

Defensive Conventions (Part 1)

Bridge is a game played with four people at a table, but the auction is, more often than not, an uninterrupted dialogue for one partnership. One side or the other usually has the majority of the points; if it's not your side, it's tempting to stay out of the auction and wait for the next hand, where you and your partner will hopefully have better cards.

If you want to be a better bridge player, however, it's a temptation you need to resist! One need only look at the fortunes of the US bridge squads in international play during the mid-20th century. In the 40's and 50's, the US dominated the world bridge scene. Then, in the 60's, something happened: in spite of superior card *players*, the US teams were getting roundly thrashed by superior *bidders*. It was not just new systems, conventions, and treatments. The biggest change was the willingness to get into the auction, disrupt the opponent's bidding, steal contracts, and exchange information even when *not* holding the majority of the points.

Modern bridge is a bidder's game, and if your side doesn't open the bidding, you need tools to get into the auction if your holding even marginally allows it. Of course, you should always have a reason to bid and a work from a plan, but your opponents *will* find their best contract if you let them.

The other advantage of defensive conventions is what you communicate when you *don't* use them. Passing now tells partner more about what you don't have, which means an alert partner will have an easier time figuring out what you *do* have.

Bailey Cue-Bids

When the opponents open, two-suited holdings are both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, holding ten, or even nine, cards in two suits can be an excellent offensive hand with a high probability of a fit with partner. Sadly, we may not get to show both. Even if the two-suiter is strong enough to make two bids, the first bid may be passed out.

If the opener's suit is excluded, there are 3 possible two-suited hands:

- 1♣ ♦ and ♥, ♦ and ♠, ♥ and ♠
- 1♦ ♣ and ♥, ♣ and ♠, ♥ and ♠
- 1♥ ♣ and ♦, ♣ and ♠, ♦ and ♠
- 1♠ ♣ and ♦, ♣ and ♥, ♦ and ♥



Of course, it's more advantageous to find a fit in the majors, so Mike Michaels, a frequent partner of Charles Goren, decided to use a direct cuebid of opener's suit to show a major-oriented two-suited hand, the convention we know today as *Michaels Cue-bids*. They are usually combined with the Unusual 2NT bid, which shows a two-suited holding the two lower unbid suits:

	Cue Bid	2NT
1♣	♥ and ♠	♦ and ♥
1♦	♥ and ♠	♣ and ♥
1♥	♠ and a minor	♣ and ♦
1♠	♥ and a minor	♣ and ♦

Showing two suits in a single bid allows the advancer (overcaller's partner) to accurately judge how to respond; additionally, using the cue bids with Unusual 2NT, the advancer will usually be the declarer. This forces the open lead to come from the stronger of the opponents' hands, as well as exposing the hand with the known distribution, hiding the unknown holding.

Another tactical advantage is that overcaller will always get another bid, so it's now possible to overcall with a wider range of hands. Overcaller can clarify the holding the next time around.

However, we have no bid available to show a two-suited hand holding spades and the other minor suit when the opponents open 1♣ or 1♦. We could just overcall 1♠ and hope we get a chance to show the minor suit; alas, this plan is most likely doomed to failure. Suppose you hold the following when your RHO opens 1♦:

♠ AQ972	1♦	1♠	X	P
♥ 64	2♥	??		
♦ 7				
♣ KQ853				

Bidding 3♣ is not attractive, but we could be missing out on a viable 9-card club fit. If only there was some way we didn't have to be guessing ... and there is. Evan Bailey and Ed Barlow proposed the following modification to the classic Michaels bid:

1♣	2♣	♠ and ♦ or ♥ (reds)
1♦	2♦	♠ and ♣ or ♥ (rounds)
1♥	2♥	♠ and a minor
1♠	2♠	♥ and a minor

In his [write-up](#) about these *Baileys cue bids*, Michael "Mich" Ravera, also makes the following suggestions for two-suited bids in general:

- The hand should have no more than 7 losers when vulnerable, or 8 losers if not vulnerable – don't be a slave to point count.
- The suits can be 5-4 if you meet the loser requirements – note that 5-4 hands occurs almost 10 times more frequently than 5-5
- Side length in opener's suit is not a liability – if you find a fit, partner is likely to be short in the suit and can ruff behind opener's partner.
- In general, make a Baileys bid if you have the right distribution unless you are strong enough to make an off-shape takeout double and bid both of your suits.

The general structure for responses is:

- Bidding one of overcaller known suits is a minimum hand
- Bidding one of the unknown suits is a pass or correct and shows a minimum hand
- Advancer's cue bid is invitational and shows a probable fit
- 2NT shows invitational values, a stopper in opener's suit, and probable misfit

Overcaller, of course, can show a stronger hand over the minimum advances.

After the Unusual 2NT bid, where both of overcaller's suits are known, a bid of the 4th suit can be used to show stoppers in that and opener's suit and partial support for the bid suits.

Snapdragon

Suppose you hold the following hand and hear the following auction, starting on your left:

♠ AQ832 1♣ 1♦ 1♥ ???
♥ 982
♦ QJ
♣ T73



You'd really like to show your spades after partner's overcall, but you wouldn't mind if partner rebids his diamonds. In this situation, a *snapdragon*¹ double shows intermediate values, usually 8 to 11 HCP, a good 5-card holding in the unbid suit, and a tolerance for partner's suit. The double is forcing for one round; overcaller's responses are natural.

When playing snapdragon doubles, bidding the fourth suit *denies* tolerance for partner's suit. With a stronger hand, advancer can bid again after overcaller's second bid, or cue-bid one of the opponent's suits. For example, cue-bidding the lower suit can show strength and full support for overcaller's suit, while cue-bidding the higher suit can show strength and interest in the unbid suit. The definition of "tolerance" can vary: I like to play an honor doubleton at worst. Like negative and responsive doubles, the partnership should also agree at what level the double becomes penalty oriented. It's common to play snapdragon through the 2 level.

Vasilevsky²

With the popularity of 2/1 bidding, it is a common to hear the following auction:

♠ QT654 1♥ P 1N ???
♥ A5
♦ KJ1076
♣ 9



Holding the above hand, how can we get into the auction? If we bid one of our suits, partner may pass, foiling our plan to show the two-suited hand. Given partner's likely middling values, how can we differentiate between a competitive hand and a stronger one, and a single-suited versus a two-suiter?

1 The origin of this name is unknown. It is also known as *fourth-suit* or *competitive* double.

2 This may be named after Las Vegas pro George Vasilevsky, or the island in the Russian City of St. Petersburg (pictured)—no one is sure.

In *Competitive Bidding in the 21st Century*, the late Marshall Miles outlines the Vasilevsky convention, based on Reuben's Useful Space Principle:

1♥/♠	P	1N	X	Transfer to ♣
			2♣	Transfer to ♦
			2♦	Transfer to ♠/♥ (the other major)
			2♥/♠	Strong take-out of ♥/♠
			2♠/♥	Weak take-out of ♥/♠
			2N	Minor two-suiter
			3♣	6+♣ and 4 cards in ♠/♥
			3♦	6+♦ and 4 cards in ♠/♥

With the previous hand, the auction might go:

♠ QT654	1♥	P	1N	2♣	Transfer to ♦
♥ A5	P	2♦	P	2♠	
♦ KJT76					
♣ 9					

Now, look at the auction holding a different hand:

♠ AKT752	1♥	P	1N	2♦	Transfer to ♠
♥ J5	P	2♠	P	P	
♦ 94					
♣ JT3					

Here, we're only interested in showing our spades, but Vasilevsky gives us the tactical advantages of transfers:

- We always have another chance to bid, so we can clarify our strength and distribution
- The better-known hand is exposed, limiting the information available to the opponents
- The opening lead will go through what is expected to be the stronger hand.

Neil Timm gives additional examples of when and how to use Vasilevsky: here is a link to his [excellent write-up](#), which includes other USP-based ideas.