

Help for Those Coming Back to Bridge after Years Away by David Howorth

If you're a baby boomer who is coming back to bridge after many years away from it, you will find that, just as your parents made the shift from "Culbertson" to "Goren," there have been a lot of changes in the way people are bidding.

People play a lot more conventions now than they did then, but that's not what I address here. Instead, I'll just focus on the most important changes that have occurred in natural bidding. I include a couple of conventions, but only those that almost anyone will expect a partner to understand and play these days.

To make this material more readily understandable for most players readers, I avoid subtleties of the type in which bridge abounds. I don't discuss exceptions or exceptions to exceptions – the things that will crop up in two percent of your deals. Let's get the other ninety-eight percent straight first.

Opening Bids

An opening bid of 1 of a major promises at least 5 in the suit.

If you were taught to open 1♠ with a suit like ♠ KQxx, you're at least as old as I am!

Today, an opening bid of 1 of a major always promises at least 5. In practice, this is easier than "4-card majors." Playing "4-card majors," one had to learn which 4-card suits qualified as "biddable suits." ♠ KQ32 qualified; ♠ J876 did not.

Under today's "5-card major" approach, *any* 5-card suit (major or minor) is a biddable suit. 65432? Yes, that's a biddable suit.*

Opening bids of 2 of a suit are weak bids, with one exception.

Decades ago, an opening bid of two of a suit showed a very strong hand. Today everyone uses the bid of 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠ to show a weakish hands, 5-11 high-card points with a

* If you want further guidance on which suit to open:

Note: Everything in this footnote assumes you do not have a hand that qualifies for an opening in the notrump family (1NT, 2NT, balanced hands strong enough to start with 2♣).

If you have a 5-card suit, open in your longest suit. If there's a tie for longest suit, open in the higher ranking suit, regardless of quality. (For example, with ♠ 65432 ♥ K2 ♦ AKQJ10 ♣ 5, open 1♠, not 1♦.)

If you do not have a 5-card suit, open in your longer minor. (Note that this means you will open 1♦ with a 3-card diamond suit if you have specifically 4432 distribution.) If you have an equal number of clubs and diamonds, open 1♦ if they are 4-4; open 1♣ if they are 3-3. *Do not open a 2-card minor.*

reasonably good 6-card suit. Why not 2♣, too? Because that bid is reserved for all the hands that used to be opened with 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠ – and even 2♣. The 2♣ bid is the next major topic in this list.

How do you respond to partner's weak-two bid? That topic is covered under "Responses" below.

With a really strong hand open 2♣, regardless of your long suit.

All the hands that were opened with two of a suit decades ago are now opened with 2♣. This is an artificial bid. It says nothing about opener's club holding; opener might have a void in clubs. Accordingly, the 2♣ opening is absolutely forcing; opener's partner must bid something.

If the 2♣ opening can show length in any of the suits, how can partner know which suit opener has? Easy. Opener will bid her suit at her next turn, and she is guaranteed that next turn because her partner cannot pass 2♣.

The 2♣ opening is also used to show a very strong balanced hand – 22 high-card points or more. Opener will show a balanced hand by bidding NT at her next opportunity.

The responses to 2♣ are discussed in the "Responses" section below.

A 1NT opening shows 15-17 high-card points.

It used to be that a 1NT opening showed 16-18 high-card points. That range that is now extremely rare, perhaps non-existent. The vast majority of people play "15-17 notrumps." (And those that you might encounter who don't play 15-17 are probably playing some still weaker range – 14-16, 12-14, or even 10-12. But you're unlikely to meet anyone who plays those lower ranges among social players.)

Part of the reason the range for 1NT has been lowered is that people open with 1 of a suit lighter today than they did in years past. Goren used to teach that opening with 13 high-card points was optional; it was only when you had 14 high-card points that an opening became mandatory. You won't find anyone who won't open a 13-point hand with 1 of a suit these days, and you'll be hard pressed to find someone who won't open a 12-point hand. This lowering of point-count requirements for an opening of 1 of a suit means that an opening of 1 of a suit (to be followed by a rebid of 1NT) would have an unacceptably large range, unless the minimum for a 1NT opening were also lowered.

Years ago, beginning players were taught to worry about the location of their honors when opening 1NT – there were rules such as "Don't open in NT with a worthless doubleton" and "You must have at least three suits stopped in order to open 1NT." Those concerns are considered archaic now. Any balanced hand (with 15-17 high-card points)

should be opened 1NT. “Balanced” means 4333, 4432, or 5332 – in other words, any hand that does not have a void, a singleton, or more than one doubleton.

A 2NT opening shows 20-21 high-card points.

A 2NT opening shows a balanced hand within a narrow high-card point range. The Goren range for a 2NT opening was 22-24 high-card points. The modern range has come down for the same reason that the range for the 1NT opening has come down.

In addition, the range is now narrower – 2 high-card points (20 or 21 points), rather than 3 (22, 23, or 24). The 3-point range was just too great to enable intelligent bidding when the auction begins at such a high level. (To elaborate: a 3-point range is acceptable for a 1NT opening, because responder has room to make a 2NT invitation, suggesting that opener go to game if he’s at the top of that range, pass if at the bottom, and use his judgment if in the middle. But there’s no room for an invitation to 3NT when the opening is 2NT.)

Responses

You can raise partner’s major with xxx.

A holding of 432 is good enough to support partner if she has opened with 1 of a major.

In Goren’s day, a responder needed Qxx or J10x or xxxx in order to raise partner’s opening of 1 of a major. But that was because opener could bid a 4-card major. Today, partner’s 1 of a major opening guarantees at least 5 cards in the suit. If you have 3, you’re guaranteed an 8-card trump fit, so you can raise freely with any 3.

The point range for a single raise is a nice-looking 5 to a mediocre 10 HCP. How is this affected if your right-hand opponent makes an overcall or a take-out double before you speak? You’ll find inexperienced players who insist on having a better hand for a “free raise,” but this is losing bridge. This may be your last chance to let partner know you’ve got a fit, particularly if you’re at the low end of the 5-10 range. If anything, it pays to be a little friskier about raising in this position, particularly if the intervention takes the form of a take-out double; a raise now may discourage your left-hand opponent from bidding whatever he was going to bid in response to the double. That makes it harder for the opponents to compete with you effectively.

Your raise of partner’s suit from 1 to 3 is invitational, not forcing.

You may recall that the raise from 1 to 3 back in the Goren days showed a hand that was good enough to open and was forcing to game. That’s no longer the case. Now it shows

an invitational hand, roughly 10 to 12 points in support. This shouldn't be hard to keep in mind because it's more logical than the old forcing meaning.

What do you do if partner opens 1 of a major and you have a hand with support that is good enough to insist on game? Just bid a new suit (which is forcing for one round) and then jump to 4 on the next round. Don't bid 4 immediately. That shows a different hand, a *weak freak* – 5-card support and fewer than 8 HCP.

If you bid a new suit, partner is forced to bid again.

New players and those who haven't played in a long time often forget this basic principle: *Any new suit bid by responder is forcing for one round.* Opener must bid again, like it or not, because although a response in a new suit has a minimum (6 points or so if bid at the one level; 10 points or so if bid without a jump at the 2-level), it has *no maximum*.

One corollary of this principle is that there is no need to jump in a new suit to show “a good hand.” I can't tell you how many times I have heard beginners say, “I thought I had to jump because I have an opening hand.” No. A jump-shift doesn't show a good hand; it shows a *great* one, at least 17 HCP – and you'll frequently be better placed if you don't jump-shift even with those great hands.

An important clarification: It is new *suit* bids that are forcing. Many notrump bids are passable.

There are a few exceptions to the general rule that all new suits by responder are forcing. The only one important enough to note in a summary like this is that new suit bids by a responder who passed originally are not forcing. In that situation opener knows that responder's hand is limited because he failed to open the bidding.

Be reluctant to raise partner's minor.

You have to take 11 tricks to make game in a minor. That's a lot harder than making the 10 tricks required for a major-suit game or the 9 required for 3NT. When partner opens 1 of a minor, even if you have a fit in the minor, your focus should be on finding a fit in a major, or seeing whether it's sensible to play in notrump.

Another point to bear in mind is that partner's bid of 1 of a minor might be made on as few as 3 cards in the suit. You have to have 4-card support to raise, and you'd really prefer to have 5, to ensure an 8-card fit. And even with 5 or more, you should still consider first whether a major-suit fit might be found, or whether a notrump contract is sensible.

Prefer 1 of a major to 1NT.

Although you need 5 cards in a major to open in that major, you need only 4 cards in a major to respond in it. This makes sense when you think about it: if partner is not going to open in a 4-card major, you'll never find a 4-4 major suit fit unless one of you bids the suit bids after partner has opened 1 of a minor. So responder should be ready to bid a 4-card major if she has one.

Quality doesn't matter. With a hand like ♠ xxxx ♥ xx ♦ Axx ♣ Kxxx respond 1♠ to partner's opening 1♣ bid, not 1NT (and not 2♣!). How good does your 4-card suit have to be? Any 4-card suit qualifies – even 5432.

What if you're lucky enough to have length in both majors? Bid the longer one first, regardless of quality. If both suits are 4 cards long, bid 1♥ first; that will give partner a chance to bid 1♠ if she has 4 spades and fewer than 4 hearts. If they are both 5 cards long (or 6, if you should be so lucky), bid 1♠ first; you can then bid hearts at your next turn. Then partner can choose between the majors without raising the level unnecessarily.

Transfers in response to opening NT bids are the norm.

Anyone reading this summary probably played Stayman (which I believe Goren always called “the 2♣ convention”) even if that was 50 years ago. Certainly everyone plays it now.*

The real change is responding to notrump now is in Jacoby transfers. Though a lot of players were playing Jacoby transfers 50 years ago, not everyone was. Now everyone does.

Jacoby transfers are simple to play; the only danger is that someone who hasn't played bridge in a long time might forget them. They work like this: If responder has a 5-card (or longer) major, he bids 2 of the suit just below the major. So 2♦ shows a heart suit and 2♥

* If you need a quick refresher on Stayman:

The Stayman convention is used to determine whether the partnership has a 4-4 fit in a major suit, since the hand will nearly always play better in a 4-4 major fit than it does in notrump.

Responder initiates Stayman with a bid of 2♣, which says, in effect, “I have at least one 4-card major and enough points at least to invite game. Do you have a 4-card major?” Opener responds to this inquiry by bidding a 4-card major if he has one, and 2♦ if he does not. The 2♦ respond says nothing about opener's diamonds, only that opener does not have a 4-card major.

Partnerships differ on which major opener bids in response to 2♣ if he has both, but this is not an important point for purposes of this summary. The important thing is that opener must realize that if he shows one of the majors over 2♣, and responder then bids some number of notrump, responder must have 4 cards in the other major, else he would not have made the Stayman inquiry. So an opener with both majors can, in this situation, later bid the other major secure in the knowledge that responder has 4 cards there.

shows a spade suit. Opener must always accept the transfer by bidding 2 of the suit responder has shown. Responder can then pass with a lousy hand, bid 2NT or 3 of the major to invite game, or bid 3NT or 4 of the major to insist on game. Generally speaking, responder's rebids of 3 and 4 of the major promise a 6-card (or longer) suit. The 2NT and 3NT rebids indicate that responder's major is only 5 cards long, inviting opener to correct to the major if has 3 (or 4) of them, but to stay in notrump with only 2.

The same principles apply to an opening bid of 2NT and when opener has opened 2♣ and rebid 2NT: 3♣ is Stayman; 3♦ and 3♥ are transfers.

There are a lot of frills that can be added to this basic Jacoby structure, and a lot of variant treatments one can give to the otherwise idle bid of 2♠ in response to 1NT, but those things are beyond the scope of this summary.

Responding to partner's weak-two opening (and the weak-two opener's rebids).

Raises first. Opener is expected to pass any raise responder makes. You should raise 2♠ to 4♠ with ♠ QJx ♥ xxx ♦ AKJ ♣ AKJ10 or with ♠ xxxx ♥ x ♦ xxxx ♣ xxxx. With the first hand, you know that game is almost certain and, despite your 19 points, that slam is very unlikely. (Remember: partner was not strong enough to open with 1♠.) With the second hand, you know that your left-hand opponent is loaded (or else something is wrong with this deck of cards), and you don't want to let them play in 4♥ or find an easy route to slam. It doesn't matter that partner doesn't know which of these hands you hold; he will pass no matter what. And it is an advantage that your opponents won't know which of these hands you hold.

Even a raise by you to 3 is not invitational. The raise to 3 is preemptive, designed to make things tough on the opponents. Partner must pass this raise. If you do have enough to invite – and remember that partner was not strong enough to open with a 1-bid, so it takes a lot to invite – you can probe with the artificial 2NT response.

A 2NT response to a weak-two is forcing. Since it is forcing, it can be made with a wide variety of hands of invitational strength or better; it does not promise a no-trump oriented hand, although responder will sometimes have such a hand for his 2NT bid.

Opener's rebids after the 2NT response follow a strict scheme. With a minimum weak-two, opener should simply rebid his suit at the 3-level. With a good weak-two, opener should bid any new suit in which he has an A or a K, regardless of his length in that suit. The idea is simply to show a stopper (and possible entry) in case responder is looking for a 3NT contract. If opener's original suit will run in a no-trump contract, he should simply raise 2NT to 3NT. (Opener will not have an outside A or K if his original suit is solid – he would have been too strong to open with a weak-two in that case.) Responder will usually be in a good position to place the contract when he's heard opener's bid in response to the 2NT query.

In addition to the conventional 2NT response, responder can bid a new suit. That bid is natural and, like 2NT, is forcing for one round. Opener should raise responder's new suit if possible; Qx or xxx is adequate support for a raise. If opener cannot raise responder, opener should rebid as if responder had responded 2NT: returning to his own suit if minimum, otherwise bidding a new suit (with A or K) or bidding 3NT (solid suit).

Note that all of the above, except the paragraphs on raises, assumes that responder is an unpassed hand. Responses by a passed hand are not forcing. But these bids – again excepting the raises – are rare, since a responder who has passed originally is unlikely to have a bid he wants to make now.

Responding to partner's 2♣.

The opening 2♣ bid is forcing, so responder must always make some response. Responder's bid of 2♦ is artificial, bearing no relation to diamonds, and means broadly, "I've got nothing in particular to describe." It's the bid made with all bad hands (say, 0-7 HCP) but it can also be made with hands that don't have a *good* 5-card suit (or, if a minor, a good 6-card suit) and are not balanced and strong enough (8+ HCP) to bid 2NT. If responder has a real dog (say, 0-4 HCP), his next bid after 2♦ should be the lowest possible bid in a minor; this, too, is artificial, a "second negative," saying nothing about the bid minor. If responder does not make this second negative, the auction is forcing to game.

If opener rebids 2NT over the artificial 2♦ response, he is showing a balanced 22-24 HCP – a hand too strong to open 2NT. After this sequence, all the gadgets available after a 2NT opening are still on: 3♣ is Stayman and 3♦ and 3♥ are transfers. There is no "second negative" in this auction. With a complete bust, responder will simply pass 2NT or transfer into a long major and play in it at the 3-level.

There are other schemes for responding to 2♣, but this is the most common.

Opener's rebid

Don't raise responder's suit without 4-card support.

In the Goren days, opener would often raise freely with 3-card support – at least if the 3 cards included a high honor. But that was because responder's bid of a new suit would have promised a "biddable" 4-card suit. Today, responder's new suit, especially if a major, could be as bad as 5432, so opener shouldn't raise except with 4-card support.

Now, as is often the case with bridge, this "rule" isn't a perfect one. There are certain hands on which a raise with 3 cards (3 *good* cards) is arguably the best bid. But if you're one of the people for whom this page is written – someone coming back to bridge after a

long absence – your best course is probably to restrict all your raises to 4-card support, until you've become comfortable with the modern style.

If your hand is balanced, and you don't have 4-card support for responder's suit, you should probably rebid in notrump.

Nothing helps partner more than showing your shape and value as quickly as possible. If your hand is balanced and you can't raise partner, your first rebid should be either 1NT or 2NT. 1NT shows that you are balanced but weren't strong enough to open 1NT initially, so 12-14; 2NT shows that you are balanced but were too strong to open 1NT originally, so 18-19. (Still stronger balanced hands would open first with 2NT or 2♣.)

If your hand is appropriate to rebid in notrump, it's hardly ever right to rebid your first suit here. That almost always shows a 6-card suit.

Bidding a new suit at the two-level that is higher ranking than your first bid suit requires extra strength.

This principle is really nothing new; it's as old as the game of bridge itself. But so many casual players get it wrong that it's worth repeating here.

At issue here is the "reverse." It's a term that isn't terribly descriptive, but no one seems to have found a better one. If you open 1♣, partner bids one of a major, and you now bid 2♦, that bid forces responder, if she prefers clubs to diamonds, to bid 3♣. And of course responder may have as few as 6 points. It makes no sense for an opener to require a responder to make that choice if opener has a minimum hand; you are contracting to take 9 tricks when your side may have less than half the HCP in the deck.

The solution here is a simple one. Don't force responder to make this choice unless you yourself have a very good hand – at least 17 HCP. With a weaker hand you must find a different rebid, one that allows your partner to prefer your suit at the 2-level (which in some cases will be by passing your 2-level rebid of your first suit).

To clear up another point that some find confusing about all this: What if, after responder has bid a new suit at the 1-level, you now bid a third suit at the 1-level? Is that a reverse? No, *that* is not a reverse. The reason is simply that in this auction there is no way to play in your original suit except at the 2-level; your 1-level rebid does nothing to change that – unlike a 2-level rebid in higher suit, which inevitably forces your side up still one level further if responder prefers opener's first suit. If the reasoning here seems difficult (and it often does to beginners), you can ignore it as long as you remember a simple rule, one that doesn't state the reason explicitly: Don't rebid at the 2-level in a suit that outranks the suit you opened unless you have 17 or more HCP.

Responder's rebid

Keep in mind that any bid of a new suit by responder is forcing for one round.

Just as there is no need to jump with a good hand when responder makes his first bid, there is no need for responder to jump on the second round in order to keep the bidding open. A bid in a new suit is forcing for one round.

Any jump in a previously bid suit is invitational, not forcing.

Few things are more unsettling in bridge than not knowing which bids are forcing and which can be passed. About the only feeling that is equally unsettling is worrying that one's partner doesn't know which bids are forcing and which can be passed.

One of the best understandings one can have to avoid all this is the agreement that responder's jump rebid in a suit previously bid by either partner is invitational, not forcing. With this understanding, when the partnership has bid three suits in three bids you'll usually have three ways to bid, so that you can show a lousy hand, a good-but-not-game-forcing hand, and a game-forcing hand. The lousy hand makes a non-jump rebid of one of the three suits (or passes opener's second suit if that's best). The good-but-not-game-forcing hand jumps in one of the three suits (or bids 2NT). What does the game-forcing hand do? It bids the fourth suit. What if you don't have the fourth suit? Bid it anyway! The next topic explains "fourth suit forcing."

By the way, it's best to play a jump in the fourth suit as non-forcing as well – a natural bid showing a two-suiter of invitational strength. If you've got the same distribution but with enough strength to force to game, bid the fourth suit without jumping, and then rebid it at your next turn.

Responder's bid of the fourth suit is game-forcing and possibly artificial.

This is an easy solution to many bidding problems. If you and your partner have bid three suits in three bids, your bid of the fourth suit sets up a game force without guaranteeing any length or strength in that fourth suit. If opener now bids notrump, *opener* is showing that she has the fourth suit stopped, since responder has not promised anything in it. If opener doesn't bid notrump at some point, and responder later bids notrump himself, responder is showing that she has the fourth suit stopped – something her earlier bid of the fourth suit did not show.

Can opener raise the fourth suit? Sure – as long as both partners remain aware that responder may not really have that suit. The raise says, in effect, "I know you may not have this suit, but if it happens that you do, I have a raise for it." Since that fourth-suit bid was forcing to game, there will still be room to sort this situation out.

Defensive bidding

A takeout double guarantees support for *all* unbid suits, unless your hand is very strong.

This isn't a new idea. It's about as old as the game of bridge. But it's a rule that beginners often flout. You must have at least 3 cards in each unbid suit in order to make a takeout double. If you don't have that, you can't make a takeout double.

There is an exception to this rule. With a very strong hand you can double and then bid a new suit over whatever partner bids. This requires at least 17 HCP. And many hands of 17 HCP still aren't good enough to do this.

If you don't have support for all unbid suits, and you don't have a good 17+ HCP, and you don't have a suit good enough for an overcall (5 or more cards), just pass. Beginners who double without these requirements often say, "I know I didn't have support for all unbid suits, but I had to do something! I had an opening hand!" No. If you don't pass hands like this, you are insulting your partner; you're assuming partner hasn't got the sense to balance with an appropriate hand. See the topic on balancing below.

A corollary to all this is that if you make a takeout double with a minimum hand (roughly equivalent to an opening hand), don't raise partner's response to "show you have support." Your double already showed partner that you have support for whatever he bids. A freely made raise now shows about a king better than the minimum hand for a double.

Be ready to balance in pass-out position.

When the opponents stop bidding at a low level, your side probably has about half the points in the deck. And if the opponents have found a fit, your side probably has one too. Don't meekly pass out and let them play in their fit. Get in there and try to play in yours.

Balancing is a complex topic and this summary can't get very deep into it. Here are the three main auctions to watch out for:

1.
1X - Pass - Pass - ?
2.
1X - Pass - 2X - Pass
Pass - ?
3.
1X - Pass - 1Y - Pass
2Y - Pass - Pass - ?

You should strain to act in all these pass-out positions. The opponents' auction tells you that your side has some values; if you don't see those values in your own hand, they are in partner's. You can double or overcall with about a king less than you would need in direct position.

A cue-bid doesn't mean what it used to mean.

Back in the old days, a direct cue-bid of opener's suit showed a huge hand, one strong enough to open with a forcing two-bid – or almost that strong. That's no longer the case. Everyone now uses the cue-bid to show a two-suiter. This is called a Michaels cue-bid.

If the opening bid is a minor, a cue-bid shows a major two-suiter, 5-5 or better, at least in principle. If the opening bid is a major, the cue-bid shows a two-suiter consisting of the other major and either of the minors. If the cue-bidder's partner wants to play in cue-bidder's minor, he bids 2NT, which is artificial and asks the cue-bidder to bid his minor.

What strength should the cue-bidder have for his cue-bid? The most common treatment is that it should be either very weak or very strong. The cue-bidder's partner will always bid over the cue-bid and the cue-bidder can then take whatever action is appropriate for the hand he has. So the Michaels cue-bidder will always know where he intends to take the hand when he learns which suit his partner wants as trump. If the intervenor is unsure how high to play the hand, as will be the case with mid-range hands (opening strength, give or take), he should forgo the cue-bid and just overcall in one of his suits, hoping to show the other one later if the auction develops in such a way as to make that feasible or desirable.

Opening leads

Opening leader should lead A from a suit headed by AK.

In the old days, an opening lead of a king could be made from either AK or KQ, creating an ambiguous situation for the leader's partner. For example, after an ambiguous king lead, should third hand signal encouragement with Jxx? It's the right thing to do if partner's holding is KQ; for one thing it lets partner know that he can safely continue the suit – that he won't be subjected to a Bath Coup, for example. But signalling encouragement with Jxx when partner has led from AKx could be a disaster, setting up the queen in declarer's hand.

Leading A from AK solves the ambiguity. The A always promises the AK (or perhaps doubleton Ax). That's so because you should never lead an unsupported A against a suit contract. Never. Really. That's one of the neverest rules of bridge. (A from Ax is an exception.) So the A always promises the K. And the K promises the Q, while it denies the A. And so on.

There are a few exceptional circumstances when the K should be led from AK on opening lead. The main one is when the AK is a doubleton; then leading “backward” (K first, then A) alerts partner that your original holding was a doubleton. The other exceptions are too rare to worry about now.

Bear in mind that the A from AK rule is for *opening leads only*. If, later in the play, you are leading a suit headed by AK, lead the king, not the ace. Why the difference? Because, although you should never lead an unsupported ace as your opening lead, it’s not at all uncommon for a defender later in the play to lead an unsupported ace. If you were to continue playing A from AK here, there would be far too much ambiguity on the location of the king when the ace is led. On the other hand, if you lead K from AK (as well as from KQ) after trick one there will seldom be any ambiguity about the location of the ace.

Two-over-one

All of the above applies to what is called “standard bidding” today. But “two-over-one” (usually abbreviated to “2/1”) has, for all practical purposes, become the new standard bidding; it is played by the overwhelming majority of tournament players. Although most beginners are still taught what is still called “standard,” it’s becoming increasingly common for beginners to be taught 2/1 from the outset.

Almost every topic covered above is treated in the same way by 2/1 players. The major differences between 2/1 and “standard” are covered below. As always, there are a lot of nuances that this summary won’t attempt to cover, but the two major features of 2/1 are:

A (non-jump) bid of 2 of a new suit in response to an opening bid of 1 of a suit is forcing to game.

Instead of showing as few as 10 or 11 points, as it does in standard bidding, this bid guarantees the values for game.

In general then, it shows values good enough for an opening bid. But judgment is called for. For example, with ♠ x ♥ Qxx ♦ Axxxx ♣ KJxx, I would happily respond 2♦ to an opening bid of 1♥; the heart fit and the spade shortness convince me that game is odds-on. But if I had the same hand and partner opened 1♠, the potential for a misfit would concern me. I’d start with 1NT instead, since there are plenty of hands partner could have that don’t have a play for game. 1NT doesn’t end things (see the next topic), and I’ll have a better idea of our side’s potential when partner bids again.

Don’t go overboard with the notion that a 2/1 response shows game values for your side. Just because you know your side has game values is no reason to go out of your way to make a 2/1 response. For example, with ♠ AKxx ♥ xx ♦ xxx ♣ AKxx, if partner opens 1♥,

don't bid 2♣ to show you have game values. Make your normal bid of 1♠. You'll have time later in the auction to show the game values, perhaps by bidding the fourth suit. (In fact, I once saw a player new to 2/1 respond 2♣ to a 1♥ opening with ♠ AKxxx ♥ xx ♦ xx ♣ AKxx. That's just crazy.)

A 1NT response to 1 of a major is forcing for one round.

Because your 2/1 response is forcing to game, you will have to bid 1NT on many of those 10- and 11-point hands that would be worth a two-over-one response in standard bidding. For this reason (and for some others), 2/1 players play that a 1NT response to 1 of a major is forcing for one round. So, when as responder you hold a hand like ♠ xx ♥ xx ♦ AKxxxx ♣ Kxx, you've got a good chance to play in a diamond contract. In fact, with a hand of lesser value, say ♠ xx ♥ xx ♦ AQxxxx ♣ xx, you've still got a good chance to play in a diamond contract – a better chance than you would have in standard bidding, where your 1NT response would often be passed.

There are some well established principles governing opener's rebid after the forcing 1NT response. This isn't the place to list them all, but the three most important are these:

- Opener must not rebid her major unless she has at least 6 cards in it.
- Opener will sometimes have to rebid a 3-card minor over partner's forcing 1NT. (Never a 3-card heart suit.) This is a corollary of the rule that rebidding one's major shows 6 or more. Some find rebidding in a 3-card minor strange at first, but it's really no different from opening a 3-card minor, which people do all the time.
- Opener's 2NT rebid over the forcing 1NT response shows 18-19 HCP, a hand too good to have opened 1NT. People new to 2/1 are sometimes tempted to rebid 2NT just because they have a 5332 hand. Don't do that without the 18-19 points; bid 2 of a minor instead.

A final note: The 1NT response is forcing for one round after an opening bid of 1 *of a major*. It is not forcing in response to 1 of a minor. There are a number of reasons for this, but perhaps the best one is that when partner opens 1 of a minor, she will have a balanced hand 40 percent of the time, so 1NT may well be a good partial – and, when it's not, opener is very likely to bid again anyway. (Compare this 40 percent figure to the situation when partner opens 1 of a major. Then she will have a balanced (5332) hand only about 15% of the time, so the odds are slim that 1NT would turn out to be the best contract.)

I welcome any questions about any of the material covered here. Just drop me an email at howorthd@bellsouth.com and I will try to answer.