

Bridge Bidding Systems for Finding Major Suit Fits

[Pete Matthews](#) – December 27, 2010

This article outlines and compares bridge bidding systems for finding both 4-4 and 5-3 major suit fits, when the opening bid is one of a minor suit. **Short club systems** attempt to locate the fits at the one level. **Fourth bid systems** are the more usual approach – the search begins in earnest with responder's second bid. Finally, I conclude with comparisons of features and methods.

A. Short Club Systems

The systems in this part take advantage of the extra bidding space when 1♣ is opened. When playing them, it makes sense to require a four or five card suit to open 1♦, to increase the frequency and value of the 1♣ opening. Because these systems do not operate over other openings, 1♦ in particular, you will need other methods for those cases.

1. Montreal Relay

The basic Montreal Relay system attempts to find both 4-4 and 5-3 major suit fits at the one level. The 1♥ or 1♠ opening promises a suit of at least 5 cards. The 1♦ opening guarantees four cards (some play five), so 1♣ becomes a catch-all opening bid. Over 1♣, a response of 1♥ or 1♠ promises five cards. A 1♦ response may be used with natural diamonds, but opener assumes this is a waiting bid with one or both 4-card majors. Opener must rebid a 4-card major (1♥ with both) over the 1♦ response.

The full system includes invitational suit bids at the 2-level and forcing suit bids at the 3-level, all showing major suits. 2NT and 3NT responses deny holding a long major. Opener typically relays to clubs and gets more info in response. The artificial responses of 2♣ and 2♦, to show hearts and spades, do not meet the restrictions of the ACBL General Convention Chart, because they are not game forcing. Therefore, the full system is basically irrelevant to most tournament players in North America. Whether appropriate or not, the basic system described in the first paragraph is what I mean by Montreal Relay here.

This is a fine system if responder has a 5-card major, or if the opponents stay out of the auction. However, consider: 1♣ - (Pass) - 1♦ - (2♦) – or worse. Not as much fun. These days, the basic Montreal Relay seems to be played mostly by intermediate players, for whom it provides a stable system without the complexity of other approaches.

Most information found on the web about the Montreal Relay system originates with Neil H. Timm, and contains the definition that the 1♦ response promises 5+ diamonds and 6-9 points – you would miss a lot of 4-4 fits by responding 1NT while holding a major suit. I have never seen the original source that Timm cites: *The Bridge World*, August, 1974, “The Montreal Relay”, by Eric Kokish. There reportedly is an excellent small book, which seems to be out of print.

2. Transfer Walsh

Walsh Responses to a 1♣ opening require game forcing values to respond 1♦ to a 1♣ opening, when holding a four-card major. Weaker hands bypass 1♦ and respond in the major, for example, respond 1♠ on: ♠AT53 ♥72

♦KT875 ♣63. (Some may play a similar method where 1♦ only promises invitational values.) In this context, opener only bids a major over the 1♦ response with an unbalanced hand or concentrated values – otherwise preferring to rebid 1NT. The 1♦ responder carries responsibility for finding an undisclosed major suit fit, usually by reversing into his major. People don't usually play short club, just so they get to bypass 1♦!

In Transfer Walsh, the 1♦ and 1♥ responses to 1♣ are transfers to the major above, and promise four cards in the suit. (The 1♠ response promises diamonds, some say 4 cards, others 5, and denies a major unless game forcing values.) After a transfer into a major, in one variation, opener bids an almost-forcing one of the major with 3-card support, or otherwise makes the same bids he would make over a natural response in the transfer suit. There's quite a bit more, and lots of material on the web. However, the 1♥ and 1♠ responses do not meet the restrictions of the ACBL General Convention Chart, so the system is basically irrelevant to most tournament players in North America. As a result, I did not investigate Transfer Walsh completely.

B. Fourth Bid Systems

These uninterrupted, natural auctions, when the response is a suit at the one level, are candidates for systems in this part. **Cases (A) and (B) are most important for the discussion here.** Some systems add cases (E) and (F).

Opener Rebids	Major Suit Response	Minor Suit Response
1NT	(A) 5 auctions 1♣ – 1♥ – 1NT 1♦ – 1♥ – 1NT 1♣ – 1♠ – 1NT 1♦ – 1♠ – 1NT 1♥ – 1♠ – 1NT *	(E) 1 auction 1♣ – 1♦ – 1NT
1♥ or 1♠	(B) 2 auctions 1♣ – 1♥ – 1♠ 1♦ – 1♥ – 1♠	(F) 2 auctions 1♣ – 1♦ – 1♥ 1♣ – 1♦ – 1♠
Lower ranking new suit	(C) 4 auctions 1♦ – 1♥ – 2♣ 1♦ – 1♠ – 2♣ 1♥ – 1♠ – 2♣ * 1♥ – 1♠ – 2♦ *	(G) 0 auctions
Original suit	(D) 5 auctions 1♣ – 1♥ – 2♣ 1♦ – 1♥ – 2♦ 1♣ – 1♠ – 2♣ 1♦ – 1♠ – 2♦ 1♥ – 1♠ – 2♥	(H) 1 auction 1♣ – 1♦ – 2♣

- A) These are the primary auctions for many of the systems discussed here. The auction 1♥ – 1♠ – 1NT (*) may require additional consideration.
- B) I'll call these auctions (three suits at the one level) the **XYZ context**: many of the methods designed for case (A) may be applied to these auctions. Otherwise, Fourth Suit Forcing is appropriate.
- C) In North America, opener's rebid in a lower-ranking suit is usually non-forcing. Fourth Suit Forcing is appropriate, and none of the other methods described here apply.

- D) Opener promises a long suit, so any new suit by responder is normally forcing. A useful agreement recommended by Jon Weinstein: responder's bid of the cheapest new suit is an artificial game force. These methods can be applied equally to the auction in case (H). These auctions are not discussed elsewhere in this article.
- E) A number of the methods noted here claim to be applicable to this auction, but that is likely to be a mistake. Responder is quite likely to want to sign off in either minor. When bidding "up the line", there will seldom be an 8-card major suit fit on this auction. If playing Walsh responses (or if responder is 5-6), responder simply makes a forcing reverse into his major. Since a jump into a minor should be invitational, it may be necessary to reverse into a fragment. A jump into a major should be a splinter.
- F) On (1♣ – 1♦ – 1♥), many people play that 1♠ is natural and forcing one round, while 2♠ is fourth suit forcing. With Walsh responses, you don't really need that: responder's 1♠ bid can only be forward-going, although not necessarily showing spades. On (1♣ – 1♦ – 1♠), there can be no heart fit, but you may still need fourth suit forcing.

3. Crowhurst

Eric Crowhurst's convention employs an artificial 2♣ bid by responder over a wide-ranging (usually 12-16 HCP) 1NT rebid by opener. Opener bids 2NT with all maximum hands (15-16, game forcing), where 3♣ is a further checkback. With a minimum (12-14), opener bids naturally in a major suit or bids 2♦. Eric Kokish recommends this method over a 12-16 (or wider) reopening 1NT bid – I prefer this application only.

Other variants are out there, e.g. www.bridgehands.com/C/Crowhurst.htm. Bird and Bourke reportedly describe Crowhurst with Transfer Rebids in *Tournament Acol*. I am not able to evaluate more than the basic methods here. All these Crowhurst methods were designed to cope with the problem of a wide-ranging 1NT rebid – if that is not your problem, you should be looking elsewhere. Curiously, Crowhurst may make more sense in the XYZ context, but I cannot see developing and playing it only for those auctions.

4. New Minor Forcing (NMF)

New Minor Forcing is the mainstay of tournament players in North America. Its prominent application is when the opening bid is one of a minor, the response is a major, and opener rebids 1NT. Responder's bid of two of the new (unbid) minor is artificial and asks opener for information in this order:

1. Bid hearts with four cards
2. Bid responder's major with three cards
3. Raise the artificial minor with both of the above and a maximum (not all play this)
4. Some other descriptive bid.

Many reverse the order of (1) and (2) above, but the above is better. It is important to find the 4-4 fit, because it may produce an extra trick, when a 5-3 fit is also available.

Responder's subsequent raise of opener's minor is natural and game forcing. This is how you set trumps, to explore for 3NT or a slam in opener's minor. Responder's rebid of the new minor promises a 5-5 hand, and should also be game forcing, although some probably play invitational. Responder's other third bids are natural and descriptive.

This section is not intended to be a complete description of NMF. You probably know more than this already. If not, try Hardy's *Standard Bridge Bidding for the 21st Century*, for example. Edgar Kaplan's approach, designed for a 1NT rebid of 15-17 HCP, is significantly different – see www.bridgeworld.com (KS Updated).

As a system, NMF does not have quite enough bids to cover all the cases. What does it mean to jump into the new minor, instead of simply bidding it? Is this an invitational 5-5 hand, or does it show a bad hand with a broken 6- or 7-card suit? You have two ways to bid to 3 of the new minor, and three desirable meanings. My personal choice is weak, and to play. With the 5-5 hands, bid the new minor and either force at the 3-level or invite with 2NT. (There is no way to show a weak 5-5; just sign off at 2 of the major.)

When the opening bid was 1♣, using 2♦ as NMF is inconvenient. There's more...

5. Checkback Stayman (CS)

Checkback Stayman has the same fundamental intent as NMF, investigating after opener rebids 1NT. However, the checkback bid is always 2♣, and over that, 2♦ is always available as an artificial bid denying either four cards in the unbid major or three cards in responder's major. When the opening bid was 1♦, NMF and CS are equivalent.

The major difference between NMF and CS is when the opening bid is 1♣, responder bids a major, and opener rebids 1NT. Over responder's 2♦ (NMF), opener may be in a quandary; over responder's 2♣ (CS), opener can always bid 2♦, if nothing else. The major disadvantage to CS is when responder has a bad hand in this situation, with support for opener's clubs. Now he cannot escape to 2♣, as he could when playing NMF. This may be the last safe haven – even if the opponents never let you play there. The inability to play in 2♣ would be a larger problem, should you extend these methods to the XYZ context.

In *Modern Constructive Bidding*, Marshall Miles prefers Checkback Stayman, which he says Eddie Kantar invented, over the other methods he considers. There is more – if interested, see "New Minor Farce Vs Checkback Stayman" by Marvin French (<http://marvinfrench.com/p1/bridgetopics/nmf.pdf>).

6. Two-Way New Minor Forcing

Two-Way New Minor Forcing, also called Modified Two-Way Stayman (MTWS) and X-Y-NT, can be applied to all auctions when opener rebids 1NT, and has this structure:

- 2♣ Opener must relay to 2♦. Responder usually has invitational values, but could be intending to pass 2♦. Responder's subsequent 2NT game try promises 4-card support for opener's minor.
- 2♦ Artificial and game forcing.
- 2♥/2♠ Natural, to play.
- 2NT Natural and invitational, with fewer than four cards in opener's minor.
- 3♣ Natural, to play.
- 3♦/3♥/3♠ Strong suit or support – slam try. [Alternative: strong suit, invitational.]

Two-Way NMF provides substantial advantages over Checkback Stayman; the main disadvantage is some added complexity. If you buy the argument that CS is at least as good as NMF, then Two-Way NMF appears to be

superior to both. Game can be invited in responder's major at the 2-level – you can play there if opener refuses. Just as with CS, you can never play 2♣, but you can always play 2♦.

Marshall Miles notes that two-way NMF is the prominent method in southern California, but he does not like it: “opener's forced 2♦ rebid over 2♣ doesn't provide any distributional information ... it just wastes half a round of bidding”.

Eric Schwartz has been honing different methods since the late 70s: the 2♣ relay includes all the signoffs, and the plain bids are mostly invitational. He has the same number of sequences, the same capacity to his methods, but he has made some different trade-offs in the meanings assigned. The 2♣ relay does yield bidding room to the opponents on signoff hands.

7. Leong Transfers

Eric Leong described his transfers in the July, 1991 issue of *The Bridge World*. Since then, he has made some changes, which I incorporate below. After major suit response and a 1NT rebid by opener:

- 2♣ Opener must relay to 2♦. Responder usually promises invitational values; rarely, responder will use 2♣ for specific slam invitational hands.
- 2♦ Opener must transfer to hearts, weak or game forcing.
- 2♥ Opener must transfer to spades, weak or game forcing.
- 2♠ Puppet to 2NT, shows a big minor suit raise for opener, and denies more than four cards in responder's major. If responder now bids a new suit, it shows shortness.
- 2NT *Natural, invitational*
- 3♣/3♦ [new minor] 5-5 or better with shortness in opener's minor, *forcing*
- 3♣/3♦ [opener's minor] *natural, weak*
- 3♥/3♠ [opener's minor] *natural, invitational, strong suit*

After a transfer, 2NT is a puppet to 3♣ promising at least 4-card support for opener's minor (singleton next).

Leong Transfers allow responder to describe his shape below the 3NT level, and there are more sequences available to explore game or slam. The shapely hand describes shape, so the balanced hand can evaluate the location of high cards.

The above is compressed from Eric's summary, which contains more details and eight powerful examples. Some of responder's rebids are not defined, so you will need to supply those. *My suggestions are in italics.*

You may be able to build a system from the summary that I captured from the rec.games.bridge newsgroup, at web.mit.edu/mitdlbc/www/contrib.html#Articles. Eric sent me a copy of his original, copyrighted article, along with an update that I have incorporated. These transfers are a worthy contender. This system permits the opponents to double the transfer or cue bid two of responder's major, a liability on weak signoff hands.

8. Morgan Transfers (MT)

Morgan Transfers are a method devised by David Morgan and described in “The Unnecessary Information Test”, *The Bridge World*, October, 1998. After major suit response and a 1NT rebid by opener:

- Two of responder's original major is a signoff.
- 2♣ is a puppet to 2♦: responder either passes or makes a natural bid to show a balanced or semi-balanced, invitational hand. (Some game forcing hands can go via 2♣, but responder has to jump, possibly to game, over 2♦.) 1m – 1♥ – 1NT – 2♣ – 2♦ – 2♣ shows 4-4 in the majors and invitational values.
- 2♦, 2♥ (if not responder's major), 2NT, and 3♣ are transfers, showing an unbalanced hand. The transfer into responder's original major shows at least a game invitation; other transfers are either weak or game forcing.
- 2♠, if a reverse, shows 4-4 or better in the majors and is game forcing.
- Jumps to 3♦ and above are non-forcing and emphasize the suit jumped into.

MT gives a number of sequences to reach most contracts. For example, there are two invitational sequences that end at two of responder's major (transfer or via puppet), and another one that's a signoff (direct 2M). MT methods are therefore accurate, but quite complex. MT also generally does a good job of concealing the eventual declarer's hand from the defense.

The above description of Morgan Transfers was provided by Steve Willner. Steve feels that these methods are technically best, though complex; from my limited view, I agree.

9. Fourth Bid Transfers

Unlike the other transfer methods presented, Fourth Bid Transfers are intended for use in the XYZ context as well as when opener rebids 1NT. The system applies to all ten auctions when opener rebids at the one-level. Responder's rebids:

1♠ or 1NT	Natural, non-forcing
2♣	Signoff in 2♦, 5-5 majors at least invitational, or other invitations not listed below
2♦ through 2NT 3♣ after 1♥ or 1♠ response	Transfers: signoff or game forcing
3♣ after 1♦ response 3♦ after 1♥ response 3♥ after 1♠ response	Invitational, 6+ card suit, singleton in <u>lower unbid</u> suit (jump to the bid just below the long suit)
3♦ after 1♦ response 3♥ after 1♥ response 3♠ after 1♠ response	Invitational, 6+ card suit, singleton in <u>higher unbid</u> suit (jump in the long suit)
3♦ after 1♠ response	Invitational, 5-5 majors, singleton in <u>unbid</u> suit
3♥ over 1♥ rebid 3♠ over 1♠ rebid	Invitational 4-card raise, singleton in <u>unbid</u> suit (therefore some 4-4-4-1 or 4-5-3-1)
3NT and above	Normal system

The claimed advantages are: better control of most auctions, saves bidding space with good hands, pinpoint responder's distribution with invitational+ hands, and choose who declares NT in games and slams. This system does not provide the capability to distinguish between responder's strong and broken suits, occasionally crucial. This system also permits the opponents to cue bid two of responder's major, a liability on weak signoff hands.

Fourth Bid Transfers are described in detail at tedmuller.us/Bridge/Bidding/FourthBidTransfers.htm.

10. Fourth Suit Forcing (4SF)

Most serious tournament players in North America play Fourth Suit Forcing. This convention completes the fourth bid systems described above, and applies when opener rebids a new suit, rather than 1NT. If playing this way, responder's bid of the fourth suit is artificial and forcing.

The ACBL convention card has boxes to indicate whether this bid is forcing for one round or to game. The latter is unambiguous, and many play it that way. That's wrong – there are common hands that just cannot be bid correctly if the fourth suit is unconditionally forcing to game. For example, after (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♣) or (1♣ - 1♥ - 1♠), what is responder supposed to bid with a relatively balanced invitational hand and no stopper in the fourth suit? The answer is to play the fourth suit forcing for one round, and play this

Rule: After bidding Fourth Suit Forcing, if responder bids at the 3-level, it is forcing to game.

Responder's 2-level bids after 4SF are non-forcing. Opener may be stuck for a bid in some circumstances, and have to bid two of responder's major with only a doubleton. Opener should jump with three-card support and a maximum in those cases, since responder may have little to do except pass the minimum preference. Clearly, there's more to discuss about 4SF than I can provide in a few paragraphs. I believe these are the methods described by Eddie Kantar, I don't have a reference. Marshall Miles describes methods close to these, which he says are *Bridge World* standard, in *Modern Constructive Bidding*.

11. X-Y-Z

The X-Y-Z system extends the principles of Two-Way New Minor Forcing to auctions where opener rebids a suit at the one-level. It's called X-Y-Z or XYZ for the three bids at the one-level. There are some complexities to this approach, because opener may be unbalanced or may have extra values. The Two-Way NMF system is partly based on the assumption that opener has a limited hand with balanced distribution.

With X-Y-Z, Fourth Suit Forcing is no longer used when opener rebids 1♥ or 1♠, but 4SF is still needed when opener makes a normal rebid in a suit at a higher level.

Some sources on X-Y-Z refer to only the XYZ context (the two or four auctions when the X-Y-Z bids are all suits), and continue to refer to the handling of opener's 1NT rebid as Two-Way NMF or Modified Two-Way Stayman (MTWS). It is possible to play different structures for the two situations, but it makes sense to play the same fundamental structure for both. Some then call the whole thing X-Y-Z.

A major issue arises when responder uses the 2♣ relay to 2♦: under what circumstances may opener bid something else? Fred Hamilton says opener should bid 3♣ holding ♠AJ83 ♥7 ♦4 ♣KQJT754. I disagree: that's a 2♣ rebid, not 1♠, because you'll probably get tapped out in a 4-4 spade fit. Marshall Miles is on target: if opener "would not pass a natural, non-forcing 2♦ rebid from responder, he can make his normal rebid over 2♣." His example hands have moderate to great extra strength.

C. Comparisons and Conclusions

Differences between Features of the Systems

Differences between Systems	1. Montreal Relay	2. Transfer Walsh	3. Crowhurst	4. New Minor Forcing	5. Checkback Stayman	6. Two-Way NMF	7. Leong Transfers	8. Morgan Transfers	9. Fourth Bid Transfers	10. Fourth Suit Forcing	11. X-Y-Z
Key: ● = yes ○ = partial ? = uncertain											
Meets restrictions of ACBL General Convention Chart	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
After 1♣ opening, discovers 5-3 or 4-4 fit at 1-level	●	●									
Operative after 1♦ opening			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Operative when opener rebids a new suit at the 2-level										●	
Responder can stop in 2♣ after responding a major	?	?		○							
Responder can stop in 2♦ after responding a major	?	?		○	●	●		●	●		○
Responder can stop in 2 of opener's minor ...	?	?		●	○	○		○	○		○
Responder can stop in 2 of other minor ...	?	?			○	○		○	○		○
Can try for game but stop in 2♥ or 2♠ when refused	?	?	○			●	●	●	●		●
Handles responder's weak/inv/strong 5-5 and long weak minor	?	?		○	●	●		●	○	○	●
Handles minor suit slamming well		?		○	○	○	●	●	●	○	○
More resistant to competition		●	●	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	●
Applicable to XYZ context			●		●	●			●	●	●

Conclusions

When I started this article, I expected to conclude that Two-Way New Minor Forcing, possibly extended with X-Y-Z, was the superior method. For many partnerships, including casual partnerships of strong players, this may indeed be the case.

It appears that, with work by the partnership, transfer methods can be superior. The full descriptions of these methods, and the theory behind them, are often buried in *Bridge World* articles – or hammered out by individual partnerships – you can't just buy a book. These methods will not be ready for general adoption until they become more widespread in the literature and/or online.

The final table summarizes the results of my investigations into Two-Way NMF and X-Y-Z.

Comparison of Methods for Two-Way NMF with X-Y-Z

	Hardy/Hamilton/Baze	Savage	BBOinquiry
applies	Modified Two-Way Stayman applies on the 6 auctions where opener rebids 1NT. XYZ applies on the 4 auctions when opener rebids a suit at the 1-level. ON with 1-level competition.	XYZ applies at responder's second turn, on all 10 uncontested 1-level auctions. Competition needs discussion.	XYZ applies at responder's second turn, on all 10 uncontested 1-level auctions. ON in competition any time when opener and responder bid (or negative double) three times consecutively, and 2♣ is available.
2♣	Relay to 2♦. Opener may do otherwise only with great distribution [Marshall Miles: only if too strong to pass a 2♦ signoff]. Responder may pass 2♦; all responder's bids are invitational. ON by passed hand.		
2♦	Artificial game force. To play by a passed hand (5 cards if opener's minor).	Artificial game force. OFF by a passed hand.	Artificial game force. OFF by a passed hand.
2♥	To play (5+ cards if a rebid, 5-4 if after 1♠).		
2♠	To play (5+ cards), unless a reverse (game forcing).		
2NT	Invitational to 3NT, denies 4-card support for opener's minor. (Holding partner's minor, bid 2♣, then invite with 2NT - opener may retreat to 3m.)		Relay to 3♣. Responder may pass; extensive slam-oriented continuations.
3♣	To play.		Forcing, jump shift shows 5-5.
3♦	Strong suit, suggests slam.		Forcing, jump shift shows 5-5.
3♥	Strong suit, suggests slam.		Forcing, jump shift shows 5-5.
3♠	Strong suit, suggests slam; splinter if 2♠ is a reverse.		Forcing, jump shift shows 5-5.
3NT	To play, usually without a 5-card major. (Holding a 5-card major, bid 2♣, then 3NT to offer a choice of games.)		
higher	Immediate: splinter in support of opener's first suit. After 2♣: splinter in support of responder's suit.		N/A
source	Max Hardy: <i>Advanced Bridge Bidding for the 21st Century</i> . XYZ by Fred Hamilton, presented separately from MTWS by Grant Baze.	http://www.sfvbridgeacademy.com/Web%20Conventions/XYZ%201%201%202008.htm	http://bboinquiry.blogspot.com/2005/06/wnat-is-xyz.html
notes	This column represents a merging of the Hamilton & Baze methods.	Mike Savage's methods appear to be based on Hardy.	Player known as Inquiry on BridgeBase Online.
related	Gavin Wolpert says that expert standard two-way NMF includes a 2NT relay to 3♣. Responder may pass; 3♦=5M-4m fit with low shortness, 3♥=5M-4m high, 3♠=4M-5m low, 3NT=4M-5m high. http://bridgepro.blogspot.com/search?q=new+minor		
related	Marvin French makes an excellent case that Checkback stayman is superior to traditional NMF. (But if that's the case, might as well play 2-way NMF - and extend it to XYZ!) http://homepage.mac.com/bridgeguys/pdf/FrenchNewMFCheckback.pdf		