

Conventions (what did they ever do for us?)

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What does that even mean?

conventional

/kən'venʃ(ə)n(ə)l/ 

adjective

1. based on or in accordance with what is generally done or believed.
"a conventional morality had dictated behaviour"
synonyms: normal, standard, regular, ordinary, usual, traditional, typical, common; [More](#)
2. **BRIDGE**
(of a bid) intended to convey a particular meaning according to an agreed convention.
"West made a conventional bid showing a hand with at least 5 spades"

So...

- ▶ The strange thing is that bridge conventions are particular not general agreements. A conventional isn't, well, *conventional*; most are not employed by the majority.
- ▶ That opens a can of worms:
 - There's no convenient specification for an agreement. The closest one can come to such is to play exactly as a book or magazine article.
 - The whole game is burdened by the need to disclose both general and particular agreements.
- ▶ The other side of the coin is that invention of methods is an attractive dimension that has kept the game alive.

Artificial

- ▶ An artificial call is one that doesn't lay claim to the strain named (or in the case of a double or pass, the defensive prospects in that strain).
- ▶ Examples:
 - Stayman 2♣ – doesn't say anything about clubs.
 - Blackwood 4NT – doesn't suggest the bidder wants to play no-trumps.
 - Opening 2♣ – is artificial and strong, it doesn't say anything about clubs (so don't say "strong" lest opponents think you mean strong in clubs).
 - A takeout double – does not suggest defending the suit doubled.
- ▶ Most 'conventions' are artificial. They exchange a bid's natural meaning for something else, be it asking a question, asserting strength or showing another suit.

System

- ▶ Systems are built of agreements such as,
 - Whether to open four- or five-card majors.
 - Whether to use a weak-, strong- or variable-NT.
 - Whether to use weak-twos, strong-twos or a mix.
 - Strong club systems are called 'artificial' because they have a non-natural one-level opening. Arguably there is little difference between that and using an artificial and strong 2♣ opener. But the terminology reflects history and practice – it's far from exact.
- ▶ The 'conventions' I have selected are potential additions to any system. That is they are of the 'bolt on' type.

Using a convention

- 1) You must remember to use the convention when you have a qualifying hand.
 - 2) You must not make the bid with another hand-type.
 - 3) You must recognise and recall it when partner employs it.
 - 4) You must understand it and the follow-ups: you must be comfortable with its complexity.
 - 5) You must appreciate the negative inferences.
 - 6) You must like it: either locate some intrinsic attraction or get a thrill out of using it. But not so much you erode the criteria for using it and get bad results.
- It helps enormously if there is an underlying principle and/or the same method(s) are used in other places.

The convention itself

- 1) Should solve a problem and fit with the overall system.
- 2) Should not offer targets to opponents or needlessly leak information. An artificial suit can always be doubled to suggest a lead. Asking questions where the answers (or some of them) are irrelevant may reveal aspects of the closed hand which can only help the defence.
- 3) Should arise reasonably frequently. Or, at least the frequency should be comparable to its complexity. Agreements that seldom arise yet are complicated are a liability.
- 4) The loss of an existing/alternative meaning should either catered for elsewhere or be an acceptable price to pay.

Horses for courses

- ▶ This is not a war on your favourite gadgets or an attempt to talk you into complexity.
- ▶ That will mean there are simply hands you cannot bid – contracts that you cannot reliably reach. Often these will be slams because those require a specific mesh of yours and partner's hand. Artificial methods can solve those problems but that's not a good enough reason to adopt them.
- ▶ Also there are treatments that work well at club bridge but less well as the game becomes more sophisticated:
 1. Long bidding sequences are scary without experience. Has something gone wrong? I think this is forcing but does partner? Early setting of strength may be deprecated in books and magazines but it relaxes auctions.
 2. Experienced players cater for more outcomes, those unburdened by such aim for the most frequent sensible solution without prevarication. And that can work out best.
 3. The weakness of club methods often shows itself in competition. The tougher the game, the more active the opponents.

JCBs

▶ ♠ Q 7
♥ 5
♦ A K Q 10 7 6 3
♣ A 5 2

▶ West North East South

1♥

??

▶ 3♥!

Jump Cue-Bids

- ▶ A jump cue-bid is an overcall, leaping to three of the suit opened on your right. It shows a solid minor suit and asks for a stopper in opener's suit for 3NT. Without a stopper advancer bids 4♣, pass or convert to 4♦ – or 5♣ with strength to make 5-minor a reasonable proposition.
- ▶ How does this evaluate as a convention?
 1. Jumping in the opponent's suit is sufficiently unusual to sit up and take notice – it won't be mistaken.
 2. Of course, that is not the same as forgetting to use and bidding something else.
 3. There is no sensible alternative use for the bid. Even if you held the same cards in hearts as you do in diamonds, it would be questionable to bid 3♥. At the least, before you did you should ask yourself, does 3♥ mean anything special?

Jump Cue-Bids (2)

- ▶ How does this evaluate as a convention?
 4. It solves a problem hand-type
 5. That 3♥ is a bid of their suit is not a problem: true they can double but any lower call would allow LHO to raise.
 6. It doesn't require adjustments elsewhere.
 7. Although infrequent it is sufficiently simple and 'sit up and take notice' for that not to be a problem

- ▶ All in all, JCBs are an excellent stand-alone addition to any system.

1NT – 2♠

- ▶ Using Stayman and transfers after 1NT assigns easy meanings to 2♣, 2♦ and 2♥ and appears to leave 2♠ 'free'. In clubs there is widespread use of this to show, opposite a 12-14 opener, exactly 11 HCP.
- ▶ The idea is to provide two invites to 3NT

$$\begin{aligned} 1NT - 2♠ &= 11 \text{ HCP} \\ 1NT - 2NT &= 12 \text{ HCP} \end{aligned}$$

- ▶ Presumably both these deny a 4-card major (otherwise Stayman and 2NT). Let's critique this as JCBs.

1NT – 2♠ (2)

► Evaluation:

1. It's simple and not open to misinterpretation.
2. It's unlikely, given Stayman and transfers are in force, 2♠ will be accidentally used with another meaning.
3. However there are many alternative uses for 2♠:
 - i. Extending transfers: showing clubs, either weak or strong
 - ii. Showing a weak hand with long clubs or diamonds
 - iii. Showing a strong hand with clubs or diamonds (exploiting the pre-emptive effect of an immediate 3-minor on weak hands).
 - iv. Showing hands with a shortage.
4. It is unclear whether opener should go on to show majors after 2♠ or 2NT.
5. There is more to evaluating a hand for no-trumps than simply counting points.

1NT – 2♠ (3)

► Evaluation:

6. It aims for a very small target. Even if we believe 25 HCPs are required for game then responder must have exactly 11 and opener 13 for a 'bad' 3NT to be avoided. Otherwise a simple invitation via 2NT (or Stayman and 2NT) would have arrived at the same contract.

That is only a success when the resulting 2NT on 24 HCP takes eight tricks. Very often when 2NT fails a trick, so does 3NT, the defence being grateful to defeat a game, reluctant to risk the contract making for a second undertrick.

- Conventions which partially duplicate existing invitational sequences, especially those which result in reaching one-under game (as 2NT here), are poor value.
- Likewise those which consume the valuable resource of low-level bids for rare gains.

Stayman after 1NT

▶ ♠ K J 8 3		1NT [12-14]
♥ K 6 5	2♣	2♥
♦ 7 6	3NT	Pass
♣ A Q 5 2		

- ▶ We've asked about majors and don't fit hearts – so we have spades: what's wrong with that?
- ▶ We have exposed opener's distribution. Perhaps a heart lead was imminent but has been deterred.

5-Card Stayman after 1NT

▶ ♠ K J 8 3
♥ K 6 5
♦ 7 6
♣ A Q 5 2

3♣¹
3♥³
Pass

1NT [12-14]
3♦²
3NT

1. Asking about 5-card majors
2. No 5-card major
3. 4 Spades, not 4 hearts

- ▶ Opener's hand has only been partly described. Against this responder has bid two suits artificially, offering two chances to the opponents to double for a lead.
- ▶ But as well as being non-disclosing, opener's 5-card majors are accommodated and, above 3NT, responder can make slam tries (with values for 4NT).

Comparing

- ▶ To get the best out of such a 3♣ convention partnerships need to establish:
 - a) How it meshes with 2♣ Stayman.
 - b) What the follow-ups mean.
 - c) How to replace the previous meaning of 3♣ (via 2♠?!)
 - d) Whether it fits the opening 1NT approach: if you never open with 5-major, or one so poor you wouldn't want it as trumps, a convention to discover those has no value.
 - e) What happens when artificial bids are doubled.
- ▶ Assuming it fits your system, it would still only be for regular partnerships. You could not hope to play 5-card Stayman with a pick-up partner.
- ▶ What about 'ordinary Stayman'?

Stayman

► 1NT – 2♣; 2♥ – 3♣

a) Weak with clubs

Ex. ♠764 ♥5 ♦Q92 ♣KJ9852

b) Clubs and spades, non-forcing

♠KJ64 ♥5 ♦92 ♣AJ9852

c) Clubs and spades, game-forcing

♠AJ64 ♥5 ♦J92 ♣AKJ74

d) Something else entirely.

► Would 1NT – 2♣; 2♥ – 3♦ be any different?

Stayman (2)

► 1NT – 2♣; 2♥ – 2♠

a) 4♠, NF opposite minimum with fit

Ex. ♠QJ64 ♥K5 ♦A92 ♣J982

b) 4♠ forcing

♠AQJ6 ♥5 ♦AQ92 ♣10 982

c) 4♠ scrambling (short hearts)

♠QJ64 ♥5 ♦QJ982 ♣872

d) 5♠ invitational

♠KJ964 ♥Q65 ♦A942 ♣2

e) Something else entirely.

► How does your choice fit with 1NT – 2♣; 2♦ – 2♠?

Anticipated questions

- ▶ Should 4NT always be Blackwood?
- ▶ Almost. Don't play Blackwood over no-trumps: you make 6NT if you have enough points, not enough aces. But these can be.
 - 1NT – 2♣; 2♥ – 4NT
 - 1NT – 2♦; 2♥ – 4NT
- ▶ Should I open an artificial strong 2♦ as well as 2♣?
- ▶ No. This just doesn't seem to work well for anyone. 2♦ is simply too high for satisfactory exchange on length information.
- ▶ Responder's negative/waiting 2♥ claims a major, often making the strong hand as dummy.
- ▶ Add potential disruptive action by opponents and the costs aren't worth distinguishing various strong-types.
- ▶ It's more fun to play 2♦ as weak, or showing a weak major, or a hard-to-bid hand, like strong 4-4-4-1s

Key Points

1. Don't let anyone persuade you to play anything that you don't understand or don't enjoy playing.
2. For your regular partnership, ask yourself how easy a convention is to play, what problem it solves, what it costs in terms of other opportunities or natural actions.
3. Don't play artificiality for the sake of it; don't play anything that inhibits your use of a takeout double; be disciplined, don't widen the use of conventions.