey's website shortly after Evan's death in order to preserve it. Marvin thought that was cool and hoped I would do the same when he "kicked the bucket". When Marvin's webhosting contract ran out in 2015, I re-hosted his website under the La Jolla Unit website.

Marvin railed against the proliferation of bidding conventions arguing that, "It's a card game after all. First, learn how to play cards." And yet paradoxically he dedicated a lot of time to documenting no fewer than three bidding systems. His [Skeleton System](#) was very basic, designed to focus the partnership on card play rather than system memorization. By using weak (12-15 HCP) notrump bids, it even excludes Stayman. His [AmBIGuous Diamond](#) system was designed for matchpoint competition. The present document, *Four-Card Majors: Western Natural Updated* was Marvin's bidding handbook.

Marvin never bought into the transition to five card majors, either in the form we call Standard American today or the now popular Two-Over-One Game Force (2/1). The title of this handbook, *Four-Card Majors: Western Natural Updated*, appears to be a challenge to 2/1 issued in response to *Five Card Majors: Western Style* (1975), Max Hardy's first attempt to popularize the ideas of Dick Walsh that laid the foundation for 2/1.

Should anyone care about four card majors inasmuch as they have been consigned to the dustbin of history? On technical merits, I don't think they can be readily dismissed. Mike Lawrence, an expert and author of many key bidding books, has stated that four card and five card majors are comparable for bidding partials and games. He argued in part that the

occasional 4-3 major suit fit reached by four card major bidders was compensated by the fact that some of these Moysian fits were the best contract and perhaps more importantly that the four card major bid regularly picked off the opponent's major suit fit. Only for slam bidding did Mr. Lawrence feel five card majors were clearly superior.

My opinion is that five card majors have prevailed in part because they are easier to teach and that the 2/1 variety is arguably easier yet to teach. Players march right into their 6-2, 5-3, 4-4, and 2-6 major suit fits and fly low into many two level 5-2 major suit fits. The New Minor Forcing convention handles the 3-5 ugly duckling often enough. The system bid is usually clear. Four card majors by contrast require good judgment. There are often multiple choices and suit quality matters more when you might find yourself playing in a 4-3 fit. This didn't trouble Marvin—he had fine judgment and wasn't interested in teaching, holding the philosophy that those who can do and those who can't teach.

Easier bidding systems allow the mediocre player to advance further much as a larger racquetball racket allows the beginner to return more shots. And yet the sweet spot on the large racket is no bigger than on the smaller racket. A good opponent will take excellent advantage of a shot returned poorly from the edge of a big racket. At some level, the large racket not only provides no advantage but in fact is a hindrance as it weighs more and reduces dexterity. And so it proves at bridge. To beat the best you need to improve the size of your sweet spot, your bidding judgment.

The same might be said about defensive judgment. Marvin's first rule of defensive carding was "trick preservation" by which he meant do not signal with a card that might be too valuable. Signaling is all well and good and does get the beginner off to a good start but it takes more experience, judgment if you will, to know when not to signal. I prefer a

partner who knows what is going on in the defense because it provides many opportunities to mislead declarer.

I encourage you to expand your bidding judgment by giving four card majors a go. If nothing else, you will surely generate some interesting swings. Combining four card majors with a weak notrump and decent card play may be enough to throw even an expert team for a loop, much as Marvin said in his essay [\*Beating the Experts\*](#). Long live four-card majors!

Matthew Kidd

San Diego, July 2015