

Opening Bid of 2♣

A Survey of Common Treatments

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Systems Options

There are four systems commonly played in Atlanta over a 2♣ opener, where 2♣ is the partnership's strong opening forcing bid:

- 2♦ waiting, usually with a rebid of the cheaper minor being a “double negative”
- 2♦ game forcing (GF), with 2♥ as an immediate “double negative” (often called “Herbert”)
- Steps
- Controls

Here is a brief summary of how each works. Some partnerships may play them slightly differently. (* indicates the bid should be alerted)

2♦ Waiting Structure

- 2♦ Default, denies any of the bids below
- 2♥/2♠ 8+ points, 5+-card suit, 2 of top 3 (or for some 3 of top 5)
- 2N Not used (though some play a general 8+ HCP – a poor treatment)
- 3♣/3♦ 8+ points, 6-card suit, 2 of top 3 (or for some 3 of top 5)

Responder almost always bids 2♦. This gives Opener ample space to show her hand. Bidding a suit is a strong step towards slam. Bidding a minor takes up much bidding room and the requirements are therefore a bid steeper. Bidding 2NT to show points deprives opener of bidding 2NT to show her balanced 22-24, the most common hand. It also forces opener to 3♥ or 3♠ to show her major, the second most likely hand. For these reasons I recommend not responding 2NT.

2♦ is GF with two exceptions. 1.) Responder may pass Opener's rebid of 2NT with a really lousy hand. 2.) If Responder bids the cheaper minor after Opener's rebid in a suit (usually 3♣ but could be 3♦ if Opener bids 3♣), Responder does not have to bid again. This cheaper minor bid is called a “Double Negative”, denying as much as a king. The cheaper minor bid should be alerted.

Evaluation – Good system as long as you don't allow a 2NT response to 2♣. One issue: Can you show a double negative if Opener's rebid is 3♦? If so, how?

2♦ GF with 2♥ Double Negative Structure

- * 2♦ GF, promising at least a king or “X” points. 5 HCP is a common treatment, though some require 2 queens or QJ in the same suit.
- * 2♥ Denies a hand good enough to bid 2♦. Similar to the “cheaper minor” double negative above
- 2♠ 8+ points, 5+ spades, 2 of top 3 (or for some 3 of top 5)
- * 2N 8+ points, 5+ hearts, 2 of top 3 (or for some 3 of top 5)
- 3♣/3♦ 8+ points, 6-card suit, 2 of top 3 (or for some 3 of top 5)

The big advantage is that Responder gets his bad hand off his chest in one bid. There are however some problems. Partnerships differ on what bids are now forcing, which can cause some confusion. The 2NT bid is so rare that it is sometimes missed.

Evaluation – A slight improvement over 2♦ waiting but not recommended for casual partnerships due to possibility of a major screw-up.

Steps Structure

- * 2♦ 0-3 HCP
- * 2♥ 4-6 HCP
- * 2♠ 7-9 HCP
- * 2N 10-12 HCP
- * 3♣ 13-15 HCP

The advantage is that Opener knows immediately within a three-point range the combined HCP of the partnership.

Evaluation – To be blunt, a terrible system, one of the few I refuse to play. It may help Opener to know the combined points if she has a balanced hand but it is completely unnecessary. With a balanced hand, Opener will bid 2N (or perhaps 3N with an even bigger hand) and Responder can judge the combined assets within a narrower range of three points. It is even worse when Opener is unbalanced. Slams usually depend on well placed aces and kings (and sometimes queens). The key is how well the hands fit together. Three points in the right place may produce slam, whereas there may be no slam with a poorly placed eight points.

Not even good for beginners, who tend to be rigid point counters.

Controls Structure

Note: Controls are defined for this purpose as Ace = 2 and King = 1)

- * 2♦ 0 or 1 control
- * 2♥ 2 controls, 1 ace or 2 kings
- * 2♠ 3 controls, 1 ace and 1 king (some play must be in the same suit)
- * 2N 3 controls, specifically 3 kings (some play ace and king in different suits)
- * 3♣ 4 or more controls (2 aces, an ace and 2 kings or 4 kings)

Some partnerships after the 2♦ response use the Double Negative from 2♦ Waiting – i.e., the cheaper minor – to later show no controls. Any other bid then promises a king.

The advantage of this system is that the big hand can judge slam prospects easily at a low level. Often Opener knows exactly what controls partner has after just one bid.

There are some drawbacks. Few partnerships define bidding after the 2NT response. (Is 3♣ Stayman or natural? Is 3♥ natural or a transfer? If natural, how many cards does it promise? If playing systems on, they are now designed to “wrong-side” the hand.) That’s OK in the sense that it comes up very rarely but there can be confusion when it does. Because the system is based on defining strength before locating a fit, finding the right spot can be more difficult than with other systems when the opponent’s interfere.

Evaluation – A fine system for those regular partnerships willing to devote time to defining what later bids mean.

When the Opponents Interfere

Speaking of interference, you need agreements on how to deal with it, no matter which of the above systems you choose.

For 2♦ Waiting and for 2♦ GF, DOPI is a good tool. DOPI is an acronym for dealing with Blackwood interference whereby **D**ouble means “0” and **P**ass means “1”. (Some may use slightly different meanings.) Used here, Double means an immediate double negative – no king and less than a defined number of HCP – and Pass shows at least a king. Other bids retain their same meaning.

Playing Controls or Steps, a slightly different use of DOPI is best. Double stands for the first step in the response progression, Pass for the 2nd, the first available bid for the 3rd, and so forth.

Puppet Stayman

One of the long-debated questions in bridge is whether to open 1NT with a 5-card major. I won’t even try to weigh the pros and cons here. Even those who are adamantly opposed to bidding 1NT in such a case, however, acknowledge the difficulty with a bigger balanced hand (20-21 or 22+). Many good partnerships solve this dilemma with Puppet Stayman.

After a 2N opener or 2♣ followed by a 2N rebid, 3♣ is Puppet Stayman, asking Opener whether she has a 4-card OR a 5-card major. (3♣ is alertable.) Responder does NOT promise a 4-card major; with 3 cards in a major, he may be looking for the 5-3 fit. Opener responds to 3♣ as follows:

- * 3♦ I have a 4-card major
- * 3♥/3♠ I have five of the major I bid
- * 3N I don’t have either a 4-card or a 5-card major

If Opener bid 3♦, showing at least one 4-card major, Responder does not want to bid the major he holds and “wrong-side” the hand. He instead bids the other major. He defines his hand this way.

- * 3♥ Showing 4 spades and denying 4 hearts
- * 3♠ Showing 4 hearts and denying 4 spades
- 3N No four card major. Was checking for a 5-3 fit.
- * 4♦ Showing two 4-card majors.

In all cases where responder has shown a 4-card major(s), Opener now bids the major. Responder with slam interest can bid on.

Some use responder's 4♦ bid to show both majors and no slam interest and 4♣ to show both majors with slam interest (or the other way around). I have asked some who use this method what opener's follow up options are to 4♣. I frankly have found the explanations lacking. Note that bidding 4NT for Key Card Blackwood is problematic as the trump suit hasn't been defined. There may be some merit to this approach but I doubt it is worth the risk and worth giving up Gerber.

One drawback to Puppet Stayman is that Responder cannot show a hand with 5 spades and 4 hearts. Non-Puppet users can bid 3♣ and then three of their major over a 3♦ response (or three of their 4-card major if playing Smolen) with 5-4 in the majors. Puppeteers can transfer to hearts and then bid 3♠ to show 4-5 in the majors but are stuck if 5-4. There is a technical solution that is beyond the scope of this lesson.

A Couple of Common Treatments

A common agreement among better players is that opener's jump to 3M after a 2♣ opener says, "This suit is trumps. Please cue bid and we'll go from there." I suppose that it could be used for minors, though I haven't seen that done.

Another treatment is *Fast Arrival*, not limited to 2♣ openings but it certainly applies here. Fast Arrival means that, if we are in a GF auction, a jump to game is weaker than showing support at a lower level. It is a common treatment for two-over-one partnerships, and it would apply for all partnerships that play Fourth Suit Forcing creates a game force. The idea is with a minimum hand (based on values already promised) jumping to game denies slam interest, while "going slow" shows interest in slam. The 2♣ opener of course creates a game force until, depending on systems used, a weak sign-off is made. Compare the following auctions:

| | | | | |
|----|----|--|----|----|
| 2♣ | 2♥ | | 2♣ | 2♥ |
| 2♠ | 4♠ | | 2♠ | 3♠ |

No matter what 2♥ means (5-card suit and 8+ HCP, immediate double negative, 2 controls or 4-6 points), the jump to 4♠ – Fast Arrival – says, "I do have trump support but I've got little more than what I already promised. I don't like my hand for slam." (Admittedly denying slam interest with a 5-card suit and 8+ HCP would be awfully rare.) Going slow with 3♠ not only promises trump support but also conveys interest in more than game.

Kokish Relays

Kokish Relays are a relatively new in Atlanta, though it has been around for many years and few here have been playing it for some time. The primary purpose is to deal with hands greater than a 2♣ opener followed by a 2NT rebid (22-23 or 22-24 depending on partnership choice.) It helps define other hands, especially those with the minors.

Bidding problems abound for larger hands whether Opener starts with 2♣ and then bids 3NT or merely opens 3NT

- Is 4♣ Stayman? If so, what does Responder then bid if there is no fit?
- Is 4♣ Gerber? If not, how do we ask for aces? (Some use 5♣.)
- Are 4♦ and 4♥ transfers? If so, do they promise a 6-card suit? What is responder's follow-up of 4NT? 5-card suit? Blackwood? Other?

Kokish Relay works like this. After a 2♦ response (regardless of system), opener bids:

- * 2♥ Forces Responder to bid 2♠. Follow-up bids are shown below
 - 2N Normal response showing partnership's agreed range and a balanced hand
 - * 3N Big hand with minors but not as strong as going through Kokish below. (With 4 it is often better to open a minor as 2♣ takes up so much bidding space.) Responder's 4 of a minor is to probably best to play, though some might play it as invitational or even key card.
- Other Natural

After the forced 2♠ response to the 2♥ Kokish Relay bid, Opener defines her hand as follows:

- * 2N 25+ HCP (or whatever is bigger than partnership's direct 2N rebid)
- * 3♥ Six hearts and no second suit.
- * 3N Monster hand with both minors with 2-2½ losers. Should have no more than one loser in the majors.

New

Suit Natural. 5+ hearts and 4+ of new suit. Unbalanced or concentrated values if 5-4-2-2 or at least a good 4-card suit worth mentioning.

In essence bidding anything other than notrump waves off any meaning to the Kokish Relay bid; opener is just bidding naturally.

Note that the 3♥ bid shows a 6-card suit. This assumes the partnership is playing Puppet Stayman and would just rebid 2NT or a Kokish 2♥ and then 2NT with a balanced hand with a 5-card major.

For the record, its namesake Eric Kokish does not use the term "Kokish Relay" and instead refers to the system by its original name of "Birthright."