

2/1 GAME FORCING

Part 1—Framework

Just this past weekend, I was playing on the internet when our opponents had this pair of hands:

West: S—KJ1075 H—84 D—Q C—AQJ76
East: S—96 H—AKQ952 D—K6 C—1032

This pair was playing Standard American (SAYC) and the auction proceeded:

West	East
1S	2H
3C	3NT
pass	

On a diamond lead, 3NT needed the club finesse to work, and when it lost the contract went down two.

Since 4H is an easy make, you might be curious as to why responder didn't bid 3H to show the extra length. The answer is that in SAYC, that action would have been non-forcing, suggesting 10-11 points with six or more hearts. Opener would have been entitled to pass with a non-fitting minimum hand. Since East had enough points to be in game, he had to choose between 4H opposite what might be a singleton or void in opener's hand, or 3NT.

This hand is a "poster boy" for the merits of 2/1. If the partnership agreement was that two-level responses in a new suit create a game force, then the auction would have gone:

West	East
1S	2H
3C	3H
4H	

The auction becomes game-forcing on East's first bid, so he repeats his long suit the next time around and opener carries on to 4H. With partner showing at least six of them, West's doubleton ensures there will be an eight-card fit and he has no diamond stopper for notrump purposes.

2/1 game forcing is the culmination, at least so far, of seventy years of bidding theory, and has been the most popularly used system amongst the rank and file of duplicate bridge players for about 15 to 20 years. Why is it in such widespread use now? To answer that, we should look at the three major phases in the development of bidding:

- **Goren**, where you could open a four-card major and make a two-level response in a new suit on a decent 10 HCP,
- **Standard American**, where you need a five-card suit to open 1H or 1S, but the two-level responses were the same, and....
- **Two-over-One (2/1)**, where a two-level response now commits the partnership to game on virtually every auction.

The trend we can identify is an attempt to strive for greater clarity during the early stages of the auction. Five-card majors are a way of quickly determining if an adequate trump fit exists. 2/1 has the goal of avoiding the “gray area” where a partnership is not sure whether a bidding sequence is forcing or passable.

The Differences between SAYC and 2/1

There are commonly-accepted bidding principles that will apply regardless of which methods you choose. However, there are also some variances in the meaning of the bids, so let’s take a quick look at what they are going to be.

Type of Bid	SAYC	2/1
Jump raise in a major	3+ card support, 10-11 pts	4+ trumps, 10-11 pts
Jump raise in a minor	5+ card support, 10-11 pts	same
Single raise in a major	3+ trumps, 6-9 points	3+ trumps, 8-9 points
Single raise in a minor	4-5 trumps, 6-9 points	same
1NT response to a minor	6 to a bad 10 points, no 4-card or longer major	same
1NT response to a major	6 to a bad 10 HCP, any shape, denies support	6-11 HCP, forcing for one round, may have support for partner’s major.

2NT response to a minor	13-15, no 4-card major	11-12, no 4-card major
2NT response to a major	13-15 bal, 2 of partner's suit	game-forcing raise of opener's suit, 4+ trumps and 13+ support points.
3NT response	16-17 balanced, no major-suit length	13-15 balanced, no major-suit length
2-level suit response	at least a good 10 HCP, one-round force	12+ HCP, forcing to game
1-level suit response	6+ HCP, one-round force, bid suits up-the-line	6+ HCP, one-round force, tend to bid a major ahead of equal or longer diamonds if less than 12 HCP.

On the last item, remember that responding at the one-level does **not** deny a game-going hand. If partner opens 1D and you have:

S—AKxx H—J9xx D—x C—AKxx

You'll bid 1H just as you're taught in the bridge lessons. Some people get confused and think that because they are playing "two-over-one" that they have to make a two-level response immediately on this good a hand. As always, however, you want to find out whether there is a heart or spade fit, and then put the contract in game.

Advantages and Drawbacks of 2/1

The advantages of playing two-over-one are many. The main ones are:

- 1) It will reduce the number of partnership mixups as to whether or not an auction is forcing.
- 2) Once the game force is established, both partners will have the opportunity and room to look for slam.
- 3) You can use a 2NT response as a game-forcing raise in opener's major, which is a huge plus. That's a gaping hole in SAYC methods.
- 4) You can more tightly define the major suit raise hands in terms of point-count and/or the number of trumps you have.

- 5) The 1NT forcing response allows responder to bail out in his long suit with 6-9 HCP.

In the heading to this section, I use the word "drawbacks" which is not entirely accurate. However, there are two challenges for responder in a 2/1 environment, which are:

- a) Once you respond a forcing 1NT, there will sometimes be a choice of actions to take on the second round of bidding, and it may not be the easiest of decisions.
- b) How do you show the "almost" hands of 10-11 HCP and a six-card or longer suit? We'll address this topic in a subsequent lesson.

Major and Minor Suit Auctions in 2/1

2/1 auctions rarely occur when the opening bid is one of a minor. That's because responding in a new suit at the one-level has no upper limit and does **not** deny a game-going hand. If partner opens 1D and you have:

S—AKxx H—J9xx D—x C—AKxx

You'll bid 1H just as you're taught in the bridge lessons. Some people get confused and think that because they are playing "two-over-one" that they have to make a two-level response immediately on this good a hand. As always, however, you want to find out whether there is a heart or spade fit, and then put the contract in game.

If partner opens a minor suit, you can always bid a new suit without going to the next level and it would be a one-round force. If partner opens 1H or 1S, your choices are more limited as a change in suits will involve going a level higher. Over a major-suit opening, the three paths responder will usually follow are:

- ❖ Raising
- ❖ Bidding a forcing 1NT
- ❖ Introducing a new suit at the two-level

Of these three options, the change of suit at the two-level is the one that commits the partnership to game. What, then, is needed for a two-level response?

Two-level responses are similar to opening bids

In general, if you'd have opened a hand, that qualifies as a 2/1 response if partner beats you to the punch. However, when both partners are using long suits in their evaluation, their side often gets overboard to a non-making game when the auction is concluded. So without an immediate fit for partner's suit, 12 HCP is the minimum you should have for a two-level bid.

The other rule of thumb concerns the number of cards responder should have to introduce a new suit at the two-level. If you bid hearts (typically 2H after partner's 1S), that will guarantee at least five of them, like an opening bid in a major suit. However, a 2/1 bid in clubs or diamonds could be made on a four-card suit, just as a 1C or 1D opening could be. The minimum length of responder's two-level bid is equivalent to that suggested by an opening bid of the suit.

If partner opens 1H, what do you respond on the following hands?

S-- AJ65 H-- 74 D-- AK97 C-- Q103

1S. First order of business is to find out if there is a 4-4 spade fit. That could be lost if you bid 2D instead.

S-- KJ94 H-- 8 D-- AQJ82 C-- K54

2D. With game-forcing values and 5-4 distribution, **always** bid the suit with the greater length first.

S-- 1076 H-- K3 D-- AKJ5 C-- K1084

2C. Although the diamonds are stronger, responding on that suit could miss out on a 4-4 club fit. When you have enough values for game but no five-card suit, respond "up-the-line" with your four-card suits at the two-level.

S-- K72 H-- 4 D-- KJ9873 C-- A65

1NT forcing. Although this hand is a marginal opening bid, the shortness in partner's suit is a deterrent to making a 2/1 response. Because partner has to bid over your 1NT, you can attempt to catch up later.

S-- 62 H-- K4 D-- AJ9872 C-- K5

2D. Same point-count, but now you have a fitting card in opener's suit, so the hand can be upgraded to a two-level response.

S-- 6

H-- QJ4

D-- K742

C-- AJ865

2C. With the singleton to go with your 11 HCP, the hand is too good for an invitational raise to 3H. How you describe the hand is to make a 2/1 response to begin with and subsequently raise the major.

S-- A52

H-- 7

D-- KQ1095

C-- AJ64

2D. With 14 HCP, you have sufficient values to put the contract in game despite the lack of support.

Opening bid guidelines in 2/1

In a 2/1 environment, you shouldn't open flat hands of 11 HCP. The balanced patterns are 4333, 4432 and 5332. If two-level responses are permitted with 12, then opening such mediocre hands will land you in games that are more likely to fail than they are to succeed.

With unbalanced hands that are just short of 12 HCP, you can open if the points are "hard" (Aces and Kings) and/or concentrated in your long suits. Otherwise, you should refrain from taking initial action.

Do you open the following hands?

S-- 5

H-- KQ10954

D-- A73

C-- Q98

Yes. The long suit is robust, and the Q of clubs is the only card that may not produce a trick. It's too good a hand for a weak 2H bid.

S-- K

H-- Q98765

D-- QJ4

C-- K75

No. The hearts are much poorer, the hand is aceless, and who knows whether the singleton King is going to be a relevant card.

S-- AJ1082

H-- Q1087

D-- A53

C-- 9

Yes. No rebid problems, unbalanced hand, decent quality in your long suits. Even if partner makes a 2/1 response on 12 HCP and you end up in 3NT, your spot cards may be sufficient to bring it home.

S-- A9754

H-- 6

D-- QJ85

C-- A62

No. Suits are much worse, and a 2H response by partner is going to make you feel absolutely sick as you have no adequate rebid.

S-- 73

H-- A10765

D-- AK94

C-- 86

Yes. Hearts aren't fantastic, but there are no rebid problems and you have three quick tricks, which can often make all the difference in a borderline game contract.

S-- K9865

H-- Q7

D-- A2

C-- Q973

No. It's a marginal hand with a nebulous value in the doubleton Queen of hearts. Since we have the master suit, we can pass initially and overcall spades later.

How 2/1 assists responder in defining hands with major-suit support.

In SAYC, responder has only two options for supporting opener's major with less than 12 HCP, the single raise (6-9) and the jump raise (10-11). Both actions show 3-card or longer trump support.

2/1 allows us more ways to raise because of the forcing 1NT response. Here's how it works:

- **6-7** points with support-- respond 1NT and then go back to 2 of opener's major.
- **8-9** points with support-- raise immediately to 2 of partner's major.
- **10-11** points with exactly 3-card support-- respond 1NT and then follow up with 3 of opener's major.
- **10-11** points with 4-card or longer support-- raise directly to three of opener's major.

Here are some examples to illustrate, with partner having opened 1H:

S-- 84

H-- K97

D-- J1083

C-- A764

2H. 8 HCP and two good features to the hand, King of partner's suit and the outside Ace. The doubleton spade could also be useful as a ruffing value.

S-- J72

H-- K93

D-- Q654

C-- 1085

1NT forcing. Your next bid will be 2H, at which point opener will know you cannot have 8-9 points with support as you failed to make the direct raise.

S-- A52 H-- K876 D-- K4 C-- 9653

3H. This promises at least four trumps and 10-11 points.

S-- K64 H-- K97 D-- A1065 C-- 832

1NT forcing, and then **3H.** Advertises exactly three-card support and 10-11 points,

Sample Hands

Board 1

South dealer

North

S-- A3

H-- QJ94

D-- 52

C-- AKJ62

West

East

S-- 9642

H-- 83

D-- QJ984

C-- 85

S-- J5

H-- 1052

D-- K1073

C-- Q1073

South

S-- KQ1087

H-- AK76

D-- A6

C-- 94

The Auction:

North	East	South	West
		1S	pass
2C	pass	2H	pass
3H	pass	4NT	pass
5H	pass	6H	pass
pass	pass		

North responds 2C with 15 HCP and a good club suit. We are in a game-forcing auction now, so when opener introduces hearts, the raise to 3H is actually more encouraging than a jump to game. Opener asks with 4NT, and settles into 6H when partner shows two Aces.

The Play:

The lead will be the Queen of diamonds. With trumps behaving, slam is a fairly good proposition. As it turns out, the Jack of spades falls on the second round, so making the contract is a breeze. If the spades didn't behave so kindly, there would have been another chance for declarer in the club suit.

Hand 2

East dealer

North

S-- 7
H-- Q1083
D-- Q92
C-- K862

West

S-- K94
H-- 65
D-- K63
C-- AQ1094

East

S-- AJ8653
H-- K42
D-- A75
C-- J

South

S-- Q102
H-- AJ97
D-- J1084
C-- 753

Auction:

North	East	South	West
	1S	pass	2C
pass	2S	pass	4S
pass	pass	pass	

In contrast to the first hand, West has just barely enough for his two-level response and shows that with the jump to 4S, precluding any slam tries by opener.

The Play:

The lead is probably going to be the Jack of diamonds. Declarer might lose four or more tricks if the missing honors are sitting badly.

The hand you don't want to give up a trick to here is North, who can play a heart through your unprotected King. Fortunately, you can avoid that by using what we call a ruffing finesse

in the club suit. Win the diamond in hand, then play the Jack of clubs to the Ace and run the Queen. If North covers, you trump, play two rounds of spades ending in dummy, and then run the clubs from the top, discarding red-suit losers from your hand. If RHO plays low on the second club, toss a heart or diamond from hand. You don't mind South winning the club as he can't switch to hearts without letting your King score as a trick.

Hand 3

North dealer

	North	
	S-- 52	
	H-- AJ1072	
	D-- A843	
West	C-- A6	East
S-- K1082		S-- Q963
H-- 98		H-- K5
D-- QJ62		D-- K107
C-- Q94	South	C-- J1083
	S-- AJ7	
	H-- Q643	
	D-- 95	
	C-- K752	

Auction:

North	East	South	West
1H	pass	3H	pass
4H	pass	pass	pass

Opener has 13 HCP and is not brimming with extras. However, responder has promised at least four-card support with the direct jump. With the same point-count and three hearts, he would have bid 1NT forcing and then 3H. Since North knows there will be adequate trumps to trump possible losers, he carries on to game.

The Play:

The fourth trump is indeed quite useful here, as declarer will now be able to ruff the third and fourth diamonds, either before or after trumps are drawn.

Make the fourth heart a third small diamond instead, and game would be destined to fail.