

Another Trio of Tidbits: 2C Opening Bids

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If opener bids 2C and then bids a suit, this shows a very strong, unbalanced hand with a good 5+ card suit. Here are a few things that you may not know about this bidding sequence and about responder's subsequent bids. (For all of the following, we will assume that responder bids 2D over the opening bid of 2C.)

1. We usually say that opening 2C and then bidding a suit shows at least 21 high card points (HCP). Sometimes you can do this with just 20 or 19 HCP, or even less than that. However, there are many 19 point hands that should be opened with One of a suit, rather than 2C. How do you know whether you should open these borderline hands with 2C or with One of a suit?

One criterion to use when making this decision is that an opening bid of 2C followed by a suit bid should show a hand that is within one trick of game or better, with that suit as trump. So if you open 2C and then rebid 2H or 2S, you should have at least nine tricks in your own hand with that suit as trump. Why nine tricks? Because game would be 4H or 4S, or 10 tricks. If you open 2C and then rebid 3C or 3D, you should have at least 10 tricks in your own hand with that suit as trump. Again, this is because game would be 5C or 5D, or 11 tricks. With this in mind, consider the following hands:

1. ♠ A K J 10 9 5 3 2
♥ A K
♦ 4
♣ A 2

2. ♠ A K 10 9 5 4
♥ A K
♦ J 3 2
♣ A 2

Both of these hands have 19 HCP. However, hand #1 is a monster: You are virtually guaranteed of getting at least 10 tricks with this hand, even if partner is broke. Therefore, you should definitely open this hand 2C, planning to rebid spades. Hand #2 is still 19 HCP, but you have just eight tricks in your hand. Therefore, you should open this hand with 1S and plan to make a strong rebid.

A benefit of using this criterion is that if responder has even one trick, he'll know that this should be enough for game. If responder has a hand that probably won't produce a trick, then he'll know that they might not belong in game.

Also, note that the opening bid of 2C is forcing to 2N, 3H/3S, or 4C/4D. In other words, it is forcing to a contract that is within one trick of game. But if opener is within one trick of game in his own hand, then these suit contract levels should be safe – even if responder has nothing.

2. Now let's switch to the other side of the table and look at what responder should do when partner opens 2C and then bids a suit. For both of these hands, assume that partner has opened 2C, you have bid 2D, and partner has bid 2H. What should you do now?

3. ♠ 10 6 4 2
♥ 10 3
♦ Q 5 4 3
♣ 5 3 2

4. ♠ void
♥ 10 6 4 2
♦ 8 7 6 5 3
♣ 8 5 4 2

The first thing to note is that responder CANNOT pass! Opener's suit rebid is absolutely forcing!! Opener could have game in his own hand – consider hand #1, above - and will want to bid game even if responder has nothing. Remember: A 2C opening bid is forcing to 2N, 3H/3S, or 4C/4D. You're not yet at that level; therefore, responder must bid again.

So now let's consider hands #3 and #4. These are NOT good hands! You MUST bid something, but you want partner to know that you're bidding because you have to, not because you want to. These are the perfect hands for what we call a "second negative" bid. This is an artificial bid that says that you have a VERY weak hand, fewer than five HCP, with no Aces and no Kings. In other words, this is a hand that probably won't provide a trick for partner. Note that the second negative bid doesn't say anything about responder's support for opener's suit.

The second negative bid is the cheapest suit bid available at the 3-level. So if partner opens 2C and then bids 2H or 2S, the second negative bid is 3C. If partner opens 2C and rebids 3C, the second negative bid is 3D. And if partner opens 2C and rebids 3D, the second negative bid is 3H. Note that the second negative bid is the only bid that responder can make at this point that is NOT forcing to game. Therefore, any bid other than the second negative IS forcing to game.

With hand #3, you should bid 3C over partner's 2H bid. If partner now bids 3H, you can just pass. (Of course, opener can bid game over 3C if his hand is sufficiently strong.)

With hand #4, you should also bid 3C over partner's 2H bid. But this hand is much better than hand #3, even though it has fewer points. You have four of partner's Hearts, and you have a void in Spades. There is an excellent chance that this hand will provide partner with at least one trick. Therefore, if partner now bids 3H you can raise to 4H. Of course, partner will likely abandon any thought of slam, knowing that you have no Aces and no Kings.

3. Now let's assume that responder has trump support and some values. How should you bid each of these hands when partner has opened 2C, you have bid 2D, and partner has bid 2H?

5. ♠ J 6 4 3
♥ 10 9 2
♦ 8 6 5 3
♣ A 4

6. ♠ A 6 4
♥ 10 9 5 2
♦ K Q 4 3
♣ 5 2

With hand #5, you should jump to 4H. The jump to game is natural and shows 3+ cards in partner's suit with 4 - 7 HCP. The "fast arrival" to game tells partner that you have a weak-ish hand with the one trick that partner might need to make game – but not much else. Of course, partner may still explore for slam if his hand is sufficiently strong.

With hand #6, you should bid 3H. The single raise of partner's suit is natural and shows 3+ cards in partner's suit with 8+ HCP and slam interest. With a good hand, it is better to bid slowly and save space for slam exploration.

It may seem counterintuitive that responder's jump to 4H is weaker than the single raise to 3H. But recall that any bid other than the second negative is forcing to game. And when you're in a game-forcing auction, it makes sense to go slowly when you have a good hand. This is analogous to the situation with Jacoby 2NT, where opener jumps to game with a minimum opening hand and bids just Three of his major with extra values.