

# Bidding Lab

Ideas and innovations  
from ACBL members



Art by Shane McDermott

## Fine tuning 2NT

By Dr. Jim Sternberg

Very big balanced hands (23 or more high-card points) can cause problems, especially when opener jumps to 3NT after partner's response to a  $2\clubsuit$  opening, necessary because after  $2\clubsuit - 2\diamond$  (waiting, negative, whatever), a 2NT rebid is non-forcing. This results in the loss of most systemic responses such as Stayman, Jacoby transfers, whatever your agreements are.

Eric Kokish made a big contribution toward solving this by using a relay after the  $2\diamond$  response, with  $2♥$  by opener forcing  $2♠$ , then 2NT being forcing and unlimited (with various other bids to show hands with hearts). Let me suggest a few further refinements.

First, I urge you to play "control responses" over a  $2\clubsuit$  opening. Opener needs to know yours aces and kings, not your HCP with queens and jacks. Aces are two controls, kings are one, so the responses to a  $2\clubsuit$  opener are:

- $2\diamond$  = fewer than two controls (a king at most).
- $2♥$  = two controls (an ace or two kings).
- $2♠$  = three controls (an ace and a king, or three kings).

To avoid taking away opener's ability to rebid 2NT, I suggest the following:

- 1) With more than three controls, not unusual (two aces, for example), bid  $2\diamond$  over  $2\clubsuit$ . Remember, when opener rebids 2NT, responder is the captain. It's not a problem because when opener signs off opposite your "fewer than two controls," you are not going to pass. Therefore,  $2\clubsuit - 2\diamond$  means fewer than two controls or more than three.
- 2) Do not, as some recommend, use 2NT as a response to show a touching ace-king or three kings. You lose your system and don't pick up enough benefit. Just bid  $2♠$ , showing three controls and letting opener rebid 2NT, his most common action.
- 3) Hands in the 20–21 range are more common than 22–23, so I reverse the common meanings: a 2NT rebid after opening  $2\clubsuit$  shows 20–21, while opening 2NT shows 22–23.

Another note: In playing the Kokish relay of  $2\clubsuit - 2\diamond$ ;  $2♥ - 2♠$ ; 2NT shows a "good" 23 or more HCP (with a five-card suit or with lots of 10s and 9s) and is forcing with all systems on. Occasionally, partner responds  $2♥$  over  $2\clubsuit$ . To retain the relay, I play that  $2\clubsuit - 2♥$ ;  $2♠$  is artificial, saying I was going to "Kokish," so treat my  $2♠$  bid as a forcing 2NT bid. Note, however, that when opener rebids  $2♠$  after responder's  $2♥$ , 2NT does not exist, but  $3♣$  is Stayman,  $3\diamond$  and  $3♥$  are Jacoby transfers, etc.

After  $2\clubsuit - 2♥$ , 2NT is 20–21, the "little one." You didn't open 2NT, so you can't have the middle one. If it goes  $2\clubsuit - 2♠$  and you were going to "Kokish," you are forced to simply rebid 2NT, but partner has three controls, so you will keep bidding. It's less of a problem and again, partner knows your range when you, as opener, bid "one more time."

Finally, playing Kokish, when you really have the one- or two-suiter with hearts, Eric suggests that after:

- $2\clubsuit - 2\diamond$ ;  $2♥ - 2♠$ ,
- $3♣$  = clubs and hearts
- $3\diamond$  = diamonds and hearts
- $3♥$  = hearts.
- $3♠$  = hearts and spades.

I suggest interchanging the meanings of  $3♣$  and  $3♥$ . The one-suiter in hearts is the more common hand type in these situations, and by having  $3♣$  show the one-suiter, you can use  $3\diamond$  as a double negative and stop in  $3♥$ .

Try some of these variations. I think they will improve your 2NT openings, but please don't use them when you play against me. I have enough problems already. □

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Send your ideas and innovations to [editor@acbl.org](mailto:editor@acbl.org).