

Opening 2NT & Responses

We are playing Weak Two's in 3 suits – ♦ ♥ and ♠ - a consistent theme of Modern Acol – so we don't have the strong two available to us in those three suits. This, as we've seen, is a very advantageous trade-off for successful bridge, but we do need other ways of bidding big hands when they crop up.

We have already looked at the 2♣ opening bid, and how to use it, covering both the balanced powerhouse of 23+ HCP, and the strong hand based on powerful shape rather than just HCP. We saw that when we open 2♣, we are guaranteed a rebid, and we use our rebid – our second bid – to tell partner which of those two types of hand we hold.

We also explored a great system for responding to the 2♣ opener – based on “controls”. Those lessons are on the website, weeks 25 & 26.

We do have another strong opening bid in our armoury, 2NT, and that is our topic for today.

What do we need to hold to open 2NT?

The simplest and best use of the 2NT opening bid is to use it when

- you hold 20-22HCP
- your hand is balanced (no void, no singleton, and no more than 1 doubleton) or semi-balanced (5422)

though it can be OK to open 2NT with a singleton, if it's the A.

You **don't** need to hold an honour in every suit. If you avoid opening 2NT because you don't have all suits stopped, you will lose far more than you'll gain - missing too many good contracts, to avoid a few when things will go against you.

An opening 2NT is not forcing: partner can pass - unlike the 2♣ opening bid, which is forcing.

Consider the following hands:

1	♠ K Q 6	♥ A Q 6 4	♦ J 6	♣ A K J 2
2	♠ K Q 6	♥ A K J 8	♦ 7 3	♣ A K Q 3

Both are balanced, both have 20-22 HCP. You should open 2NT in both cases, and not worry about the weak diamond suit. Sometimes you'll be unlucky: partner will raise to 3NT, and have a matching weak suit with yours, and the opposition will reel off the first 5 tricks. But it's not common, and on average your 2NT opener will be winning bridge.

3	♠ K Q 6	♥ A K J 6 4	♦ A 7 3	♣ K 2
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Here you have 20 HCP and an excellent 5-card major suit. You have a stop in all suits- the ♣Kx is a stop, with the lead coming from your left. A bid of 2NT is better than bidding 1♥, and makes it much more likely that you and partner will find whatever game you might have available.

4	♠ K Q 5	♥ A K J 6 4	♦ A K 9 4	♣ Q
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Here you have 22 HCP; if you count the ♣Q as worthless, you still have 20 HCP. However, you are unbalanced, holding a singleton. Best to open 1♥.

How to respond to partner's opening 2NT

Responding to 2NT is in many ways similar to responding to 1NT, except of course you know partner is much stronger, so will be quite common for you to have enough strength to know that game is likely. You don't need a big hand, opposite 20+ points from partner, to have a game contract available.

Bear in mind that while a 2NT opening bid promises 20-22HCP, it's wrong to assume that 20, 21 and 22 points are all equally likely; partner is more likely to hold a hand at the low end of the range.

(For those interested in the maths, the chances of picking up a hand with 20 HCP are 0.64%; 21 HCP 0.38%; and 22 HCP 0.21%- so a 20 HCP hand will crop up 3 times as often as a 22 HCP hand. For 1NT hands, the odds are far closer: the chances of picking up a hand with 12HCP are 8.0%; 13 HCP 6.9%; and 14HCP 5.7%).

We are going to use the same general principles as we do for responding to 1NT, namely **Stayman** and **transfers**. We covered those in weeks 10 and 11 – again, the lessons are on the website.

Stayman:

Just as a 2♣ response to 1NT asks for a 4-card(or longer) major, looking to locate a major suit fit (a fit is a suit with at least 8 cards between you and partner), a 3♣ response to 2NT serves exactly the same purpose. You might sometimes hear this referred to as “extended Stayman”

Opener will reply to 3♣ just as she would to a 2♣ Stayman bid:

3♦ - I do not hold a major suit with at least 4 cards

3♥ - I have at least 4 cards in hearts, and possibly also in spades

3♠ - I don't have at least 4 cards in hearts, but I do in spades

If you're going to bid Stayman, it's to find out whether your best game is 3NT or in 4♥/4♠. If you are strong, and you think slam might be on, it's probably best to avoid Stayman and start exploring for a slam straight away: in NT, if you're balanced or semi-balanced, or in a suit contract if you have a 6-card or longer suit (remember, partner will have at least 2 cards in each suit, to open 2NT, so if you have 6, you have a guaranteed fit).

So, after 2NT- 3♣ (Stayman enquiry),

If opener's response is 3♦, you will bid 3NT

If opener's response is 3♥, and that is your major, bid 4♥

If opener's response is 3♠, and that is your major, bid 4♠

If opener's response is 3♥, and your major is spades, bid 3NT. Partner will know your Stayman was based on a spade suit, because you've not supported hearts. If she holds 4 cards in both majors, she will bid 4♠; otherwise she will pass 3NT.

Transfers:

We discussed transfers in response to an opening 1NT in Week 10. It's much the same in response to 2NT, except there is no transfer into a minor as we're a level higher – there is no practical merit in having a bid of 3♠ to mean transfer to a minor suit at the 4 level, so we use 3♠ in response to an opening 2NT to mean something else.

So you should use “red suit transfers”, which means a response of 3♦ asks partner to transfer to hearts, and 3♥ asks partner to transfer to spades. The point of doing this, rather than bidding your own long major suit as a take-out, is

- The strong hand is declarer, rather than going down on the table as dummy
- The opening lead is up to the strong hand, rather than through it

- The opener has another bid after a transfer, and therefore so does responder, and the bidding conversation can proceed. Playing take-outs, there is the terrible disadvantage that the opener cannot feasibly have a rebid, so it is very hard to find the right level of contract. While opener is within a narrow range (20-22), responder might have quite a wide range of strength of hand.

Here is the full set of responses to an opening 2NT by partner:

- Pass: holding a weak hand (0-4HCP), unless very distributional.
- 3♣: Stayman, promising a 4-card major, and asking opener if she has one. Opener responds 3♦ to deny a 4-card major, 3♥ to show four hearts (and possibly also 4 spades), and 3♠ to show four spades but denying hearts. The great advantage of this bid is it offers the chance to find game in a major, when 3NT might be a poor contract.
- 3♦ / 3♥: transfer to hearts or spades, respectively, where responder has 5+ cards in a major suit. Transfers don't apply after an intervening bid by opponents. They DO apply after an intervening double- this is exactly the sort of situation where a transfer could be extremely useful. Note that one of the main points of playing transfers, even more vital in than in the case of a 1NT opener, is that you don't want the big hand as dummy. Another advantage is it frees up 3♠ for another purpose:
- 3♠: holding at least 5 spades, and looking for opener to have 3 or 4 card support. Opener raises to 4♠ if has at least 3 spades, otherwise bids 3NT.
- 3NT: to play, holding 5 to 10 HCP, and having no interest in game in a major, or in a slam. Opener must pass.
- 4♣: ace asking (Gerber). See Week 28.
- 4♦: at least 6 diamonds, and slam interest. Requires 10+HCP unless very distributional.
- 4♥ / 4♠. A sign-off in game. No interest in a slam.
- 4NT: quantitative (see Week 27), asking opener to pass with a minimum, and bid 6NT with a maximum, and in in the middle, evaluate to decide whether to pass 4NT or bid 6NT.
- 5NT: quantitative (see Week 27), asking opener to bid 6NT with a minimum, and bid 7NT with a maximum, and in in the middle, evaluate to decide whether to bid 6NT or 7NT.
- 6NT: 13-14HCP. Sign off in small slam.
- 7NT: 17-20HCP's. This won't crop up very often!

The best way to get this in place is to play prepared hands - which we will have in the Thursday class.

Jim Steele, May 2022

