

## Acol Strong 2

It is my observation, as well as a purely personal opinion, that the acol "strong 2" opener is commonly over-used. If that is indeed so, the reasons are quite understandable. The "blood is up" when you get dealt a strong hand. Conventions are fun to use, particularly those whose incidence is rare. So there is a twin adrenalin rush of employing a rare convention to show a strong hand. It is almost a natural human tendency to shoe-horn hands into the desired category.

I thought I would set out my thoughts on this in some detail, and those who disagree with me will of course be welcome to pile in and argue their corner.

Subject to licensing restrictions imposed by the sponsoring organisation, partnerships are free to agree on whatever system, conventions and treatments that they wish, which may or may not bear some resemblance to Acol "as we know it". Licensing restrictions do not particularly interest me. Best practice is of interest, but also what is "standard" within Acol is the principal consideration in this post (and will never fall foul of licensing restrictions anyway). Many of my games are played with pickup partnerships, and there is neither the time nor inclination to discuss finer nuances. Advanced players and beginners alike would benefit from their partnership sharing the same impression of "standard" when sitting down to play in a pick-up game.

Central to the definition of an Acol strong 2 opener (and I am excluding 2C from this part) is a requirement to hold "8 playing tricks". However this is insufficient by itself to define the bid. A red-v-white 4S opening bid may be expected to hold 8 playing tricks, as perhaps should a 5C opener at suitable vulnerability. Yet there must be something to distinguish these essentially pre-emptive bids from an Acol 2.

There are several resources that provide guidance; perhaps not entirely identical guidance but pretty close. Here are a few by respected experts.

Sandra Landy in her series on Standard English, describes the bid here:

<http://www.ebu.co.uk/publications/Education%20and%20Teaching/Sandra%20Landy%20Articles/apr00.pdf>

Chris Ryall here:

<http://www.cavendish.demon.co.uk/bridge/acol/open2.htm>

Karen Walker here:

<http://www.prairienet.org/bridge/strong2.htm>

Each link contains a suggested definition punctuated with examples. I shall not waste space repeating them here. You can click on or paste in the links for yourselves.

Walker's definition has a rather stronger requirement than even I am used to. Perhaps it is an American style (among the few over there who play strong 2s).

Additionally, I shall throw in Eric Crowhurst's definition from Precision Bidding in Acol (ISBN 0 7207 0765 X). It was written in the 1970s, so standard trends may have since evolved.

*It caters for the hand which is not strong enough in honour tricks for a game forcing bid of 2C, but which is too strong to open with one and follow with a jump rebid. It is normally based on a strong six-card suit and at least eight playing tricks, but can also be used on powerful two-suited hands on which the opener would be nervous of opening with a modest one bid.*

*The two tests to apply if you are not sure whether to open with one or two are as follows:*

*(a) If you open with a one bid, is there a real danger of your missing game if everyone passes?*

*(b) If you open with a one bid, are you going to have difficulty describing your hand in the next round?*

Crowhurst also provides some example hands (not sure that I entirely agree with them all):

S:AKQ82

H:AQJ93

D:6

C:K7

S:AKJ4

H:-

D:AKT953

C:AQ8

S:72

H:AKQJ5

D:AQ9

C:KQT

S:AQJ9

H:A5

D:AKJ973

C:4

S:AKJT7

H:AQJ83

D:A4

C:3

Common qualities that run through all of the definitions and examples are:

- 1) At least 8 playing tricks (well, we already knew that!)
- 2) A hand of "quality and power" (whatever that means! perhaps refer to conditions 4 and 7)
- 3) A good suit, ie one whose trick taking potential would not be damaged except by particularly bad breaks in a misfitting hand. Concentration of honour holdings and intermediates within the proposed trump suit seem to be desirable.
- 4) Some defensive strength if the opponents contest the auction (ie not a purely pre-emptive hand).
- 5) A hand that fears a significant risk of playing at the 1 level when game is available
- 6) A hand that (when single-suited) is too strong to be described by a nonforcing jump rebid in the opened suit if opened at the 1 level.
- 7) A hand with at least as many quick tricks as losers
- 8) A hand that has a clear opinion on the optimum trump suit, within a choice of up to 2 suits.

All conditions are required in order to qualify, with the possible exception of 7 and 8, which I have invented while writing this article. The last two are not expressly stated in the reference works but they are a theme that I find running through the examples presented in their support. The 8th condition perhaps follows logically from the previous conditions, and may be superfluous, being always satisfied if the others are.

The 7th condition I have plagiarised from a concept often quoted as an additional requirement for a strong 2C opener (apart from HCP): that it should hold more quick tricks than losers. Typically the 2C opener is stronger than the other Acol strong 2 openers, so this may not be a strict requirement of the suit-based strong 2, but it will not be far off. Hence in condition 7 I suggest perhaps "as many as" should apply, as opposed to "more than".

As regards the upper limit of strength for a strong 2 (other than 2C), it is common to draw a line between the 2C opener and other strong 2 openers, above which you would open 2C and below which you would open another strong 2. In practice I think that a clear distinction is neither required nor desirable. All the strong 2 openers are forcing for one round. Given that opener has a guaranteed rebid he might choose to do so at the game level or by way of another forcing bid, despite a negative response. As long as a bid is forcing there is no particular requirement to place an upper limit on the strength, although there may be other reasons why it is desirable. Furthermore if you have a hand that is clear about the best trump strain, the sooner you can get that message across the more controlled will be the subsequent auction. This is why Crowhurst recommends opening 2D rather than 2C in the second example hand listed above.

Accordingly, I personally conclude, as I mentioned in another thread in the dim and distant past, that opener (East) in the first "hand of the week" (22 November 2006) at

<http://www.acolatbbo.org.uk/> falls short of a strong 2 opener, failing as it does conditions 3 and 5 for certain. It also fails (in my opinion) both of the optional conditions 7 and 8. Condition 1 is arguably satisfied if your evaluation of playing tricks includes assumptions of average expected support from partner and reasonable breaks. A hand whose strength varies widely according to how well fitting is responder's hand would generally fail one or more of the conditions and would be better handled by opening at the 1 level, identifying the quality of responder's fit, and then if encouraged upgrade. Opener usually has a variety of forcing options available as long as he can just get past the first round. Not one of the examples in Crowhurst or the other reference links contains a hand based on Ace to 6.

Another example hand that recently arose on BBO was

S:KT  
H:76  
D:KQJT863  
C:KJ

I entered this hand in Pavlicek's evaluator at <http://www.rpbridge.net/xhe1.htm> and it regurgitated a generous (to my view) 7.5 playing tricks. Indeed the only conditions that this hand satisfies in my opinion are 3, 4 and 8.

In my opinion, if there is any one of the 8 conditions that can be dispensed with fairly safely it is condition 5 (fear of being passed out in 1). These days responder needs precious little in order to bid, and the opponents will often rescue you if not. I do not like to rely on the opponents' assistance, but it has to be acknowledged that a very

substantial proportion of the world's bridge playing population is happy to dispense with strong 2 openers altogether (having higher priorities), with the exception of 2C (which perhaps has a slightly more relaxed strength limitation compared with Acol as a result).

Condition 6 could also be dispensed with by introducing artificial continuations in the rebids. A common treatment is for a 3NT rebid by opener to show a single suited hand too strong for a non-forcing jump rebid in the suit, with balanced hands all being shoe-horned into lower no trump rebids (helpful in any case to investigate the trump strain below game).

Among the objectives of employing a strong 2 opener are:

- (1) to provide accurate slam bidding,
- (2) to provide accurate game bidding (in particular to avoid playing in 1 of a suit when you have game on)

Of these, I rate the first objective as being the higher priority of a strong 2, whose effectiveness is compromised if you dilute the requirements of the opening bid. Looking back over the decades that I have been playing, and recognising that personal memory is a fickle thing, I reckon that I have been opening at the 1 level more and more often over the years on marginal hands, and when the real strong 2 arises I tend to feel that the continuations are more controlled and the outcome more confident.

Partnership agreement is of overriding importance. Opposite a partner who expects you to hold something like

S:Kx  
H:xx  
D:KQJTxxx  
C:KJ

for a strong 2 in Diamonds, then you are not going to end up with too many disasters if you happen to open a strong 2 in Diamonds when dealt with that hand. However if partner's picture of your hand is more akin to

S:AQJ9  
H:A5  
D:AKJ973  
C:4

then you will be "riding for a fall".

**1eyedjack**