

# Findon Acol

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# Introduction

This document describes a version of the Acol bidding system that is easy to learn and apply, and uses a disciplined, formal approach to encourage competitive bidding. It aims to provide the tools to allow thoughtful players to find the best score on the widest range of hands possible, whether that means accurately competing on part-score hands, finding worthwhile slams or avoiding bad ones.

Bidding systems provide a form of communication in an extremely constrained environment: there are only so many bids available at any point in the auction, and partners have to use them to exchange information and identify at what level (if at all) they should be playing while their opponents do the same, all without going past their best spot.

Actually identifying what contract you should be playing in is a non-trivial task that requires considering many factors; and some thought (or even better, practical experience) should be enough to convince you that no bidding system is really good enough to always get it right – the language of bidding, and the limited space provided by the auction, place strong constraints on the information you and your partner can exchange.

Our version of Acol aims to meet this challenge by setting out clear rules for openings, responses and rebids; by relying on partnership discipline to adhere to the standards required for systemic bids; and by relying on careful analysis by both partners at every stage of the auction, not just in considering what a particular bid signifies, but also in why it was chosen from amongst the available alternatives.

Before we move on to the details of our system, here are some general principles that should be borne in mind throughout:

- The first two rounds of the auction - the opening, initial response, opener's rebid and responder's next bid - should provide the most accurate picture possible of your hand's strength and shape.
- The third round is often where the final contract is decided. In an uncontested auction you'll usually bid what you expect to make, if game appears possible; in a contested auction, it's a question of bidding what will get you the best overall score on the board.
- The auction is an open forum – you use it to exchange information with your partner, but the opposition hear everything you say. Don't ask a question if the answer will be more useful to them than to you, and don't volunteer information that isn't going to help your side.
- You should generally aim to limit your hand as quickly as possible, unless you have slam ambitions and need to keep the auction open to find out more about your partner's hand. Passing on a shapely 5-count may feel hard, but once you've passed anything you bid on subsequent rounds will be interpreted in the context of your original pass.
- Except where explicitly required, never bid NT out of desperation or as a "last resort".

# Overview

Our general opening standards are 11+HCP with 7 losers, or 12+HCP regardless.

Here's a list of the key features of Findon Acol; you can use it to provide a quick summary of the system.

- 12-14 HCP 1NT, which can include any 5-card Major.
- All suit openings at the 1 level promise 4+ cards.
- 4 card suits are bid strictly upwards, 5+card suits generally downwards.
- Suit raises are based on the Losing Trick Count (LTC).
- Strong 2♣ opening, with control-showing responses.
- 2♦, 2♥ and 2♠ are all weak 2s.
- Opening 2NT shows a balanced 21-22 HCP.
- After a 1 level opening, a new suit by a responder who hasn't limited their hand by passing, calling 1NT or 2NT or by doubling is always forcing.
- After a 1 level opening, opener's rebid is only ever forcing if it's a conventional call that requires a response (e.g. Blackwood, or a splinter or cue bid).

## Losing Trick Count

The Losing Trick Count provides a metric indicating how well-suited a hand is for play with a particular suit as trumps. It has a long history, dating back to at least 1934, when F. Dudley Courtenay first used the name for existing methods, and does a good job of evaluating distributional hands with scattered values, as well as more balanced hands. These notes make frequent reference to it, so understanding it and being able to use it is of significant value, even if you rely mainly on the Milton Work Count in practice.

Essentially, the LTC aims to estimate the honour tricks that the opposition can take, and uses that to suggest how many tricks the partnership will make, and so help suggest what level you can bid to.

The most important prerequisite for the LTC is that the partnership has identified an 8-card fit in the proposed trump suit; any LTC calculation is at least premised on the presumption that such a fit will be identified, and is of no direct practical worth until one has been.

## Counting your Losers

To count the losers in your hand, count the losers in each suit and then add them up (only the best 3 cards in each suit are significant); in a suit of 3 or more cards, it's just a question of how many of the top 3 honours you're missing. Here's a comprehensive summary:

- AKQ, AK doubleton, singleton A, or void: 0 losers;
- AKx, KQ(x), AQ(x), Ax or Kx doubleton, or a singleton (other than A): 1 loser
- Doubleton (missing both A and K), Axx, Kxx, Qxx or xx: 2 losers
- 3 small: 3 losers.

Of course, one of the suits you're counting losers in will be the proposed trump suit. There's no virtue in having a trump shortage - it's not like you can ruff in once your holding has been exhausted - and so when counting losers in the trump suit itself, you should not limit the number of losers because of the shortage - for instance, QJ doubleton in trumps is 2 losers, just like QJx, but a small doubleton or singleton trump always counts as 3, just like 3 small.

As a guide, a typical suit opening will contain 7 or fewer losers; a typical 1NT opening will contain 8 (or sometimes 7) losers, and a typical overcall should come to no more than about 8 losers

For instance, the hand

♠ QJ  
♥ AJ5  
♦ AK764  
♣ K32

has 18HCP; but because it's essentially balanced, and has soft values in a shortage, it comes to 7 losers.

## Applying the Losing Trick Count

In principle, applying the Losing Trick Count is easy: once you've identified an 8-card fit you add your losers to your partner's, subtract the total from 18, and that's the level you can bid to (or if you prefer: subtract the total from 24, and that's how many tricks you can expect to win); for instance a typical 1♠ opening has 7 losers, and if partner has a similar hand with a fit they will also have 7 losers, the combined total is 14, and you can expect to make 10 tricks in 4♠.

Of course, that presupposes you know how many losers your partner's hand contains; but you can use their bidding as a guide, and so long as opener is clear on what you expect they can pass, advance, or try not to look queasy when it's their turn to speak.

If your partner has opened 1NT, or made a simple overcall, reckon on them having 8 losers; if they've opened in 1 of a suit, take them for 7 - they should have no more than that; if they've shown reversing values, they should have no more than about 5 losers.

If your partner has opened a weak 2, or made a weak jump overcall, treat them like a 7 loser hand initially: they are about as likely to have 8 as to have 7, but over a defensive opening you want to bid to the limit quickly and aggressively on the assumption that it's more a problem for the opposition than it is for you. Similarly, treat a Michael's cue bid (an overcall showing at least a 5-5 distribution) as 7 losers – more often than not, you'll be right.

So if you open 1♠ and your partner raises to 3♠, they are showing you an 8 loser hand; with 7 losers yourself you would just pass, but with 6 losers you can bid on to 4♠ and expect to make it most of the time.

Of course, it isn't always opener who names the trump suit first. When you have a fit for responder's suit, a simple raise by 1 indicates a 7 loser hand; with fewer losers, you can raise correspondingly higher - for instance in the sequence 1♣-1♥-3♥ opener is suggesting a 6 loser hand by raising to 3♥ rather than the minimum 2♥. This corresponds to assuming that by making a 1-over-1 response responder should have about 9 or fewer losers, and a 2-over-1 suggests about 8 - and that's pretty much how it works out in practice.

## Limitations and Adjustments

Nothing easy is ever perfect, and so it is with the losing trick count. It tends to overvalue unsupported Queens and undervalue many combinations that include an Ace; it's often unfair to balanced hands of 17 or more points; and it's a gross statistical measure, making no account itself of how your values marry up with your partner's hand. And, of of course, the lie of the hand on the day can have a crushing effect on even the most promising of contracts.

So it's common to make adjustments, although what adjustments to make is a matter of opinion and debate. Here are some common considerations that I personally take into account:

- AQ doubleton is more powerful than its 1 loser would suggest: I don't, but many people count this as 0.5 losers.
- AJTx, similarly, is better than you'd expect for 2 losers: I count 1 or 1.5, depending on how I think the cards lie.
- An opener with no Aces is advised to add 1 loser;
- A hand that is 4333 (particularly if you expect to have fewer trumps than your partner) affords little help in controlling outside suits by ruffing, and it's customary to add 1 loser for being 4333; this is significantly less important where partner has a very long suit, or a strong hand with 2 suits.
- A responder or overcaller with a preponderance of Queens and few or no Kings or Aces may want to add a loser;
- When the partnership identifies they have a 9 card fit and each hand contains at least 3 trumps, they are entitled to deduct a loser from their combined holdings; however do so with caution - only 1 partner should do so; I recommend that the partner who initially agrees suit can make this adjustment, but not the partner who first shows the suit.

Furthermore, the Losing Trick Count is only really reliable to about the 4 level: beyond that it may still provide an indication of how many tricks you can generate, but fail to identify that the opposition have enough top tricks to cash before you get the chance. Beyond the 4 level, use the LTC as a guide to what may be possible, but use Blackwood and cue bids to verify that they can't spoil your party.

# Opening Hands with 11-20 HCP

## Opening Standards

Balanced (4333, 4432, or 5332) hands with 12-20 HCP are opened with a call in the range 1♣ to 1NT. We also open unbalanced hands with 11+ HCP, so long as they have no more than 7 losers.

Within the notional 11-20HCP range we make a distinction between lower-range hands and stronger, typically unbalanced hands with about 17+HCP and 5 or fewer losers. These stronger hands we call **reversing** hands, and they are usually indicated by either a jump rebid or by showing a higher-ranking suit on the second round than on the first, forcing responder to raise the level of the auction in order to show preference. Reversing hands will almost always be at least 5-4.

## Opening 1NT

Balanced hands with 12-14 HCP are always opened 1NT, without regard to suit texture or where the points lie.

## Opening 1 of a Suit

If you have an opening hand (12+HCP, or 11+HCP with 7 or fewer losers) but can't open 1NT, it's either because you're too strong or not balanced.

If your hand doesn't have reversing values (5 or fewer losers, in principle 17+HCP) your choice is usually very straightforward: if you have 5+ cards in one or more suits, open your highest ranking suit of 5+ cards; otherwise, open your lowest ranking 4-card suit.

If you are balanced and partner's bid doesn't reveal a Major suit fit, you should plan to rebid in NT to express your values: a rebid in NT at the minimum level will show 15-17HCP, and a jump rebid would show 18-19HCP; with 20HCP, you can rebid 3NT even after a 1-over-1 response.

If you do have reversing values and you have two suits of 5 or more cards, you would normally bid the lower of the two, planning to rebid your other suit at the 2 level: bidding your suits upwards is the simplest and most economical way of showing reversing values, but a rebid at the 1 level never reveals reversing values - it's consistent with (among other things) a minimum 4441 hand where partner has bid your singleton.

4441 hands can represent a challenge for any system - with 15+ points you just bid your lowest 4 card suit, planning to either support your partner's suit or, if they bid your singleton, rebid in NT as if you were balanced; but if you have 12-14HCP and partner bids your singleton you have a problem. You can't rebid in NT (you aren't strong enough), and so you'll have to either repeat your suit or bid a new suit. With a singleton Spade, we recommend opening 1♦: if partner bids 1♠ you can rebid 2♣; this gives the impression of a hand that's 5-4 in the minors, but if you're going to have to lie about your shape it's likely safest to lie about your length in a minor. With other 4441 hands you should just bid your lowest suit, planning to bid upwards at the 1 level; at worst, you open 1♦ and partner bids 2♣; you can rebid 2♦, suggesting a 5-card suit and partner may take you for either a 6th Diamond, or a 4-card Major in a hand not strong enough to reverse, which is not that far from the truth.

## Responding to 1-Level Openings

You have the following options:

- Make a limit raise, according to the LTC; this would show a fit, imply a hand of less than opening strength, and indicate how many losers your hand contained.

- Name a higher-ranking suit at the 1 level: this would show 6+HCP; if partner has opened with a Major, it also denies a 4-card holding in their suit. If you are not strong enough to speak again, you can name a 4-card Major even if the suit you name is not your longest.
- Bid 1NT: this shows 6-9 HCP, and denies 4 cards in any of the suits you may have bypassed; if partner has opened with a Major, it also denies a 4-card holding in their suit.
- Name a lower-ranking suit at the 2 level: this would show 10+HCP, and will almost always be your longest suit; if partner has opened with a Major, it also denies a 4-card holding in their suit.
- Bid 2NT: this shows a balanced hand of 11-12HCP, and suggests that there is little likelihood of a Major suit fit - you may be 4333 or, if partner has opened with a Major, perhaps 4432 with a doubleton in partner's suit.
- 3NT: If partner has opened with a minor, this shows 13-15HCP in a balanced hand with little prospect of a Major suit fit. Unless they have a significantly unbalanced hand or are unusually strong, partner is likely to pass.

Those are your options, but how do you choose from amongst them? Your first priority is to identify a Major suit fit, if one exists.

If partner has opened a Major and you hold 4 cards in that suit, you should take action - raise the suit to the appropriate level if your hand is not of opening strength, or with stronger hands employ one of the tools discussed in the section on Slam Bidding. If your hand has a fit for partner's suit but more than 9 losers and fewer than 6 points, it's not strong enough to raise to the 2 level - just pass for now, but feel free to show support for partner on the next round, if you get the opportunity: your initial pass will warn partner not to expect too much. On the other hand, with 6+HCP you're obliged to keep the auction open - if you have a fit, raise even if you have more than 9 losers.

In the absence of an immediate Major suit fit, consider whether your hand is strong enough to bid twice - if not, you'll likely have only one chance to describe your hand, and you should give priority to showing a Major at the 1 level, if possible - even if you have a longer minor you could bid instead. With about 10+HCP, just bid your longest suit as cheaply as possible. With 6-9 HCP, no direct support for partner's suit and no suit available to bid at the 1 level, bid 1NT; in Acol, this bid is all about what you don't have (10+HCP, support, or a 4-card suit ranking higher than partner's): if you have a single long (6-7+ cards) and partner's rebid doesn't suggest you have a workable contract in one of his suits, you can bid your own suit on the second round - partner will take you for a poor hand, little tolerance for his suits, and a long suit of your own, and will likely pass.

With support for partner's minor, you have the option of raising them - this would suggest a hand with no other 4-card suit you can conveniently show, likely 5 card support and no game ambitions of your own; if you have an essentially balanced hand with values outside of partner's suit, at most forms of scoring you are likely to prefer a NT contract.

## Opener's Rebid

If partner has directly supported your suit then the normal rules apply: in the simplest case, you'd see how many losers better than a "normal" opening (7 losers) and bid on if the losers suggest it.

Over a raise to 2 you may make a long-suit trial if game appears close, or simply raise further; over a raise to 3 you can pass or bid game, or if game appears certain and slam possible you can use 3NT as Roman Key Card Blackwood, or start cue bidding to find out more about your partner's hand.

Without immediate support from partner, make the normal rebid for your hand:

- Support partner's Major, if you hold 4 cards: a single raise with 7 losers, a double raise with 6, and a game or even a slam try with 5 losers or fewer.
- Balanced hands that couldn't open 1NT should rebid NT without a Major suit fit:
  - 15-17HCP: Rebid NT at the minimum level;
  - 18-19HCP: Jump rebid in NT;



- 20HCP: Rebid 3NT.
- Without reversing values and an unbalanced hand, you can:
  - Bid a lower-ranking suit, disclosing a 5+-card holding in the suit you opened and a 4+-card holding in your second suit.
  - Rebid a 6-card suit.
  - Rebid a 5-card suit, if you have no lower-ranking suit you can name instead.
  - In a semi-balanced hand (e.g., 5431), if partner bids you shortage and you have more than 14 HCP, you have the option to rebid in NT, as if you were balanced; be guided by the placement of your values, and your holding in your "third" suit and any help you may have for your partner's suit.
- With reversing values and an unbalanced hand, you can:
  - Bid a higher-ranking suit (but not at the 1 level - jump if necessary) to disclose reversing values, a 5+-card holding in the suit you opened, and a 4+-card holding in your second suit.
  - Make a jump rebid in a lower-ranking suit;
  - With a 6+-card suit, make a jump rebid in your suit.

Because we open 1NT on any balanced 12-14HCP hand with a 5-card Major, opening 1♠ and then rebidding Spades on the next round guarantees 6+ Spades; similarly, opening and rebidding Hearts must be a hand with either 6+ Hearts, or 5 Hearts and 4 Spades, but without reversing values.

With a 6-4, opener has the option of showing their second suit or rebidding their long suit; with reversing values we recommend bidding your second suit, and repeating your 6 card suit later if necessary. Without reversing values, it's usually best to rebid your Major if possible - a 6 card Major is much more important (and more likely to lead to a game) than a 4-card minor, and a 4-card Major is always worth showing if the auction permits, even if you do hold a 6-card minor.

## Dealing with Interference after Suit Openings

Our general approach when dealing with interference over our suit openings is to preserve as much of the normal meaning and structure of our bids as possible: if the opponents name a suit then we can no longer directly show that suit ourselves, and bidding NT will generally show a stopper (although the stopper shown by an initial response of 1NT may be notional, or based on a long suit and a degree of optimism), but beyond that if a natural call consistent with the system is available we'll use that.

A double after interference generally shows a hand that wants to advance the auction, but no longer has the values (or holding) required for a systemic call because of the interference.

A direct cue bid of an overcaller's suit before trumps have been agreed is a general one-round force; if partner has a stopper in the suit they are encouraged to bid NT (potentially with a jump, if their values justify it), show delayed support for partner, disclose a new suit or show additional length in one of their own suits.

## Responding to a 1NT Opening

1NT shows 12-14HCP in a balanced hand (any 5332, 4432 or 4333 hand); responses are as follows:

- Pass:
- 2♣: Stayman, 0+HCP
- 2♦: Transfer to Hearts
- 2♥: Transfer to Spades
- 2♠: Transfer to Clubs
- 2NT: 11-12 HCP, balanced.
- 3♣: Transfer to Diamonds
- 3♦: Game forcing; sets the trump suit and requests cue bids.
- 3♥: Game forcing; sets the trump suit and requests cue bids.
- 3♠: Game forcing; sets the trump suit and requests cue bids.
- 3NT: 13-15HCP, balanced.
- 4♣: Minorwood
- 4♦: Minorwood

We use simple Stayman, even though opener may have a 5-card Major. A new suit by an unpassed hand after a Stayman response is forcing.

We play simple super-accepts over Major suit transfers: with 4 cards in the suit and either 7 losers or a maximum hand, opener bids 3 of the transfer suit rather than 2.

# Dealing with Interference over 1NT Openings

## The Opponents Double

While some pairs will double a 12-14HCP 1NT opening "for take-out", the overwhelming majority of good pairs treat the double of a weak 1NT opening as being for penalties; our policy is not to ask, but to assume any immediate double of 1NT by an unpassed hand is for penalties.

Opener should take no action themselves, having already narrowly defined their hand's strength and general shape; deciding what (if any) action to take is entirely a matter for responder, who has the best view of the side's combined assets.

Responder must first decide if the side is best off playing in 1NTX; with 8+HCP and an essentially balanced hand, that is the preferred course of action - the partnership has at least half the points, and it's not clear that 1NT will fail. There is a slim chance that, if the side make exactly 9 tricks, they will get a slightly lower score in 1NTX than if they play in 3NT (380 vs 400 (nv) or 580 vs 600 (v)), but if they make either 8 or 10 tricks then they are best off playing in 1NTX.

If responder chooses not to play in 1NTX, they have several choices depending on the shape and strength of their hand:

**Redouble:** This shows a hand with a single playable suit of 5 or more cards, that wants to play at the 2 level; opener must bid 2♣, and responder will pass or correct to their suit. If the opponents intervene, opener should pass as responder may be very weak and essentially balanced.

**2♣, 2♦, or 2♥:** Responder has 2 or more suits of (in principle) 4 or more cards, and hopes to find a 4-4 fit (or failing that, at least a 4-3 fit) at the 2 level. Opener should either pass or bid their cheapest available 4-card suit at the 2 level, bearing in mind that the principal aim is to avoid stranding the partnership in a 4-2 fit; this may mean settling for a 4-3 fit, and if that's necessary then the lower the rank of suit the better - if the opponents choose to take out into their own suit that's fine, and there's no reason to make it harder for them than necessary.

**2♠:** This is the Baron convention. Rarely, responder will believe that the side can make game in a suit, but that 1NT may be unsafe; 2♠ asks partner to bid their 4-card suits upwards at the 3 level, until a fit is found or the partnership reaches 3NT.

**2NT:** Responder is asking partner to pick their better minor - most probably, they are 5-5 in the minors and want to settle for a 5-3 fit at the 3 level.

**Bid at the 3 level:** 3♦, 3♥ and 3♠ bids retain their meaning, even in the face of a double. After a double of 1NT, 3♣ is no longer required as a weak transfer to Diamonds (Redouble is available for those hands); so 3♣ shows a similar hand in Clubs.

## The Opponents Call at the 2 Level

### Lebensohl

When opponents show a suit at the 2 level over our 1NT opening, either directly (on opener's left) or in the passout seat after responder has passed 1NT, we use the Lebensohl convention.

At the heart of the Lebensohl convention is the agreement that responder's bid of 2NT is entirely artificial, and requires opener to bid 3♣.

This means that a natural bid of 2NT is no longer available but any bid at the 3 level can be made either directly or via this 2NT/3♣ relay sequence, and different meanings are assigned accordingly.

Here's a list of responder's options:

A direct bid at the 2 level is always weak, and to play;

A direct bid of a suit (but not one shown by the opposition) at the 3 level is natural and forcing;

A direct bid of 3NT shows the values for game, but denies a stopper in opponent's suit or a 4-card Major.

A direct cue bid of opponent's suit is forcing and denies a stopper, but shows at least one unbid 4-card Major.

A bid of 3NT via the 2NT/3♣ relay is natural, and shows a stopper in opponent's suit.

A cue bid of opponent's suit via the 2NT/3♣ relay is forcing and shows both a stopper in opponent's suit and at least one unbid 4-card Major.

Bidding a suit via the 2NT/3♣ relay, when responder had the option of bidding it at the 2 level, is invitational, but does not promise a stopper.

Bidding a suit via the 2NT/3♣ relay, when there was no opportunity to name it at the 2 level, is weak and to play. With Clubs, responder passes opener's forced 3♣ response.

Note the general pattern with cue bids and 3NT calls: making the call via the 2NT relay shows a stopper, whereas making the same call directly denies one.

## Double

Lebensohl caters for a responder with a single long suit, or game-going (or at least, invitational) values; more moderate hands without length in the opponent's suit may still wish to compete, and they should register their interest in doing so by doubling.

Knowing that responder has around 8-10HCP and with some prospect of a fit, opener can feel safe calling a 5-card suit at the 2 or 3 level when, in the absence of a double, finding partner with a poor flat hand may represent an unnecessary risk. With length and tricks in opponent's suit and knowing that the opponents do not have the majority of the high cards, opener can also pass for penalties.

## The Opponents Call over Stayman

We use Stayman on hands that may be very poor, intending to pass any response; and so when opponents call, we try to give a weak hand whose only intention was to remove from 1NT a way to gracefully quit the auction if appropriate.

### Opponents Double 2♣

By simply doubling rather than raising the level of the auction, the opponents have provided us with two extra steps, which we can hope to use to our advantage. Opener responds according to the following scheme:

Pass: No 4-card Major.

Redouble: One 4-card Major only; 2♦ by responder (or a double of the intervening call) asks opener to bid their Major.

2♦: Both Majors.

2♥/2♠: Shows a 5-card Major.

### Opponents Call 2♦

This gives us one extra step in our Stayman responses; we use it to give a "junk Stayman" responder an easy exit from the auction if opener has an unsuitable hand.

Pass: No 4-card Major, or a poor hand without both Majors.

Double: Both Majors.

2♥/2♠: 4 or 5 cards in the named Major only, and a fair hand (7 losers or a good 13HCP).

## Opening 2♣

The 2♣ opening is reserved for strong hands, where there is a real danger of missing a game if partner is too weak to respond to a normal opening. These hands will be either 23+HCP balanced (21-22HCP hands are opened 2NT), or contain 8+playing tricks; unbalanced hands that open 2♣ will typically contain 20 or more points, but we do occasionally open weaker hands where opener's primary concern is to identify how many controls (Aces and Kings) partner holds.

Partner responds showing how many controls their hand contains (an Ace counts as 2 controls, a King counts as 1—there are a total of 12 controls in the deck); with a particularly poor hand, they also disclose whether they hold a 6-card Major:

- 2♦: 0-1 Control, and no 6-card Major; responder may pass any continuation, unless opener makes a jump rebid.
- 2♥: 2 Controls; responder must make at least one more bid, unless opener bids a game directly.
- 2♠: 3 Controls; the partnership are forced to game.
- 2NT: 4 Controls; the partnership are forced to game.
- 3♣: 5 Controls; the partnership are forced to game.
- 3♦: 6 Controls; the partnership are forced to game.
- 3♥: 0-1 Controls, with a 6+-card Heart suit. Responder need not bid again.
- 3♠: 0-1 Controls, with a 6+-card Spade suit. Responder need not bid again.
- 3NT: 7 Controls

...and so on.

## Rebidding with an Unbalanced Hand

Opener's rebid in a suit shows an unbalanced hand with 5 or more cards in the suit named; responder should always support it directly if they are in a position to do so, even if (e.g.) they hold a 5-card Major and opener has named a minor.

If responder changes suit, they should try to hold 5 cards in their suit; but that's not always possible, and naming a 4-card Major below 3NT is generally the right thing to do - after all, opener may well be a 4-6 or 4-5 hand.

## Rebidding with a Balanced Hand

With a balanced hand opener should generally bid 2NT, unless responder has called 2♦ and opener believes they can make game anyway - but bear in mind that, while responder is not obliged to speak again, with a King (or even a scattered 4 points) and a long suit they are likely to call again opposite a hand that contains 23+HCP. With a hand lacking in Queens and Jacks and an auction that suggests the side has sufficient controls for a slam, disclosing your full strength by bidding 3NT with 25+ may help responder to make a quantitative move if they hold the bulk of the missing minor honours.

Over a 2NT rebid by opener, we employ a structure very similar to the one we use over 1NT:

- 3♣: Stayman; after a negative response of 3♦, a call of 4 in either minor is Minorwood
- 3♦: Transfer to Hearts
- 3♥: Transfer to Spades

- 3♠: McPhee - our particular brand of minor-suit Stayman.

Over 3♦ and 3♥, a direct call of 3NT is a Queen Point ask.

## Opening 2♦, 2♥ and 2♠

Our 2♦, 2♥ and 2♠ openings are "normal" weak 2s. These openings show a 6 (or 7) card suit in a single-suited hand with 6-10HCP.

With a fit but no slam ambitions responder will generally just raise, using the Losing Trick Count and assuming opener has 7 losers; in practice they will generally have 7 or 8, so any further action should be left to opener.

Without a fit and with no game ambitions, responder should generally just pass in the first instance.

Other hands have these options:

- 2NT: Ogust, a convention asking opener to clarify their strength and suit quality; opener rebids:
  - 3♣: Lower range hand (6-8HCP), with a poor suit;
  - 3♦: Lower range hand (6-8HCP), with a good suit;
  - 3♥: Upper range hand (8-10HCP), with a poor suit;
  - 3♠: Upper range hand (8-10HCP), with a good suit;
  - 3NT: Opener's suit is good enough that it is expected to run (e.g., AKQxxx).

With moderate hands, it can be hard to choose a response; if in doubt, be guided by your holdings outside of your suit - 3♥ suggests honours outside of your Major, while 3♦ suggests little of value outside of your suit.

After opener's response, a new suit by responder below game is forcing

- 3NT: To play.
- New suit: Forcing, if by an unpassed hand; at least 5 cards in the suit, in principle proposing an alternative trump suit in a hand that hopes for game. Responder is in principle denying a fit, but suggesting tolerance (i.e., a singleton) in opener's Major; but this may be the first move by a good hand that wants to find out more about partner's shape. Opener may return to their own suit, raise responder's suit, or cue bid to indicate support for responder and a shortage.
- Jump shift: Support of partner's Major, in a good hand that expects at least game; in principle this is a splinter, showing a shortage, and encourages opener to make further cue bids. Unlike splinters over "normal" openings responder is clearly in charge of the auction, and the splinter may simply be a pretext to force opener to cue bid.



## Opening 2NT

Our 2NT opening shows a balanced hand with 21-22HCP; as with our 1NT opening, the hand can be any balanced shape (5332, 4432 or 4333) regardless of any 5-card Major suit holding.

Responses are:

- Pass: No further interest.
- 3♣: Stayman; after a negative response of 3♦, a call of 4 in either minor is Minorwood.
- 3♦: Transfer to Hearts.
- 3♥: Transfer to Spades.
- 3♠: McPhee, our particular brand of minor-suit Stayman.
- 3NT: To play.
- 4♣: Minorwood (RKCB in Clubs).
- 4♦: Minorwood (RKCB in Diamonds).

## Slam Bidding

Our discussion so far has been restricted mostly to finding a fit and, if possible, a game.

Where slam appears likely or possible, we have a number of tools available. These are best used not to identify a slam we might not have otherwise found, but to avoid a "bad" slam we might otherwise have been tempted into bidding.

## Splinters

When responder has a raise to game in opener's suit and a shortage (void or singleton) in a hand of opening values or more (i.e., 11+HCP and 7 or fewer losers), they should show their fit, values and shortage using a splinter bid.

Similarly, when opener with a reversing hand (i.e., 5 losers in an upper range hand) and a shortage has a fit for responder's suit, they indicate this with a splinter bid if possible.

This is done by bidding the shortage at a level higher than they would use to show a holding in the suit, but still below game; for responder this typically means a with a single or double jump (e.g., 1♠-3♦ or 1♥-3♠), but for opener it may require a double or triple jump - if their shortage is in a lower-ranking suit than the last named suit, a single jump may already be reserved for hands with that suit and reversing values (e.g., 1♥-1♠-4♣, because 3♣ would show a reversing hand with 5 Hearts and 4+Clubs).

We use splinters to show either a singleton or void; if there are two levels of splinter available (e.g., 1♥-3♣ and 1♥-4♣) the lower bid shows a singleton and the higher shows a void; where only one splinter is available (e.g., 1♥-1♠-4♦) it shows either.

In the examples we've shown here the splinter is in support of the first suit shown, but it need not be: wherever an "unnecessary jump" is available below the level of game, it should be interpreted as a splinter in support of the last named suit.

A splinter bid sets the trump suit, is forcing to game, and encourages the exchange of cue bids.

## Strong, Balanced Raise

With opening values and a fit for opener's suit but no shortage, responder can make an immediate jump to 3NT. This sets the trump suit, is forcing to game, and encourages the exchange of cue bids.

## Cue Bids

In this context, a cue bid is a gratuitous bid in a suit other than trumps, after trumps have been agreed and either when the partnership is committed to game (e.g. after a splinter, or after a Blackwood enquiry) or at a level that commits the partnership to game (e.g., 1♠-3♠-4♣ or 1♥-2♥-3♠). It is game-forcing, requests partner to respond with further cue bids, and (in principle) promises first or second round control in the suit named.

Generally, you will make the cheapest cue bid available to you, without regard to whether it shows a first or second round control - unless you intend to continue cue bidding for at least a further round, you would not usually bypass a second round control in order to show a first-round control.

Also, if you have already splintered in a suit you would normally only make a cue bid in that suit for one of two reasons: if your splinter showed a singleton, cueing the suit reveals it to be the singleton Ace; and if your splinter may have shown either a singleton or void, cueing the suit confirms first-round control of the suit (i.e., a void or the singleton Ace).

Occasionally when you make a cue bid, you're only really interested in partner's holding in a specific suit; you're entitled to make a cue bid in the suit below the suit of interest regardless of your holding in that suit, or in the suits you've skipped, to see if partner will cue bid the next-ranked suit.

## Roman Key Card Blackwood

RKCB is a call of 4NT that's used as a 5-Ace Blackwood enquiry. The 5 Aces are the four Aces and the King of trumps. In the absence of an agreed trump suit, the responses should assume that the last suit shown is the proposed trump suit. Please bear in mind that this explicitly excludes any suit that the RKCB caller named in a 4th Suit Forcing bid - the response to that call reveals details of the holding in that suit, which commonly makes using it as the "anchor" of a 5-Ace Blackwood less useful.

When a Major is agreed at the 3 level (e.g., 1♥-3♥, 1♠-3♠ or 1♦-1♥-3♥) we don't entertain the possibility of playing in 3NT; in these auctions, we use 3NT as RKCB rather than 4NT.

Responses to RKCB (assuming it's called as 4NT) are as follows:

- 5♣: 0 or 3 key cards;
- 5♦: 1 or 4 key cards;
- 5♥: 2 key cards, but not the Queen of trumps;
- 5♠: 2 key cards, and the Queen of trumps.

Sometimes, one or the other partner may use a call of 4NT with an implied trump suit not because they intend to play in that suit, but because they regard the King or Queen of that suit as crucial to determining the final contract. This can be a useful tool, but you must bear in mind that partner is not in on the joke: if you then bid the implied trump suit they may take it that you intend to sign off at that point, and if you attempt to sign off in a suit they haven't previously named they may take it as a cue bid in support of the implied trump suit. Bidding a slam, or returning to a Major that partner has already shown, should always be taken as a sign-off in the absence of a clearly agreed trump suit.

## Minorwood

In some sequences (over a negative Stayman enquiry, and directly over 2NT and 2♣-2♥/♠-2NT) a call of a minor at the 4 level is Minorwood.

Minorwood is a form of Roman Key Card Blackwood with the implied trump suit set to the named minor; responses are the same 4 steps as for Roman Key Card Blackwood; e.g., over 4♣ 4♦ shows 0 or 3 key cards in Clubs; 4♥ shows 1 or 4; 4♠ shows 2 key cards without the ♣Q; and 4NT shows 2 key cards and the ♣Q.

## Queen Point Asks

When partner's controls or key cards have already been shown (in response to a 2♣ opening or a RKCB enquiry) a call of 4NT or 5NT (or 3NT, in a sequence like 2♣-2♥-2♠-3♠) asks partner to show, by steps, how many undisclosed Queen Points their hand contains.

Queen Points is a hand evaluation metric that falls between counting Controls (where an Ace is 2 and a King is 1) and high card points (where an Ace is 4, a King is 3, a Queen is 2, and a Jack is 1). When counting Queen Points, an Ace counts for 3, a King is 2 and a Queen is 1; so there are 40 HCP, 24 Queen Points, and 12 Controls in the pack.

## After Roman Key Card Blackwood

When one or the other partner has used RKCB, the next available call of NT (most commonly, 5NT after 4NT RKCB) asks their partner to show by steps how many Queen Points their hand contains, **excluding** the key cards (and possibly, the Queen of trumps) that they showed with their RKCB enquiry. In case it needs to be said, the first step (e.g., 6♣) shows 0 Queen Points outside of the key cards shown by their previous response.

## After a 2♣ Opening

When you've opened 2♣ responder has already shown you the number of controls their hand contains; if you then call 4NT (or 3NT, in a sequence like 2♣-2♦-2♠-3♠-3NT) this is a Queen Point ask.

Unlike after a RKCB enquiry, you may be genuinely uncertain how many of partner's controls are Kings and how many are Aces; to avoid confusion, partner doesn't simply ignore the controls in their hand, and respond with the number of Queens they hold. Instead, the first step (e.g., 5♣ over 4NT) shows the minimum holding of Queen Points consistent with their initial response.

if the auction started 2♣-2♦ they may hold a zero count, and so the first step must show 0 Queen Points.

If they have shown 2 or more controls, things get more complicated: the fewest Queen Points they can hold will be a hand with no Queens, but with as many of their controls held as Aces as possible.

For instance with 2 Aces and nothing else they hold 4 controls, and 6 Queen Points; but either of those Aces could be a pair of Kings, and they'd have the same number of controls but more Queen Points - with 4 Kings and no Queens they'd still have 4 Controls, but they would have 8 Queen Points.

Fortunately, there's a "short cut" that helps in figuring out how many steps to bid. Responder should count the Queens in their hand, and add 1 for each pair of Kings they hold. The total is the number of steps they should advance beyond 5♣ - for instance with an Ace, 2 Kings and a Queen, they should advance 2 steps (one Queen, and one pair of Kings) beyond 5♣ and bid 5♥.

# McPhee

We use 3♠ as a form of minor suit Stayman after both 2NT openings, and 2♣ openings followed by 2NT rebids. There is a slightly different form of McPhee for each case, as after a 2♣ opening responder has already declared how many Controls his hand contains.

In either case, the caller has a hand that's at least 5-4 in the minors, and the task is to try to find the best spot to play: 3NT, 4, 5 or 6 of a minor, or 6NT. To invoke McPhee, responder must first make the judgement that neither Pass nor a direct call of 3NT is in the partnership's best interests: with sound stoppers in both Majors opener will probably just call 3NT anyway, but otherwise the partnership is likely committed to playing in a minor at the 4 level or above.

## McPhee After a 2NT Opening

After 3♠, opener's options are:

- 3NT: No 4-card minor, or double stoppers in both Majors and no slam interest.
- 4♣: 4+Clubs, not good enough to bid 4♥ (RKCB in Clubs).
- 4♦: 4+Diamonds, not good enough to bid 4♠ (RKCB in Diamonds).
- 4♥: RKCB in Clubs.
- 4♠: RKCB in Diamonds.
- 4NT: Pick a minor
- 5♣: To play
- 5♦: To play.

In response to 4♥ and 4♠, responder has 3 steps available below game - the fourth step (showing 2 key cards and the Queen of the minor) would commit the side to 6 of the (presumed) preferred minor; if that holding is not, on the face of it, enough for slam then opener will bid 4 or 5 of their preferred minor instead.

Over a call of 4♣ or 4♦, responder can use this inference to judge if their hand is worth going on: with 2 key cards and a Major suit void they can cue bid their void, to see if that provokes opener's interest; with 3 key cards, they may choose to bid 6 directly. With 2 key cards alone, they should raise opener to game.

## McPhee After a 2♣ Opening

After 3♠, opener's options are:

- 3NT: No 4-card minor, or double stoppers in both Majors and no slam interest.
- 4♣: 4+Clubs, not good enough to bid 4♥ (Queen Point ask).
- 4♦: 4+Diamonds, not good enough to bid 4♥ (Queen Point ask).
- 4♥: Queen Point ask.
- 4♠: Weakness in Spades, asking partner if they have a corresponding shortage.
- 4NT: Weakness in Hearts, asking partner if they have a corresponding shortage.
- 5♣: To play
- 5♦: To play.

If opener bids 4♣ or 4♦, it implies that it isn't safe to ask for Queens with 4♥; in turn that implies that 3QP (if playing in Clubs) or 4QP (playing in Diamonds) beyond responder's declared controls would not be sufficient to make a slam, very likely due to the side missing 3 or more controls. Responder with at least 1 control and a major suit void can cue bid their void, to see if that inspires opener.

4♠ and 4NT both commit the partnership to 5 of an as yet undisclosed minor, but warn that slam appears unlikely as opener is missing both A and K of a specific Major (Spades in the case of a call of 4♠, Hearts in the case of 4NT). With no shortage in the suit, responder should bid a single step and opener will bid game in their preferred minor; with a singleton responder should bid 2 steps (i.e., 5♣ over 4♠) and with a void they should bid 3 steps.