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2/1: Forcing 1NT agreements

A reader sent me this hand:

♠A J 7 6 3 ♥Q 7 ♦3 ♣K Q 5 4 2.

As he put it:

"I bid 1♠ and my partner responded with a forcing 1NT bid. Naturally I showed my clubs. My partner bid 2♦ and I hated that. Should I now bid 2♠ or 3♣?"

What would *you* do?

The answer to this question is that opener should pass.

This is a common situation. Opener bids and rebids and partner makes a non-forcing bid that opener does not like. When to pass and when to keep bidding? Here is the rule (use the hand above for this discussion):

If opener has a weak hand, he should almost always pass. Here, opener has a weak hand but his partner has said he wants to play in 2♦. Opener has no reason to believe that 2♦ is in trouble. At least, it is not in trouble *yet*.

If opener bids 2♠, however, it shows extra values. Certainly it shows six spades and the reason it shows extra values is that if opener had a minimum hand with six spades, he would have rebid 2♠.

Mike's Advice

If opener bid 2♠ with the example hand, he is at least one spade short of his bid, as well as a couple of good points.

Opener should not bid 3♣ with his weak 5-5. True, it might get to a slightly better contract, but keep in mind that you are at the three level now. If you are right, you may improve the contract a little. But if you are wrong, you are likely to be doubled.

Here is a typical example:

Opener	Responder
♠ A J 7 6 3	♠ 8
♥ Q 7	♥ K 5 2
♦ 3	♦ K 10 8 7 6 4
♣ K Q 5 4 2	♣ 10 9 6

There are many possible layouts. 2♦ may or may not be a good result. 3♣ may or may not be a good result.

Against this, 2♦ is not likely to be doubled, but getting doubled in 3♣ is possible. The key here is that safety counts for a lot when your side is wallowing around in search of a fit when your values are thin.

Take this hand:

♠A Q 10 7 4 ♥K 3 ♦2 ♣A Q J 9 4.

Opener has a good hand this time. It is not good enough to jump to 3♣ over 1NT, but when partner tries to sign off in 2♦, opener can still be optimistic. Bidding 3♣ is reasonable. Mind you, 3♣ may get you a minus score, but at least there are a few hands partner can have for his bidding thus far that will still produce a game.

One last hand:

♠A Q 10 6 4 ♥— ♦Q 9 8 5 ♣A J 6 4.

Again, you open 1♠ and partner bids 1NT. You rebid 2♣ and get lucky: Your partner bids 2♦. This is not forcing, showing from 5 to 10 points, usually with six diamonds.

You have a fit, but you still have only 13 HCP. Should you follow the rule and pass, on the theory that you have a weak hand?

Not at all. With this hand, you are not worried about getting out of the bidding with a misfit. You are delighted to find that you have a great fit. Fits are what you look for in the bidding and you have one. In this circumstance you should do something.

What do you think your hand is worth here?

Here is possible layout:

Opener	Responder
♠ A Q 10 6 4	♠ 2
♥ —	♥ Q 9 8 3
♦ Q 9 8 5	♦ K 10 7 6 4 2
♣ A J 6 4	♣ K 7

East will take a lot of tricks with these cards. He might take 12. That is more than expected but 11 is likely. West should do something to either get to game or at least show great interest. My guess? Choose between 4♦ and 5♦. Both bids have merit. A splinter bid of 3♥ is also possible if the partnership knows what it means. The important thing is that West should not pass 2♦ just because he has a weak opening bid. □