

Two Over One Game Force (2/1) – What It Is ... And What It Isn't

A word of explanation first. This is a definition of what the system is and what it is not because there are a number of misunderstandings in this area. This is not an article on how to play 2/1 (altho a lot can be inferred just by knowing what the basics of the system are and you can develop your 2/1 system just from this).

This bidding system is in common use in the United States but is not yet terribly common in the rest of the world (as of 2012) altho it is catching on, especially at the top level. Saying 'I play 2/1' is similar to saying 'I play Acol' or 'I play Standard American' – not definitive of exactly what you play but it does set a framework or general approach.

I. What It Is

A system can be called 2/1 if it meets two criteria and two only:

1. The response of 1NT to 1H or 1S is forcing (note: this, of course, says 5 card majors too) and
2. The Two Over One suit response is either: forcing to game (Hardy-style) or forcing to game unless responder rebids his/her suit (Lawrence-style).
No more and no less.

The argument for the forcing NT (this is an invention of Alvin Roth who also invented 5 card majors, the negative double, the unusual NT, and maybe even the precursor of 2/1 and was probably the finest bidding theorist the world has ever seen) is that, if responder has 2 cards in the major opened, a contract of 2 of that major, even if only a 5-2 fit, is at least as good a contract as 1NT (analogous to the weak transfer to a major – you are often willing to risk a 5-2 fit there too) and that will often be responder's rebid if opener rebids a new suit at the 2 level without reversing. If the responder has a singleton or void in the opened suit (with three or more, you would usually raise or make a Two Over One response), the hand most likely belongs in a suit contract in some other suit and not 1NT (altho 1NT will sometimes score better than two of a suit, two of a suit will be the better contract at least as often in MPS and is generally better in IMPS) and the 1NT forcing mechanism is likely to get you to a contract that's quite playable. The forcing NT should normally be used on any responding hand, except raises, of 6-12 points.

Opener's rebid over a forcing NT response can be to repeat the major if it's at least 6 cards long and the opener can't envision a game in the hand (is relatively minimum), a 4 card heart suit (if the opening was 1S), or a 3 (yes, 3) card minor as well as the strong jump shifts or an invitational rebid of a jump to 3 of the major or an invitational rebid of 2NT. If responder has a balanced hand of a good 10-12 points, he/she can rebid 2NT (rather than the direct 2NT ala Acol without Jacoby 2NT) over a 2 of a suit rebid by opener. This, of course, isn't forcing.

A rebid by responder (immediately after 1NT and opener's rebid at the two level) of a new suit isn't forcing either and opener should not raise unless there still might be a game in the hand (this is much more likely if responder's next response is 2H than if it's a minor – at the two or three level) – this re-response shows a minimum of 5 cards in the suit altho it's probably 6 or more, especially in a minor.

The Two Over One response in a suit (from which the system got its name) allows very intricate investigation of slam. For example, in the auction 1S – 2C; 2D – 2S, the hand is forced to at least 4S but, if either side is the least bit interested in slam (in fact, according to the principle of fast arrival which is used frequently in 2/1, a bid of 2S is stronger than a bid of 3S altho both force to 4S), a cue bid at the three level can be made (or possibly something else depending on partnership understanding). Opener also can use the principle of fast arrival, as mentioned above, so, for example, 1S – 2C; 2D – 2S; 4S is weaker than 3S (it doesn't deny the possibility of a slam, it simply says I've got a poorish opening hand but responder can carry on if very strong).

Opener is not expected to exceed two of his/her suit with a minimum hand except possibly with 2NT (a small balanced hand) and then only when playing a strong NT (note: when playing the weak NT, opener never exceeds two of his/her suit with a minimum hand whether the response was 1NT, a two over one, or 1S over 1H). However, you can make it a rule that even the small balanced hand with 5 cards in the major will also never exceed 2 of the opened suit even when playing the strong NT and that really isn't misrepresenting your hand at all – you have a minimum hand and nothing else to bid below 2 of the major. Note that: 1. Opener's rebidding the opened major doesn't guarantee that he/she has a minimum or 6 or more cards in the suit, just that there is nothing else to rebid (but it will usually be a fairly minimal sort of hand) and 2. Even if you are playing Lawrence-style, a 2/1 becomes forcing to game when opener shows more than a minimum by his/her 2nd

bid. As an example: 1H – 2C; 2S – 3C is still forcing to game playing Lawrence-style even tho responder has rebid his/her suit because opener showed extra strength by the reverse (opener could pass in the auction 1H – 2C; 2H – 3C or even 1H - 2C; 2D - 3C).

II. What It Isn't

Two Over One Game Force dictates nothing about the range of the opening NT (altho it's usually played with one of 15-17 high card points and a balanced hand. It is, after all, an improvement on Standard American and the thought was to start with Standard American and then add the improvements).

It does not necessarily use Inverted Minors altho it's usually played that way. Some people think Inverted Minors are easier to use if played with the weak NT.

The opening two of a suit bids don't necessarily have to be the Standard American bids where 2C is the only strong bid and the other three suits are weak 2s. You could, if you so desired, play 2/1 with the traditional Acol Strong Twos (altho why you'd want to is a mystery), or you could use the Benji (or Reverse Benji) two bids, or something altogether different.

It also doesn't require you to use 2NT to show 20-21 HCP (High Card Points) in a balanced hand altho, being based on Standard American, it's usually played that way. It can, for example, use 21-22 HCP instead or it can use it for whatever purpose suits you (as long as it's a very strong balanced hand because that bid is needed to fill in the NT bids unless you use Benji two bids when both 2C and 2D can also have NT ranges so an opening 2NT will then be freed up for something else).

It also does not necessarily use weak jump responses to one of a suit. The original Two Over One system was popularized by Max Hardy (altho it was invented by Richard Walsh) and he liked weak jump responses but he specifically says that they're not part of the system. Mike Lawrence modified the system slightly as mentioned above and to use the standard, rock-crusher jump shift by responder (because, as he said, 'I'm not fond of the preemptive jump shift' and he likes the other responses to be limited by the jump shift).

One other thing it doesn't necessarily include is light 3rd seat openings or 5 card majors in 1st or 2nd position that might only be 4 cards in 3rd or 4th position altho you can play it that way if you wish. Incidentally, Edgar Kaplan has an excellent presentation of light 3rd hand openings in his book about the Kaplan-Sheinwold System (he didn't believe they should be made in one of a suit but he advocated slightly unusual weak twos in 3rd seat and also said that the requirements for the weak NT could be lowered in this situation).

Some of these things were in some versions of Hardy-style and not in others so are not necessarily an integral part of the system but the two criteria above are common to both Hardy-style (in all of its incarnations) and Lawrence-style.

III. What Can You Expect if You Agree to Play 2/1 with someone

You can certainly expect that you'll be playing the basics of the system – the forcing NT (which says 5 card majors) and the Two Over One responses as forcing to game or forcing to game unless responder rebids his/her suit (except when opener shows more than a minimum by his/her rebid in which case it's always forcing to game). In fact, the basic thing to agree with partner is do you play Hardy-style – which few people in America do now – or do you play Lawrence-style - Mike Lawrence's 'improvements' – or do you play either of the 'styles' except ... - or do you play something different?

If you play Hardy-style, you can expect that Two Over One responses to all opening bids of 1 of a suit are unconditionally forcing to game (defined as forcing to 3NT, 4 of a suit, or penalizing the opponents) regardless of the opening suit, a strong NT of 15-17 HCP, Inverted Minors, Standard American two bids (strong 2C and 3 weak 2s), and weak jump responses.

If you play Lawrence-style, you can expect that Two Over One responses to all opening bids of 1 of a suit are forcing to game unless responder rebids his/her suit (altho see above), a strong NT of 15-17 HCP, Inverted Minors (altho Mike Lawrence doesn't mention them in his book), Standard American two bids, and strong jump responses.

Regardless of the 'style', you are most likely playing Jacoby 2NT – the 2NT response over 1 of a major doesn't make any sense as the invitational to 3NT bid that it normally is in Acol or modern Standard American (if either is not using a special-meaning 2NT response to 1H or 1S).

IV. Is it complicated?

No – but you can make it as complicated as you wish, as is the case with most bidding systems. Almost everything is logical once the basic principles of the bidding system have been laid out (like with almost all decent bidding systems). It's not necessary to have many predefined sequences any more than it is with Acol or Standard American. Experienced players will see the logic almost immediately and that's enough. So you can play a decent game if you agree Hardy-style or, maybe, a slightly better one if you agree Lawrence-style – it's only a little more complicated if you pick and choose. If you have a long-term partner, you'd probably want to clarify at least some of the sequences further.

V. Possible systems not pure Hardy-style or Lawrence-style (note: these are just two of the many possibilities);

The two systems presented here have eight things in common:

1. The Two Over One responses are absolutely forcing to game only over 1H and 1S
2. 2C over 1D (which Mike Lawrence tactfully calls the ‘... the black sheep of the Two-Over-One System’) should probably not be part of the system and should be played pretty much as in Standard American (or Acol)
3. The Edgar Kaplan modification to the strong 2C making it forcing only for two rounds if partner makes two negative responses (however you define them - these systems use 2NT over 2H and 2S and the cheapest suit over 3C and 3D rebids by opener) and opener rebids his/her suit
4. Weak twos in Diamonds, Hearts, and Spades (altho you can make the 2D bid like the Roman 2D, or anything else for that matter, if so inclined, altho there is a good argument that 2D is the most effective of the weak 2s)
5. Mini-splinters so any single jump shift is shortness in that suit, 4+ card support, and at least invitational values. Opener simply rebids 3 of his/her suit if he/she thinks there is no play for game if responder has the invitational strength hand (the basic idea is exactly the same as normal splinters which are used to find ‘fit slams’ only here the first idea is to find ‘fit games’ so some people will only use them over major suit openings and that does seem to make some sense. So you can play mini-splinters over 1H or 1S and the traditional rock-crusher jump shift over 1C or 1D.) I don’t have enough experience with this to really determine which is preferable altho I have a feeling that mini-splinters over a minor might pinpoint a weakness for 3NT and might also reach some very good minor suit slams).
6. Vanilla Jacoby 2NT so a rebid of 4 of the major is the worst possible hand you could have to open 1 of the major, 3 of a new suit shows shortness in the suit, 4 of a new suit shows a 2nd, and decent, 5+ card suit (QJxxx or better), a rebid of 3NT shows a better than absolutely minimum hand (or else you’d bid 4 of the major) but not a really good one, and a rebid of 3 of the major shows a good hand (both 3NT and 3 of the major deny a short suit or a good 2nd suit). Note: this treatment can incorporate the meaning of normal splinters freeing them up for another use.

7. Responses to 1NT are: 2C = normal Stayman; 2D and 2H = transfers to 2H and 2S respectively; 2S = McKendrick (an invitational hand in NT, a weak hand with a 6 card minor, and, possibly, if partner agrees, a strong hand, perhaps balanced) and opener rebids 2NT with a minimum (a hand that would pass an invite by a normal 2NT) or 3C with a maximum. Over 2NT, responder passes, corrects to 3C or 3D or bids 3H or 3S with a 4 card major or 3NT without one - over 3C, responder passes or corrects to 3D or bids 3H or 3S with a 4 card major or 3NT with the invitational hand (and the strong hand if it's clear that the partnership doesn't have a slam - note: the re-responses with a strong hand should be looked at carefully - these are merely some ideas); 2NT = minor-suit Stayman; and 3 of a suit bid = to be determined.
8. Opener, after a two over one response over 1H or 1S, will never exceed two of his/her suit with a minimum hand. Remember that a rebid of two of the suit, regardless of the range of the opening NT, does not show more than 5 cards – just that there is nothing else to bid - and that 2NT can be the only exception to the rules of not exceeding 2 of your suit as opener with a minimum hand and then only if you are playing a strong NT. But, as mentioned above, even this exception can be eliminated if you rebid 2 of the opened major even with the small balanced hand and then there are no exceptions to the rule of not exceeding 2 of your original suit with a minimum hand. Remember that this does not say that, if you rebid 2 of your suit, you have a really minimum hand just that, if you go beyond it, you show extra strength, altho you will often have another bid if you're truly not minimum.

Va. Two Over One based on the strong NT

The opening 1NT is 14-17 (instead of the normal 15-17) so the small balanced hand is really a small balanced hand – it's only 12 or 13 HCP. If playing minor suit raises as limit bids (normal for Acol all along and now for modern Standard American as well), if you have the small balanced hand, you should always pass (normally, at best you will have 13 HCP opposite a flat 12 so the theoretic maximum is 25. A good rule is that, if you have a minimum of 25 points, bid game but, if you have a maximum of 25 points, play in a part score).

Inverted Minors don't seem to play well with a strong NT because, in this case, the small balanced hand has to rebid 2NT (unless you make it very complicated and you still might be too high) over an Inverted raise to 2 (or

else there's just no good way to handle it) and that might well get you overboard so this system uses normal minor suit raises. So, actually, it uses limit bids in all four suits and a limit 2NT over 1 of a minor.

The opening 2NT is 20-21 HCP, as in Standard American.

Vb. Two Over One based on the weak NT

Two Over One can also be thought of as an improvement on the Kaplan-Sheinwold System which was popular in America during the heyday of Edgar Kaplan, one of the all-time great theorists and then one of the world's better players – the Kaplan-Sheinwold System used a weak NT, 5 card majors, the forcing 1NT response to a one of a major, and Inverted Minors.

The opening 1NT is 12-14 HCP (as it often is in Acol).

Inverted minors.

The opening 2NT is 21-22 HCP (as it often is in Acol). A 15-18 HCP NT type hand is handled by opening 1 of a suit and then rebidding the cheapest NT and a 19-20 HCP NT type hand is handled by rebidding with a jump in NT.

VI. Getting to 2/1 from Standard American or Acol

I'd strongly recommend that, at the start anyway, you use Two over One over 1H or 1S only regardless of whether you use Standard American or Acol and continue to use your current system over 1D or 1C (note: 1C is not part of any version of 2/1).

The specific recommendation for these two systems is below but I'd recommend that you try it out in other than a serious event. I would not expect everyone to like it or to even want to try it even tho it provides a moderately infrequent, but very clear, improvement in bidding accuracy (altho this advantage can be quite large when it happens).

VIa. Getting there from Standard American

Since 2/1 is quite similar to Standard American, the simplest way to migrate is to use Standard American with the forcing 1NT response to 1H or 1S and the two over one response to a suit as absolutely forcing to game (starting with this aspect of Hardy-style is not a problem – the bigger problem with Hardy-style is the weak jump-shift response) and then, once you have the structure down, decide if you want to use the Lawrence-style two over one responses where a two over one response to one of a major is absolutely forcing to game unless responder rebids his/her suit or if opener rebids a suit past his/her opening suit immediately after the 2/1 response.

You don't have to change your opening 1NT and its responses, your 2 or higher bids, your 1C or 1D openings, or your raises.

VIb. Getting there from Acol

It's conceptually a little harder to migrate from Acol (unless you play Acol with 5 card majors and 3 weak 2's when the upgrade path is very similar to upgrading from Standard American) than from Standard American (which makes sense bearing in mind the derivation of Two Over One).

The first real hurdle is to start using 5 card majors. This involves a shift in thinking about the opening bid that is really not difficult to start using. Your opening bid is now pretty much dictated by the system (not having a 5 card major forces you to open 1C or 1D unless you have the criteria for a 1NT or

higher bid). However, altho to a lesser extent, the principle of preparedness still applies (you can't always follow it tho – let's say you have a 4-4-4-1 hand with the singleton being in clubs – you can't open 1H or 1S so must open 1D and a 2C response will force you to lie about your hand somehow – in 4 card major Acol, this hand can be opened 1H or even 1S if the heart suit is bad. Note: Standard American and Acol with 5 card majors have the same problem). On the other hand, the distribution requirements for a reverse aren't as limiting – you don't have to have more of the first bid suit than the second (unless you have clubs and diamonds or hearts and spades and you don't make a normal reverse if the suits are longer than 4 cards and the same length) – e.g., if you have AKx AJxx xx KQxx, you can open 1C and reverse into 2H over 1S or 1NT) but, if you have AK x AJxxx KQxxx, you'd open 1D and then rebid in clubs.

Once those points are clear, you can simply change your 1NT response to 1H or 1S to be forcing (opener rebidding a 3 card suit systemically takes some getting used to and this is equally true for Standard American players) and change the two over one response to 1H or 1S to be game-forcing. When you have used that structure for a while, you can decide if you want to change the 2/1 response to Lawrence-style. Note: you are quite free to continue to use the weak NT and this does make life simpler in some regards.

As with Standard American, you do not have to change your opening 1NT and its responses, your 2 level or higher bids, your 1C or 1D openings, or your raises (altho you no longer can be counted on for four card support to raise a major – 3 is enough because of the 5 card majors).

VII. More information

If you are interested in more information, there are many books on the subject and a number of articles on the Internet or in bridge magazines. Mike Lawrence's book is almost a must – its title is Mike Lawrence's Workbook on The Two Over One System. And experienced players with a regular partner will want to at least look into the Kaplan Inversion.