



Reverses in the Bidding

by Bob Gruber

Reverses are an area where both partners tend to assume “partner bids it the same way I do.” Often that’s true; and often it’s not. But even when there is tacit agreement, that agreement may not be grounded in the best bidding practices. Of opener’s reverse, responder’s reverse and touching suit reverses, opener’s reverse is most likely to be discussed and agreed upon, but all three topics bear exploration. So, here’s a discussion from the standpoint of Standard American bidding.

Opener’s Reverse

When the opener bids a new suit at the two level that is higher ranking than his original suit, that bid is a reverse and is forcing for 1 round. The “book” says opener must have 16+¹ points for this bid that is so named because it reverses the usual order of bidding the higher-ranking suit first². Why is opener required to have extra points for this call?

As with a non-reverse, the reverse bid asks responder to make a choice of opener’s two suits with the added proviso that the reverse is forcing. Whichever suit responder prefers he must bid it at the 3 level, a level that requires extra points to have a reasonable chance to make the contract. Since responder has not promised the extra points for this safety, opener must have them. Empirically, the 3 level requires about 3 more points than the 2 level, so opener should have a minimum of 3 more points, hence 16+¹ total points.

Opener’s Reverse with Touching Suits

If you open 1♣ and reverse into 2♥, you could have three ♣s and four ♥s, fewer ♣s than ♥s. But if you open 1♣ and reverse into 2♦, you almost guarantee that the ♣s are longer than the ♦s; not equal in length, longer. Definitely longer.

There are two auctions where opener’s reverse with touching suits—1♥ then 2♠, 1♣ then 2♦—shows a longer first suit than the higher-ranking second suit. Playing 4-card majors, opening 1♦ and reversing into 2♥ tends to show a 5-card or longer ♦ suit, unless the 4-card heart suit is too weak to open. But when playing 5-card majors, requiring longer diamonds than hearts is too restrictive, and is not a requirement. With equal length in ♠ & ♥ or ♦ & ♣ and enough strength to reverse, you can afford to bid the lower-ranking suit at the 3 level. So, if your suits are equal in length, don’t distort

¹ Some partnerships require a minimum of 17 or even 18 total points for a reverse. This number needs to be agreed upon by both partners.

² In these days of 5-card majors, i.e., requiring 5 or more cards in the suit to open that major, reverses may seem common to the beginning bridge player. You open 1♣ and then rebid 1♠ over partner’s 1-level bid. But it’s not a reverse unless you bid the higher-ranking suit at the 2 level. If both suits are bid at the 1 level, it’s not a reverse because responder does not have to go to the 3 level to show a preference for one of opener’s suits. It’s responder’s need to bid at the 3-level, a level that requires extra points for a measure of safety, that is the crux of the reverser needing extra points.

Historically, “seeming reverses” were much less common because Standard American bidding employed 4-card majors. You only needed 4 cards in the suit to open a major, although the suit had to have a little quality; you didn’t open a 4-card major if they were all small cards. So, in those days, the bidding of a convenient minor and then a 4-card major was much less common than today playing 5-card majors.



the normal order of bidding the higher ranking suit first. You can show that strength (in Standard American bidding) by making what's called a "high reverse" by bidding that 2nd suit at the 3 level.³

Now you've introduced a nice subtlety to your bidding. Partner immediately knows when you reverse with ♥ & ♠ or ♣ & ♦, that not only do you have reversing strength, the first suit is longer. Your subsequent bidding should be more accurate.

Responder's Reverse

The same principle of needing extra points to bid a higher-ranking 2nd suit at the 2 level—thus requiring partner to take a preference at the 3 level—applies to responder also. In the case of responder, 12+ total points are required to reverse the order of bidding the suits. Responder's reverse is also forcing.

The implications of responder's reverse can improve the accuracy of responder describing his distribution and strength. First, if responder bids 2♣ over opener's 1♦ call (or 2♣ over opener's 1♥ call), it tends to deny a 4-card major, but it's not absolute. If responder has 5 (or more) ♣s, a 4-card major and 12+ points, he can bid 2♣, followed by bidding the unbid major at the 2 level, or even the 3 level, if necessary. In fact, that's how responder should bid. This sequence promises greater length in ♣s than the major (but the major should be at least 4 cards in length) and a game going hand. Responder has accurately described both his distribution and his strength. (Implicit in this discussion is the fact that responder's 2♣ bid is forcing at least one round. Opener cannot suddenly dislike his hand and pass. Responder is trusting opener to abide by normal bidding agreements. On the other hand, do not plan on effecting a responder's reverse as a passed hand; your 2♣ bid is no longer forcing.)

Given sufficient point count (12+ total points), responder does not need to distort his distribution by bidding the 4-card major first, and then the 5-card minor. If you bid that way, opener should assume the major is longer. Then, to show your strength, you'll probably have to make a jump bid. Opener may get the strength right, but will probably never untangle the distribution. Plus, the jump bid may well put you 1 level higher than necessary. If that's the 4-level and the only makeable game is 3NT, OUCH! Much better to show your distribution via a responder's reverse if you have the points to do so.

Final Word

Since not everyone plays all these reverse situations the same way, be sure to discuss them with all your partners.

³ Did you note that as opener, bidding a new suit at the 3 level is a "high reverse?" You haven't actually reversed the order of bidding the suits, but you should have 16+ points for your call. If you have a minimum opening bid, you may bid a new lower-ranking suit at the 2 level (but not the 3 level), rebid your suit (tending to show a 6-card suit), support partner's suit at the 3 level, or lacking any of those choices, bid 2NT.

After partner's 2-level response, it's natural and seemingly safe to bid at the 3 level. But will the bidding end there? No! Your bid is forcing and partner may now feel compelled to bid a game. Unfortunately, if he has the minimum 10 total points, those points plus your 13 make the prospect of actually making the game contract slim. The way to avoid this kind of shaky game is to not overbid by bidding a new suit at the 3-level when holding a minimum opening hand.