

Negative Free-bids

Part 1 -- Responder's First Bid

Called a modern solution to a common bidding problem by the *Encyclopedia of Bridge*, the Negative Free-bid has become a popular addition to many partnerships' systems. Whether you and your partner decide to use this bid or not, it's likely you'll be playing pairs who do, so it's a good idea to arm yourself with some information.

The Negative Free-bid is not really a convention (all of responder's and opener's bids are natural) but is best classified as a bidding treatment or agreement. When using Negative Free-bids, you and partner agree to lower the point requirements for some of responder's free-bids in competitive auctions. This increases responder's ability to show a long suit after an opponent overcalls and improves your chances of finding a fit.

The problem with standard free-bids

Consider this typical situation. Partner opens 1♦, your RHO overcalls 1♠, and you hold: ♠53 ♥KJ8743 ♦82 ♣K82 or ♠643 ♥842 ♦Q7 ♣KQJ103

With standard methods, a new-suit bid at the two-level would promise at least 11 points (perhaps a good 10). Neither of these hands is strong enough to bid your suit freely, so what do you do?

With Hand #1, the usual solution is to make a negative double. Since partner will seldom be kind enough to bid hearts, you plan on bidding 2♥ over his expected rebid of 1NT, 2♣ or 2♦.

But what if LHO raises his partner's spade suit? When the auction is passed back to you, you'll have another dilemma-pass and lose a possible part-score, or risk a 3♥ bid, which could be a disaster if partner doesn't have a suitable trump holding.

With Hand #2, the negative double isn't even an option. You're more or less stuck with passing and hoping you can show your hand later. If LHO raises his partner's spade overcall, you may be shut out forever.

Even if LHO passes and partner reopens with a double, you have no good way to describe this hand. A jump to 3♣ would show some values, but virtually promises a 6-card suit. And 2♣ is somewhat of an underbid, since you have a considerably better suit and hand than partner might expect.

The Negative-Freebid Solution

The Negative Freebid (NFB) allows you to make your natural response with hands like those above, but without promising game-invitational values or catapulting the auction too high.

A NFB is used when an opponent overcalls your side's opening bid and responder has a long suit that cannot be shown at the one-level. In the examples above, you would make a NFB of 2♥ with Hand #1 and 2♣ with Hand #2.

Responder's Use of the Negative Freebid

Responder's NFB is always a non-jump, new-suit bid between 2♣ and 3♦. It is an alertable bid that shows:

- A good suit—a 6+-card suit or a strong 5-carder.
- 5-11 points.
- If partner opened 1♥ or 1♠, no 3-card or longer support for partner's suit.

Some pairs prefer to play NFBs through 3♠, but this can create some very awkward auctions when responder holds a strong hand. More often, you'll want to use the 3♥ and 3♠ bids to show forcing hands.

Remember: These free-bids are called negative because they're non-forcing. They are, however, intended as constructive; they show good suits and good playing values.

Responder's new-suit bid is *NOT* a NFB if the bid is made:

- At a level of 3♥ or higher. If partner opens 1♠ and your RHO overcalls 3♦, no Negative Freebid is available; your new-suit bid of 3♥ or 4♣ is forcing.
- At the one-level. Responder's new-suit bid at the one-level carries the standard meaning. After 1♦ by partner, 1♥ by RHO, a freebid of 1♠ is unlimited, showing 6+ points and a 5+-card suit (since you would make a negative double if you held only 4 spades).

Much of your success with this system depends on your hand evaluation skills. Remember that a Negative Freebid tends to tell partner you have a one-suited hand without features that would be more valuable in other contracts. Your choice of whether or not to use the NFB, then, depends not just on your high-card values and suit quality, but on your outside holdings. The vulnerability and the form of scoring may also affect your decision (you'll usually want to be more conservative at IMPs).

Try your judgment with the following hands: 1♦ - 1♠ - ?

1) ♠8654 ♥Q108643 ♦A7 ♣3

Bid 2♥. You have minimum high-card values, but your length in spades (and partner's presumed shortness) makes it more likely that dummy will have fair support. Your 2♥ bid may also have some preemptive value because it prevents LHO from bidding a cheap 2♣.

2) ♠J74 ♥K9632 ♦1054 ♣A7

Double. This hand isn't a good choice for a NFB at any vulnerability or form of scoring. Your suit is weak and your hand would be a good dummy for contracts of 1NT or 2♦, so keep all options open with a negative double. If partner rebids 2♣, take a preference to 2♦.

3) ♠9 ♥AKJ97 ♦108732 ♣64

Bid 2♥. A NFB is often the only bid you'll make in the auction, but you're free to bid again with hands that have extra playing strength. If the opponents bid over your NFB, you can compete by rebidding your suit (if you have a strong 6-carder and can do so at the 3-level) or by supporting partner's minor, which you would want to do with this hand. If partner doesn't raise your hearts, your hand is strong enough to compete up to 4♦.

1♥ - 2♣ - ?

4) ♠43 ♥J54 ♦AQJ985 ♣72

Bid 2♥. Even though you have a strong suit, resist the temptation to bid 2♦, which would deny 3-card heart support. Raising partner's major is more important than showing a new suit, especially if you have a minimum. If LHO competes and it's right for your side to bid on to 3♥ (or 4♥), partner won't be able to make an intelligent decision unless you show your support right away.

5) ♠J92 ♥42 ♦KJ1097 ♣AQ6

Bid 2NT. Your suit is good enough for a NFB of 2♦, but your hand's most valuable feature may well be the double club stopper. The 2NT bid gives partner a better description of both your high-card strength and your hand's suitability for the most likely game of 3NT.

Other System Changes

Since so many of responder's new-suit bids are non-forcing, you'll need to make a few other adjustments to handle stronger hands. The two main changes involve negative doubles and responder's jump shifts in competition.

Negative Free-bids (NFB's) are growing in popularity because they allow responder to make more natural, non-forcing bids, which improves your chances of finding a fit. Adding this to your system is simple enough-all you have to remember is that in competitive auctions, responder's new-suit bids between 2♣ and 3♦ are not forcing. They show 5-11 points and a long suit (6+-cards, or a very strong 5-carder).

Obviously, this agreement affects the way you'll bid your stronger hands, so you also need to adjust the meanings of some other bids. The two main changes involve negative doubles and responder's jump shifts in competition.

Negative Double Auctions

Since responder's free-bids through 3♦ are not forcing, you need a way to show a long suit and forcing-to-game values. To do this, responder must use the negative double to start the description of all strong hands with long suits. After opener's response to the negative double, any new-suit bid by responder then shows a 5+-card suit and is forcing to game.

Adding Negative Free-bids to your system does not change the way you bid your normal negative double hands. As responder, you still use the negative double to describe hands of limited high-card strength. The meaning of your negative double is changed *only* if you rebid a new suit later.

After 1♦ by partner, 1♠ by RHO, you would make a negative double with each of these hands:

1 - ♠AJ9 ♥K1074 ♦53 ♣AJ86

2 - ♠4 ♥AQ ♦K102 ♣AKJ10974

3 - ♠AQ ♥Q10832 ♦A83 ♣Q93

4 - ♠2 ♥AKJ1097 ♦K932 ♣87

For the time being, opener will assume your negative double is standard and he'll make his normal response. You'll then clarify your hand type with your second bid.

With Hand #1, you have a normal negative double and you'll bid this hand as if you were playing Standard. If partner shows a minimum (with a rebid of 1NT, 2♣, 2♦ or 2♥), you'll bid 3NT. This auction guarantees 4 hearts, so if partner has 4-card support, he'll usually correct to 4♥.

With Hand #2, you plan to rebid a minimum number of clubs over partner's response. You won't need to cuebid-the negative double followed by your new-suit bid shows a forcing hand. Depending on partner's rebid after you show your clubs, you can now cuebid to show extra strength and try for slam. 6♣, 6♦ or even 6NT are likely contracts.

With Hand #3, you'll bid 2♥ if partner rebids 1NT, 2♣ or 2♦. Your new-suit bid doesn't promise any minimum suit quality-it merely shows that you have a forcing-to-game hand with 5 or more hearts. If partner doesn't raise hearts, you'll settle for 3NT.

With Hand #4, you'll also bid 2♥ after your negative double, but here you plan to insist on a heart game. Note that even though this hand's point-count falls into the 5-11 HCP range for a NFB, it has the playing strength of an opening bid. A diamond or heart slam is a strong possibility, so show your strength by starting with the negative double. Don't risk partner passing a NFB of 2♥ (or even a jump to 3♥, which is described below).

Responder's Jump-Shift in Competition

So far, we've covered the ways responder can show a long suit with a relatively weak hand and with a forcing hand. With the Negative Freebid system, you can also show a third hand type-one that's at the top of the NFB point-range and has a very strong suit.

To show this highly invitational hand, responder jump-shifts after an opponent overcalls. The jump in a new suit shows:

- A strong 6+-card suit.
- Game-invitational values (10-11 playing pts.)

After partner opens 1♦ and RHO overcalls 1♠, you would jump to 3♥ with ♠J3 ♥KQJ986 ♦92 ♣KJ8 or ♠94 ♥AQ85432 ♦K62 ♣8. A 3♣ bid would describe a hand like ♠43 ♥Q85 ♦Q6 ♣AQJ1073.

Opener is now well placed to evaluate chances for game. Since he knows you don't have great high-card strength outside your suit, he can pass with a soft 13 or 14 points. With good quick tricks and/or a fit, he can bid game, even with a bare minimum opener.

Responder's Cuebids

The negative double starts the description of strong hands that have length in an unbid suit. If you just want to show strength with support *for partner's suit*, there's no need to start with a negative double -- use a direct cuebid instead.

- If partner opens a major and an opponent overcalls, you can cuebid with virtually any distribution that includes support for opener's suit.
- If partner opens a minor and an opponent overcalls, your cuebid denies 4+-card length in an unbid major. If you have a major suit, use the negative double first to check for a 4-4 fit. You can then cuebid to show support for partner's suit later. Depending on your preferences, responder's immediate cuebid need not be forcing to game. The modern, and most effective, treatment is to use the direct cuebid to show limit-raise values or better. Your jump-raise in competition (1♥ by partner - 1♠ by RHO - 3♥ by you), then, is preemptive. After responder's cuebid, opener must show his strength with his rebid. Opener retreats to 3 of his suit to show a hand that wouldn't have accepted a limit raise; he makes any other bid to show a game acceptance.

So what does the opening bidder do with all this information?

Many players like Negative Free-bids because they make it easier for responder to show his long suit in competitive auctions. This helps you find trump fits that might otherwise be lost with standard methods, but it also requires you to use careful judgment later in the auction.

If you and your partner decide to use Negative Free-bids (NFB's), you agree that in competitive auctions, responder's new-suit bids between 2♣ and 3♦ are not forcing. These alertable bids show long suits (6+-cards, or strong 5-carders) and limited high-card values (5-11 pts)

After you open and partner makes a NFB, you may have enough information to place the final contract. If not, you'll need to choose a rebid that describes your strength and fit for partner's suit.

If your RHO passes your partner's NFB, the meanings of your rebids are:

- Pass -- a minimum with no interest in higher contracts. Passing does not promise a fit, so if you have a minimum with poor support, don't run to 2NT.
- Rebid of your first suit (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - Pass - 3♦) -- not forcing, showing a minimum with a long, strong suit and no fit for partner's suit.
- 2NT (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - Pass - 2NT) Invitational high-card strength (16-18 pts.) with stoppers in the opponent's suit. This usually denies a good fit for partner's suit.
- A free raise of partner's suit (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - Pass - 3♥) -- game invitational, showing a fitting hand worth about 15-18 playing points. Since partner has promised a strong suit, a fit may be a good doubleton or better.
- Jump to game in partner's suit (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - Pass - 4♥) -- a minimum opener with a big fit and extra playing strength. If your hand has great high-card strength, start with a cuebid if the auction gives you room.
- Cuebid (1♣ - 2♥ - 2♠ - Pass - 3♥) -- forcing-to-game strength. The cuebid usually suggests a fit, but also starts the description of other big hands (opener denies the fit if he rebids notrump or his own suit later). You can use the cuebid to ask for a stopper, start a slam-try sequence or just clarify that you have extra high-card strength and defensive values. This information may be critical in helping your partner make a decision if the opponents sacrifice.
- Jump cuebid (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - Pass - 3♠) -- a splinter, showing a singleton, great trump support (4+ cards) and slam-try values.

If your RHO competes (by raising his partner's suit or bidding the fourth suit), it's helpful to adjust your definitions for a few of opener's rebids:

- Competitive raise of partner's suit (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - 2♠ - 3♥) -- a minimum with a fit for partner's suit. A raise in competition is *not* invitational to game.
- Double (1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - 2♠ - DBL) -- You may choose to treat a double as penalty, but many partnerships prefer to use it as positive, showing extra values but with no clear-cut action. It tends to describe a hand with defensive strength, but without length in partner's suit.

Over Responder's Negative Double

If partner makes a negative double instead of a Negative Freebid, be sure you alert the opponents to its two-way nature with a Special Alert. If the opponents ask, tell them that partner could have either a normal negative-double hand *or* a forcing hand with one long suit.

In selecting your rebid, you should assume for the time being that partner's negative double is standard and make your natural rebid at the normal level. Keep in mind, though, that partner may *not* have the 4-card major he's temporarily showing, so use some caution. If you have a strong hand with 4-card support for partner's supposed major, try not to blast off to 4♥ or 4♠ - instead, start with a low-level cuebid to let partner clarify his hand type.

You'll also want to think long and hard about converting partner's negative double for penalties. Remember that partner could have a monster one-suiter, so be careful about passing his double unless your hand and the vulnerability screams that it's right.

Over Responder's Jump Shift

Responder's jump-shift in competition (1♦ - 1♠ - 3♣) is invitational, showing a strong 6+-card suit and a hand worth about 10-11 pts. Partner will often have a cover card for you outside his suit, but in general, his jump will be based on playing strength, not on high-card values. As opener, you have to evaluate your chances for game based on that picture of partner's hand. Your point-count isn't important; quick tricks, a trump fit and ruffing values are.

Try rebidding these hands as opener after partner's NFB

1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - Pass - ?

1) ♠KJ7 ♥8 ♦AJ9743 ♣A104

Pass. Partner's hearts rate to be at least as strong as your diamonds, so don't save him by running to 3♦ or 2NT.

2) ♠7 ♥K8 ♦AK1054 ♣AQ974

3♥. You have enough to invite game and, although your heart support isn't robust, your hand is suitable for 4♥. If partner has only a 5-card heart suit, it will be a strong one, so invite with a free raise. Note that a 3♣ bid here would *not* be forcing. It denies a heart fit and asks partner to choose between your two suits.

3) ♠4 ♥Q982 ♦AQ1084 ♣A76

4♥. This shows a minimum opener with an excellent fit and good expectations of making game, even opposite a minimum NFB. Partner should never assume you have the values for slam. If you did, you would have shown your strength by cue-bidding 2♠ first (or jumping to 3♠ to show the singleton).

4) ♠103 ♥KQJ74 ♦AQ5 ♣976

3♣. If your RHO bids, your raise of partner's suit is *not* invitational, so feel free to compete with any hand that has a fit, even a dead minimum. It's important to show your support and take the pressure off partner.

5) ♠J86 ♥AKJ52 ♦AQJ ♣73

Double. You have weak club support and your hand isn't strong enough to insist on game with a cuebid, so use the positive double. This shows a good hand with defensive strength, but doubt about what the final contract should be. Depending on the vulnerability and his own playing strength, partner may pass, bid notrump or rebid his clubs.

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Negative free bids for 2/1 in competition after an opening bid do not make much sense to me as written. The responder can have a good hand quite often so the negative double with forcing good hands just complicates matters. However, there is a place for negative free bids. After an overcall by partner and an intervening bid, a non forcing free bid would be very useful for lead directing or sacrifice purposes.

Negative free bids complement fit showing jumps in competition after an overcall, If you do have your own suit and a fit with partner then jump in that suit. Otherwise your suit bid is a non forcing free bid.

♠KQJ1098 ♥xx ♦xxx ♣xx

LHO opens 1♥ and partner overcalls 2♣, RHO bids 2♦. This is a negative free bid of 2♠. There is so much bidding that a rock 2♠ bid is very unlikely to exist. If by some chance you have one, you can make a snapdragon double showing the unbid suit and tolerance for partner's suit. Later on, bid spades to show your strength. There is so much bidding going around, I would rather play introducing a suit as a "negative free bid" not even forcing one round. This is both lead directing, finding a sacrifice or making a nuisance of yourself all in one negative free bid, If you do not play negative free bids, you have to bid 3♠ with this hand. Splinter addicts cannot even do that.

♠KQJ10x ♥xx ♦Axx ♣xxx

This time 1♥ - 2♦ - 2♥ - ? but this time you bid 3♠ as a fit showing jump, if you play the bid after overcalls (recommended). Normally a new suit would imply a fit with partner and a one round force. With negative free bids it does not, so we use the fit showing jump. We do not play splinters in competition, so a jump can be a weak jump shift or a fit showing jump. If you go the "negative free bid" route you can play fit showing jumps with overcalls. My partners and I only play fit showing jumps as a passed hand but if we buy into "negative free bids" it opens the door for the bid after overcalls.

♠KJ109x ♥xx ♦xxx ♣Kxx

With the same auction as above, it would be nice to stick your nose in with a negative free bid of 2♠. If you have a "real" 2♠ bid which you want to be forcing one round you are forced to double (cards) as per negative free bid theory.

The concept of negative free bids appeals to me when there is lots of bidding going on. Getting in there with your suit without forcing values makes a lot of competitive sense. The contortions with negative doubles for the good hands make the bid not worth it though, with 2/1 auctions. Overcalls are a different matter though just due to the low frequency with partner having a positive free bid. Negative free bids now make sense. Negative free bids and D.S.I.P. doubles go together. If you would double with cards, you do not need bidding a suit as a one round force.