

Bidding Strong Hands – Responding to a 2♣ Opening Bid

In a previous lesson we talked about opening the bidding with a very strong hand- the 2♣ opening bid: how to judge whether your hand is suitable for such a bid.

This time we're going to explore the responses to a 2♣ opening bid. If your partner opens 2♣, she has a very strong hand, and it's **likely you're going to be in game, or even slam**. How can we bid to give ourselves the best chance of ending in the optimum contract?

I am assuming throughout that we are playing Modern Acol with three weak two opening bids: 2♦, 2♥, and 2♠.

If you're playing Benji Acol, you have both 2♣ and 2♦ as strong opening bids, and that's perfectly fine. It's a very popular and successful system, and if you play that, great! Stick with it. But that's not the system I am teaching here.

We saw in our modern Acol system, that our 2♣ opener has to cover two types of hand:

- Type 1 A balanced /semi-balanced powerhouse of points, ie 23+HCP
- Type 2 A hand whose strength depends on shape, with one (or perhaps two) good suits

We also saw that when you open 2♣, you are 100% going to get the chance to bid again. If the 2♣ opener is followed by a pass from the opposition (as it most often will be), your partner **MUST** reply, even with nothing. This is important, as you are going to use **two bids** to tell partner which type of hand you hold: your opening 2♣, and then your rebid.

If you rebid in NT, you are saying your hand is type 1.

eg 2♣ - 2♦ - 2NT "I have a balanced/semi balanced hand with 23+ HCP"

If you rebid a suit, you are saying your hand is type 2.

eg 2♣ - 2♦ - 2♠ "I have a strong shapely hand, with a good spade suit"

Note that in both examples here responder has replied with the negative bid 2♦. Further on in today's lesson we will be exploring how else responder might bid, if her hand is not very weak.

But in the meantime, let's continue with the recap:

If the 2♣ opener is of type 1, the balanced 23+, then it is acceptable for responder to pass, and leave the final contract as 2NT, ie the bidding goes 2♣ - 2♦ - 2NT - pass. That will imply a very weak hand, as you don't need a lot to make 3NT if partner is sitting with 23+.

We also saw last time that after the sequence 2♣ - 2♦ - 2NT, responder now has exactly the same options as she would after an **opening** 2NT- except allowing for partner's extra points.

We will cover that later in a lesson on opening 2NT and responses, but here is a quick summary of what you can bid after 2♣ - 2♦ - 2NT:

- Pass
- 3♣ is Stayman, looking for a major suit fit
- 3♦ is a transfer to ♥
- 3♥ is a transfer to ♠
- 3♠ shows 5 spades, and asks partner to raise to 4♠ with 3+ spades, otherwise bid 3NT.
- 3NT is to play.

I will say this again as it is VERY important: a rebid in NT is the **only** non-forcing rebid by the 2♣ opener! If opener rebids in a suit, it is a forcing bid, and you must reply however weak you are!

In fact, if you open 2♣ with a shapely hand, rather than a balanced powerhouse of 23+ points, you are committing your partnership to at least a game contract. **You expect partner to keep the bidding open until you have reached at least game, even if they have a very weak hand.**

Note: This is akin to the Benji 2♦ opener. In Benji you have both 2♣ and 2♦ available for strong hands, so can distinguish between a game-force opener and a slightly less powerful strong hand. But it loses the weak 2♦ opener. As in all options between systems, it's a trade off.

Since opening 2♣ with a shapely hand, rather than a HCP powerhouse, is going to take our partnership to at least game, however weak partner turns out to be, we need a very strong hand to open 2♣.

That's why we need to apply those tests I talked about last time:

- Playing tricks
- Quick tricks
- Losing tricks
- The "2 queens" test

So, partner opens 2♣, you reply 2♦ ("I don't have much, partner") and opener rebids 2♥.

You know they have a shapely hand that they have judged passes the tests, and have a 5+ heart suit. Now what?

If you have absolutely nothing of interest, you will reply 2NT – a second negative.

Your first bid of 2♦ showed a weak hand (7 points or fewer). Your second bid of 2NT shows a "bust": no aces or kings, and max one queen. It's now up to your partner to decide the final contract, though if they make a rebid below game, you **will not pass**, but find a bid. They might for example have a two suited hand, and are looking for the better fit with your hand.

Say for example partner opens 2♣ with a strong two suiter, with 6 spades and 5 hearts.

Here is your hand

♠ 6 ♥ J 7 3 2 ♦ 8 5 4 2 ♣ 9 6 3 2

The bidding goes

Partner (opener)	2♣
You	2♦ (I have a weak hand, 7 points or fewer)
Partner	2♠ (I have a shapely game going hand with 5+ spades)
You	2NT (second negative, a "bust")
Partner	3♥ (my hand is a game-going two suiter with spades and hearts)
You	4♥ (I know we're going to game, and 4♥ is a better choice of game)

If you swap your spade and heart holding, your final bid would have been 4♠.

If you had equal holding in both partner's bid suits, you would bid game in her first suit.

Let's now look at a system for responding to partner's opening 2♣.

There are various possible systems, all with their strengths and weaknesses. If you and your partner already play one, then by all means keep using it.

The one I'm going to suggest here focuses on what is most often of interest to a partner who has opened 2♣: what high cards - aces and kings - you hold. This is usually a lot more helpful for partner to know than simply your point count. Your "quacks" - queens and jacks - contribute to point count but are usually less valuable, and less important to know about for a partner who has opened 2♣, than your aces and kings (or lack of them).

As an aside here, I should point out that the traditional Milton point count we all use (4 for an ace, 3 for a king, 2 for a queen, and 1 for a jack) tends to slightly overvalue queens and jacks and undervalue aces and kings. It's still a great system, but be aware it's not perfect.

The principle I'm going to introduce here is called "CONTROLS".

We are going to consider only aces and kings, and count

- 2 controls for each ace
- 1 control for each king

We will simply count up our controls, and respond to partner's opening 2♣ according to our count.

It's a bit like responding to a Gerber or Blackwood enquiry, in that your response is prescribed, and doesn't need any judgement – so it's easy to use, once you've learned it. And it stands an excellent chance of telling partner just what she needs to know!

Here are our responses to 2♣, based on controls:

- 2♦ 0 or 1 control (no aces, max 1 king)- same as a weak response with less than 7 points
 - 2♥ 2 controls (one ace or two kings)
 - 2♠ 3 controls (specifically 1 ace and 1 king)
 - 2NT 3 controls (specifically 3 kings)
 - 3♣ 4 controls (1 ace and 2 kings, or 2 aces)
 - 3♦ 5 controls (1 ace and 3 kings, or 2 aces and 1 king)
- etc

When partner receives this information, she can work out a lot, alongside what she can see in her own hand, and is in a good place to judge how to proceed with the bidding.

Note we have two bids for 3 controls – 3 controls crops up quite a lot, and having two bids for it adds extra information, often vital. It also means if you do end up in a NT contract, the hand with 3 kings will be declaring, and you very much want the opening lead to be round to you, rather than through your kings!

Let's see how it works, by looking at some examples.

Here is a hand from our previous lesson. Let's say partner has this hand as dealer, and as we said last time, would choose to open 2♣.

♠ A Q 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ A 2

Clearly partner's intent is to rebid hearts, to tell us the nature of her hand- a shapely hand, 8 ½ or better playing tricks, 3 ½ or better quick tricks, with a 5+ card good heart suit. But of course **we** don't know that yet – all we have so far is partner's opening 2♣.

This time, we're playing Controls responses to 2♣, so let's see what we'd respond with various different hands.

Example 1 ♠ K 5 4 3 ♥ 5 4 ♦ 8 6 5 2 ♣ 7 5 4

What should we bid?

Playing controls, this hand is 0 or 1, so we bid 2♦.

Opener's hand was

♠ A Q 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ A 2

so she's thinking

"Partner has at best 1 king, perhaps one or two queens or jacks. I know we are certainly missing ♥A and ♦A, so slam is out of the question. My opening 2♣ based on a heart suit as committed us to game, and the only game possible is 4♥. So that's what I'll bid.

4♥ is the final contract.

As you can see, with your meagre 3-point hand, she will make 4♥, with the loss of 1 heart, 1 diamond, and 1 club.

Example 2: here is your hand.

♠ K 5 4 3 ♥ 6 4 ♦ A 6 5 2 ♣ 8 5 4

Playing controls, what should you bid this time?

You have three controls, specifically one ace and one king. So your bid is 2♠. It says nothing about your spades- it just tells partner about your controls.

Here is partner's hand

♠ A Q 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ A 2

She now knows your partnership is missing one of the red aces, one certain loser. She also knows you have 1 king, so your partnership is missing two kings. Slam looks a slim chance, so she will bid 4♥, a sign off.

Example 3: here is your hand.

♠ K 5 4 3 ♥ A 4 ♦ K 6 5 2 ♣ K 5 4

What should you bid?

This time you have five controls, so your bid is 3♦. Playing controls, it says nothing about your diamonds, it just tells partner you have 5 controls.

Could be 2 aces and a king, or (as here) 1 ace and 3 kings.

Here is partner's hand

♠ A Q 2 ♥ K Q J 10 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ A 2

She knows your partnership holds either

- 3 aces and all the 4 kings, or
- all 4 aces and two of the 4 kings.

So 4♥ is a sure thing, but 6♥ might well be on. **How to work it out?**

So far the bidding has gone 2♣ – 3♦ (showing 5 controls)

If your 3♦ bid was 2 aces and 1 king, then your partnership has all 4 aces, and is missing two kings; you have the king of either spades, diamonds, or clubs. Whichever it is, you are probably making 6♥.

If your bid was 1 ace and 3 kings, then you have one certain loser (a red ace) but there are no missing kings. So you are limited to the 1 ace loser, and 6 hearts looks virtually certain.

So partner bids 6♥ straight away!

Now, say the same scenario arises, partner has opened 2♣ and here is your hand.

♠ K 5 4 3 ♥ A 4 ♦ K 6 5 2 ♣ K 5 4

We've just seen your bid is 3♦, to tell partner you have 5 controls.

Could be 2 aces and a king, or (as here) 1 ace and 3 kings.

But this time, partner has opened 2♣ with a balanced 23 pointer: Here is partner's hand

♠ A Q J 2 ♥ K Q J 9 ♦ A J ♣ A J 10

She has 3 aces – so she immediately knows your 5 controls must be 1 ace and 3 kings: you must hold **a minimum of 13 HCP**, so the partnership has at least 36 points. And she knows you have all the aces and kings between you.

So the contract will either be 6NT or 7NT.

Which should opener bid, in response to your 3♦?

Holding all the aces and kings, and at least 36 points, 6NT is a near certainty, and 7NT looks odds on.

She bids straight to 7NT!

Dummy ♠ K 5 4 3 ♥ A 4 ♦ K 6 5 2 ♣ K 5 4

Declarer ♠ A Q J 2 ♥ K Q J 9 ♦ A J ♣ A J 10

As you can see, you have 12 top tricks, but are missing two queens, as your hand was minimum for your bid – nothing outside your controls. Curses! 7NT can go off if both missing queens are offside, or one of them is and you pick the wrong finesse. But if the opposition lead a minor, you have a free finesse, and your contract is home.

If they don't, you will play off your spade winners first and watch for discards – looking for any information you can get to help your decision on which finesse to take.

Now it will be obvious that bidding controls won't always provide perfect information for partner when she opens 2♣. But often it will, and she will be able to work out what the final contract should be. Where it doesn't, it does provide a very good basis for further exploration. As we get more advanced, we will talk about cue bidding.

So playing Controls in response to 2♣ is a good basis on which to build your bidding on, for the long term. I recommend you give it a go.