

# RESPONDING

## i). Responder's Obligations

When considering a response to partner's opening bid, the responder's first duty is to make the bid that best expresses the type of hand that he holds, while allowing partner the maximum amount of space to complete the picture of his hand. With the opening bid your partner has made two statements – firstly a statement about the shape of his hand and secondly a statement about the strength. Thus, if your partner has opened with a 1NT bid, you know immediately that partner's hand conforms to one of the three balanced patterns and also that he has between 12-14 HCP (assuming that you are playing a weak no-trump). With this knowledge you can make an immediate assessment about where the hand should be played.

It is important to remember that any bid made by either partner during the course of the auction is an inherent expression of both shape and strength. If we look at a typical, straightforward auction we can analyse each individual bid in these terms:

N	E	S	W
1♥	P	1♠	P
2♠	P	4♠	P
P	P		

### 1♥

With the 1♥ bid, North is stating that he has at least four cards in the ♥ suit and a hand strong enough to open at the 1-level. His partner does not yet know the precise strength of the opening bid nor anything else about the shape of his partner's hand other than that no other suit in his partner's hand is longer than his ♥s (unless he has a weak two-suited hand where his first-bid suit could be shorter than his second-bid suit).

### 1♠

Nevertheless, South's 1♠ response contains no less than three items of information. Firstly, he is stating that he has enough points to respond in a new suit (6+ HCP). Secondly, he is promising a ♠ suit that contains at least four cards. Thirdly, he is stating that he does not have a hand

suitable for an immediate limit raise (see below: ‘Responder’s limit raise’) in his partner’s ♥ suit (either because he does not have four-card ♥ support and he therefore cannot guarantee a fit, or because his hand is too strong in high-card points to make an immediate limit raise).

**2♠**

North’s 2♠ rebid shows at least four-card ♠ support and implies a hand of limited high-card strength, containing a maximum of 15 HCP. South can infer from this bid that North holds a five-card or longer ♥ suit or precisely 15 HCP with either a balanced 4-4-3-2 or 4-4-2-3 shape. With less HCP than this, North would have opened 1NT and with either 4-4-4-1 shapes he would have opened with 1♣ or 1♦.

**4♠**

South now has enough of a picture of the combined strength and shape of the two hands to be able to bid a confident 4♠. South is saying: ‘Shut up, partner! This is the best we can do.’

**Pass**

North *must pass*, unless he has been forced to lie about his strength during the auction. On this particular sequence, there is simply no possible reason for North to have lied.

Note the order of priorities revealed by this auction. Both partners bid cautiously until they have found their fit. Once the fit has been found, both partner’s make limit bids, expressing their respective strengths (i.e. North’s 2♠ bid says that a fit has been found and says ‘I have somewhere between 12-15 HCP or compensating shape’. South’s 4♠ rebid says: ‘Understood partner! I have a hand similar in strength, which is enough for game but not for slam.’)

Here is a slightly more complex auction, where the use of inference is illustrated to imply a fit.

N	E	S	W
1♠	P	2♥	P
3♣	P	4♠	All pass

## 1♠

Promising a hand strong enough to open, with at least four cards in the spade suit. An opening 1♠ bid always promises either a five-card or longer suit or a balanced hand of 15+ HCP. With a 4-4-4-1 hand the opener would have opened with either 1♣ or 1♦.

## 2♥

Showing 8+ HCP and at least a five-card ♥ suit, since otherwise South would be responding in no-trumps or would be bidding a lower-ranking suit, following the principle of leaving the opening bidder the maximum amount of space to express his hand.

## 3♣

Showing a hand with longer ♠s than ♣s, since with equal length North would have opened 1♣ rather than 1♠. This bid therefore guarantees a hand of 6-5 ♠s/♣s with intermediate strength or better (otherwise North would simply rebid his ♠s) or a hand stronger in high-card strength with at least five ♠s and four ♣s (a 'reverse').

## 4♠

South can now make a limit bid, showing 11-13 HCP, even though he may only have a three-card ♠ suit, since he can infer that North has at least five ♠s.

Once you know that you have a fit, tell your partner! If you fail to show your support, your partner cannot help but draw a completely false picture of the shape of your hand. When you show support for your partner's suit, make the bid that best expresses the strength of your hand.

Such a bid is known as a '**limit raise**'. All bids that show support for partner's suit are limit raises, whether it is the responder supporting the opener's suit or the opener supporting the responder's suit. All limit raises are made with the assumption that partner has *a minimum* for his previous bids.

### ii). Responder's Limit Raise

5-8 HCP, with four-card support - raise partner's suit to 2.

- 9-10 HCP, with four-card support - raise partner's suit to 3.
- 11-12 HCP, with four-card support - raise partner's suit to 4.
- 11-13 HCP, with four-card support and a singleton or void - bid your short suit one level below game in partner's suit (known as a 'splinter').
- 13-15 HCP, with four-card support - bid your longest outside suit and then raise partner's first-bid suit to 4 over his rebid (known as a 'delayed game raise').
- 16 + HCP, with four-card support - bid your best outside suit one level higher than necessary (known as a 'fit jump') or, depending on partnership agreement, jump to 2NT (a Barron 2NT).

Note how all of these bids combine to give you a method of showing precise strength as well as support. Once again you are using a very simple code to get your message across. Often, of course, you will have to temporise in the early stages of an auction because you need confirmation that the opener's first-bid suit is longer than four cards when you only have three-card support.

Notice also how, in the latter auction above, South's 4♠ limit raise no longer showed a 'delayed game raise' of 13-15 HCP, but instead promised 11+ HCP and only three-card support. This was because North was prepared to bid his second suit at the 3-level, thus promising that he was better than minimum, either in terms of shape or high-card strength. A 3♠ rebid from South after 3♣ would have shown 8-10 HCP and better ♠s than ♣s (i.e. close to a minimum for his 2♥ response).

You must be prepared to constantly re-evaluate your hand throughout the auction as more information comes in. In other words you must be prepared to make a judgement as to whether a particular bid from your partner or from an opponent increases or decreases the value of your hand.

### iii). Opener's Limit Raise

12-15 HCP, with four-card support - raise partner's suit one level.

16-17 HCP, with four-card support - raise partner's suit two levels.

18-19 HCP, with four-card support - raise partner's suit to game.

With experience (and partnership agreement!) you will be able to downgrade the requirements for a limit raise when you have a particularly unbalanced holding. Do not take this too far, however! Once you have reached agreement with your partner as to the ranges of the respective limit raises, you can adapt your bidding to suit.

N	E	S	W
1♥	P	1♠	P
2♠	P	3♠	P
4♠	All pass		

This auction arrives at the same contract as the first, but contains an additional bid of 3♠. This bid is known as an 'invitational raise', asking partner to bid game if he is maximum for his limit raise of 2♠ (i.e. holding 14-15 HCP) or to pass if he is minimum. South is therefore showing a hand of 10-11 HCP or very good compensating shape.

### iv). Finding a Fit

As previously stated, the first priority in any auction is to find a fit. On some hands, however, the responder will find it uncomfortable to bid at the 2-level when he has no guaranteed fit with his partner.

#### Example 1

♠	9 2
♥	J 4 3
♦	Q J 6 5
♣	K J 8 2

If partner has opened the bidding with 1♥, responder has the points to bid at the minimum level (6+) but the shape is poor. He does not have four-card support for his partner's suit and so (technically) cannot make the

limit bid of 2♥. On the other hand, a bid at the 2-level would show a five-card suit with 8 + HCP or a holding with at least 10 HCP. In these circumstances, responder should bid 1NT, *despite the weakness of his spade holding*.

This 1NT response shows a balanced hand with 6-9 HCP and no four-card or longer suit of higher rank than that opened by partner and without four-card support for partner's suit. Thus you would also respond with 1NT on the above hand if your partner had opened with 1♠ (although with more confidence, since this opening bid would improve your shape). Remember, never bid 1NT if you have a four card suit of higher rank than your partner's – otherwise you may well miss a fit. This rule holds true even if your suit contains four small cards.

Holding 11-12 points with the same sort of hand, it has traditionally been the practice to respond with 2NT to partner's opening. To my mind, this is a truly horrible response. It consumes a lot of the bidding space to show an unimpressive hand, while frequently denying partner the space to show his own hand comfortably. There are also much better alternative uses for the 2NT response to an opening bid – the Barron 2NT, for example. Therefore with 10-11 HCP you should respond with 2♣ on this hand pattern and then raise partner to 3♥ if he rebids 2♦, 2♥ or 3♣, since any of these rebids would promise a five-card heart suit. If partner rebids 2♠ he is 'reversing', showing a strong two-suited hand in the majors, and you should therefore make the limit raise of 4♥ in reply. Partner is also reversing if he rebids 3♦ over your 2♣ response. If partner rebids 2NT over 2♣ you can confidently raise him to 3NT, since he is showing a balanced 15-16 HCP, but it is better to bid 3♥ on the way in case he has a five-card ♥ suit. This is the only occasion when what is technically a limit raise of 3♥ is actually forcing, asking partner to choose his preferred contract of 3NT or 4♥. With 12-13 HCP you will also respond 2♣, but will raise partner's rebid of 2♦, 2♥ or 3♣ directly to 4♥. If partner reverses with 2♠ or 3♦ it is better to bid the fourth suit (i.e Fourth-suit Forcing) on the way to bidding 4♥. Now partner knows that you are at the top end of the range for your 4♥ bid and he can better judge whether the slam is a realistic prospect.

With 14-15 HCP, you should again respond with 2♣ and raise to 4♥ over partner's limit bids of 2♥ or 3♣. Over a 2♦ rebid you should bid 2♠ on the way to raising partner to 4♥. Once again this tells him that you are very good for your raise and if he is stronger than he has already indicated, he may well elect to push for the slam. Over a 2NT rebid you will again bid 3♥, asking partner to choose between 3NT and 4♥. Over the 2♠ or 3♦ reverses, you will bid a quiet 3♥, since over a 2-level

response a reverse is forcing to game and a 3♥ rebid therefore implies a stronger hand than a 4♥ rebid. If partner simply raises this to game, your hand is good enough to investigate the slam, either by making a cue-bid or via a 4NT Ace-asking sequence.

With 16 + HCP, you should resist the temptation to jump about to show your strength. If partner has opened a weak two-suited hand, your leap into the stratosphere is not going to make him very comfortable. The basic principle is to find your fit *before* revealing your strength. The only time you should consider an immediate jump in a new suit to show your strength is when you have a single-suited hand with a *shortage* (at most, a doubleton) in your partner's suit. Partner now knows that you have a very strong hand with a good trump suit and can react accordingly.

Notice once again how all of these sequences combine to give you a method of showing differing high-card strengths, as well as making both positive and negative statements about the shape of your hand. With practice, both you and your partner will have a pretty accurate picture of the combined holdings, before the opening lead has been made. If you or your partner gets a bidding sequence wrong, be prepared to talk it over afterwards – preferably calmly! In this way you should avoid making the same mistake twice.

#### v). **Failing to Find a Fit**

The hands that inexperienced players find most difficult to bid are those where both the opener and the responder hold unbalanced hands, with no reasonable fit between the two. Time and time again, both partners will engage in an all-out war to play the contract in their suit. Consider the following hand:

#### **Example 2**

♠	9
♥	8 4
♦	Q J 10 7 6 5 3
♣	K 10 3

Your partner opens with 1♠ and you respond a reluctant 2♦. Despite the weakness in high-card strength, this is a much better response than the crass 1NT than many would recommend. There is no reason to suppose that 1NT has better play than 2♦. You suppress your groan when partner rebids 2♥ and rebid 3♦. If partner now rebids 3♥ do not bid 4♦! You

must simply pass 3♥ and hope for the best. Partner may well hold something like:-

♠ A J 10 8 6 4  
 ♥ A Q 10 7 3  
 ♦ - - - - -  
 ♣ J 7

You need a major miracle to make 4♦ (i.e. no more than one loser outside of the trump suit!) whereas 3♥ has definite prospects, particularly if the spades break 3-3. This is just about the *best* holding that your partner could have, so when he twice denies a suitable holding in your suit, listen to what he is telling you. Above all, you must reserve your competitive bidding for your opponents – when you compete with your partner, neither of you wins.

On the auction above, both your 3♦ bid and your partner's 3♥ bid are limit bids in strength and shape. Your partner's 3♥ bid demands that you give a simple preference either to his ♠ suit or his ♥ suit, depending on your holding. If you switch your ♠ and heart holding, you would simply bid 3♠ over 3♥ and the auction would end there (although you should have simply responded with 2♠ over 2♥ in the previous round of bidding, of course). If you are to reach the right contract on the majority of occasions, **you must trust your partner.**

#### vi). Responding to Partner's Opening 1NT

Partner's opening bid of 1NT shows between 12-14 HCP and a hand pattern that conforms to one of the three balanced shapes. As responder you immediately have a clear idea of what the final contract should be, depending on your own strength and shape. The rules for responding are simple:

- 0-10 HCP, balanced - pass.
- 11-12 HCP, balanced - bid 2NT, inviting partner to raise to 3NT with a maximum opening.
- 13-18 HCP, balanced - raise partner to 3NT.
- 19-20 HCP, balanced - raise partner to 4NT, inviting partner to rebid 6NT with a maximum for his opening.
- 21-24 HCP, balanced - bid 6NT or bid 4♣ (Gerber) if you need to know about partner's aces.
- 25-28 HCP, balanced - bid 7NT or 4♣ (Gerber) followed

up by 5♣ (Gerber) if you need to know about partner's Kings.

With an unbalanced holding, the considerations are slightly different:

- 0-10 HCP + 5-card suit - bid 2 of the suit. Partner must pass.
- 11 HCP, unbalanced - bid 3 of your longest suit, inviting partner to pass with a minimum or to bid 3NT with a maximum or to bid 4 of your (major) suit with a maximum and three-card support.
- 12-18 HCP, unbalanced - bid 4 of your major suit or bid 3NT holding a minor suit.

With more than 18 HCP you can revert to the sequences recommended for balanced responses. Unless you hold a wildly unbalanced hand, your shape is more likely to help rather than hinder your partner in his no-trump contract.

There are two other useful options available to a partnership. Known respectively as 'Stayman' and 'Transfers', they are both conventional bids used over partner's 1NT or 2NT opening bids. For an explanation of these sequences go to the article 'Stayman & Transfers' in the Conventions section of the Library. Another useful convention to employ over partner's opening 1NT is known as the 'Barron 2♠'. This is used primarily as an asking bid to determine if partner is minimum or maximum for his opening bid. If minimum (12 to a 'bad' 13 with no five-card minor), partner simply rebids 2NT. If maximum (a 'good' 13 with a five-card minor to 14) partner bids his *lowest* four-card (or longer) suit. The responder's 2♠ bid therefore guarantees at least 11 HCP with a reasonably balanced hand, but he could have as much as a strong unbalanced hand with slam interest if a fit can be found.

### **vii). Responding with Strength**

Classic ACOL advises you to jump-shift (i.e. bid your strongest suit one level higher than necessary) whenever your partner has opened the bidding with one of a suit and you have 16 + HCP. Such a procedure is dangerous, however, if you and your partner have agreed that it is acceptable to open weak two-suited hands at the 1-level. *Always bid slowly until you have found a fit, no matter how strong you are.*

When you have good strength or compensating shape and at least four-card support for your partner's suit, there are two useful ways you

can express your hand, depending on your strength/shape. These are known as ‘splinters’ and ‘Barron 2NT’ respectively.

## **Splinters**

When you have a hand where you want to be in game in partner’s suit opposite his opening bid, with a singleton or void, bid this singleton or void one level below game in partner’s suit (e.g. 1♥-P-4♦!...) With a minimum hand for his opening bid, partner will simply rebid game in his suit. With better than a minimum and slam interest, partner will either cue-bid or bid 4NT to ask for the number of controls. Be warned, however! The splinter should also promise one of the top three honours in the trump suit. It is embarrassing to be playing in a slam or grand-slam missing the necessary honours in trumps. Note also that your splinter bid is a limit raise in exactly the same way as in the sequence 1♥-P-4♥... It simply shows an additional feature in your hand, giving partner a better idea of the relative merits of the combined holding. Splinters can also be used by the opening bidder to show a fit in the responder’s suit (e.g. 1♥-P-1♠-P; 4♦!... shows a hand strong enough to raise partner to game in ♠s – 18 + HCP – with a singleton or void in ♦s.) Partner will now simply rebid 4♠ with a minimum (6-9 HCP) or cue-bid to investigate the slam with a stronger hand.

## **Barron 2NT**

There are various ways to show support for partner’s suit and a strong hand but the best method I’ve come across is the ‘Barron 2NT’, which works as follows:- With 16 + HCP and at least one of the top two honours in your partner’s suit as well as four-card support, jump to 2NT over partner’s opening bid. With the same type of hand without one of the top two honours, jump to 3NT. Either bid is unconditionally forcing to game in partner’s suit. With a minimum for his opening bid, partner will simply rebid his suit at the next available level. Over this rebid, any further bid in another suit from you is a first-round control cue-bid and shows a very strong hand, requiring partner to cue-bid first-round control if he can or rebid his suit otherwise. With better than a minimum opening and good trumps (particularly over the 3NT response), partner will cue-bid first-round control in another suit, requiring you to cue-bid your lowest first-round control or rebid his suit otherwise.

All of this probably sounds very complicated, but in fact it becomes quite easy with practice. The system has the distinct advantage of being able to commence a cue-bidding sequence below the game level,

which allows you to bail out early enough if partner cannot show the required control(s).

It is vital that your partnership agrees that a response in a new suit to an opening bid is forcing, unless the responder has already passed in the auction and the opening bidder can see that game is not a viable proposition. It is also vital that a rebid in a new suit that is made at any point in the auction is unconditionally forcing for one round. Applying this rule allows the partnership to employ **‘Fourth-suit Forcing’** as a useful method of quantifying the hand. (See the article ‘Fourth-Suit Forcing’ in the Library).

### **viii). Responding to Partner’s Strong 2 Opening**

In ACOL an opening 2♦/♥/♠ is known as a ‘Strong Two’. This is something of a misnomer, since the bid has nothing to do with the number of high-card points held in the opener’s hand, but is simply an expression of the number of tricks that the opener is expecting to make (assuming reasonable breaks in the trump suit) with his suit as trumps.

#### **Example 3**

♠	A 4
♥	A K Q J 6 4 3
♦	8
♣	9 6 2

Purists would insist that this hand is not strong enough for a 2-level opening bid but, in my opinion, this is nonsense. A 2♥ opening on this hand is an accurate description of the worth of the hand, since it can reasonably be expected to generate eight tricks with ♥s as trumps, despite the fact that it contains ‘only’ 14 HCP.

Therefore it is logical that responses to ‘Strong Two’ opening bids should also be based upon the number of tricks that the responder can provide, rather than simply an expression of the high-card points held in the responder’s hand. If the answer is no tricks at all, then the responder should simply bite the bullet and pass. If the answer is one trick, then the responder bids either 2NT or 3 of his partner’s suit, depending on the type of information he needs from his partner. Over a 2NT response the opener should bid his second suit (if he has one) or simply rebid his first suit. The 2NT or raise to 3 in the suit responses should be viewed as ‘negative’ in the sense that the bids express doubt that game can be made.

The opening bidder must now reassess his hand and decide whether to try for game or not. If he has no prospects for making an additional trick in his hand, he should simply rebid 3 of his suit over the 2NT response or pass his partner's limit raise.

With two tricks in his hand, the responder should raise his partner to 4 of his suit. With more than two tricks, the slam may be possible. In these circumstances the responder should make a 'positive' response in his suit and wait and see how his partner responds. If partner simply rebids his suit, be warned! Partner is telling you that he can only provide the eight tricks that he originally promised. You need a guaranteed four tricks in your own hand to pursue the slam.

Note that it is rarely correct to open two-suited hands with a 'Strong Two', unless you can guarantee eight tricks opposite a complete bust in your partner's hand. Usually it is much better to 'reverse' with good two-suited hands, since if partner passes your opening bid you are quite likely to be playing in the right contract anyway.

#### **ix). Responding to Partner's 2♣ Opening.**

The strongest opening bid in ACOL (or Standard English) is 2♣. This shows 23+ HCP, or a very strong hand with powerful shape. The opening bid is unconditionally forcing to game, except for the sequence 2♣-p-2♦-p; 2NT... where the responder can pass the 2NT rebid with less than 3 HCP in his hand.

With 5HCP or less, the responder bids 2♦ (negative). If the opener now bids a suit that the responder does not like or if the responder has a poor hand containing 0-2 HCP, then the responder rebids 2NT. This 2♦ response, followed by the 2NT rebid is known as a 'double negative'. The opening bidder should now be aware that his partner can provide very little (or no) support and he should reassess his hand accordingly.

Unless the opener now reverses to show an exceptionally strong two-suited hand to demand that partner shows preference any rebid is non-forcing. The opener must therefore be very careful to re-evaluate the merits of his hand after his partner's double negative response.

Once the opening bidder has shown his suit, the responder can reply positively by raising partner's suit or by bidding a feature in his own hand. Since he originally responded to the 2♣ opening with a negative 2♦, partner should not get too excited by this delayed positive response.

With 6-9 HCP, the responder should either show his own best suit (if ♦s he would have to show it with a 3♦ response) or bid 2NT if his

hand is balanced. The opening bidder will now be able to assess the prospects for slam.

With 10+ HCP, the responder should either jump in his longest suit or bid 3NT. Either of these bids are virtually forcing to slam, but both partners should be wary of leaping too high too quickly. Remember, the stronger you are the more time and space you will have to explore all the possibilities, since the opposition will interrupt your auction at their peril!

One final point needs to be stressed. The responder should never attempt to take control of the auction, unless the opening bidder makes a limit bid (i.e. rebids the suit he wants to play in or rebids no-trumps.) It is far more important that you tell the opening bidder what you hold, rather than demand he describe his hand to you. The partner who holds the strength should be the one who makes the decisions.

Frank Groome  
(October 2009)