

The Exciting World of Bridge – Lesson 2

Last week we learned a whole bunch of things about the game of Bridge. We ended by starting our checklist for deciding to open the bidding. This week we are going to start by adding to more items to that checklist. There will be a fourth item added eventually but for the next few weeks our opening bid checklist will only be three items long.

Checklist Item #2 – if we have 13 to 21 points and we couldn't open 1NT or 2NT, we are going to open one of a suit. Here's how we decide which suit to open:

- 1) If we have one 5 card or longer suit, we open it.
- 2) If we have a tie – with two 5 card suits or two six card suits, we open the “higher” one.
- 3) If we don't have a 5 card or longer suit, we open our longest minor.
- 4) If we have 4 of both minors, we open 1♦. If we have 3 of both minors, we open 1♣.

That's it! That's all you need to know to decide how to open one of a suit. You may have noticed that the way this works out, you never get to open 1♠ or 1♥ unless you have at least five of them. There is a very good reason for this that we'll discuss more soon.

Checklist Item #3 – if we have 22 or more points, we open 2♣.

This one may seem a little bit strange but it's our first foray into what we call “artificial bids”. Since we've described our auction as being a “conversation”, these types of bids could be described as “code words”. In certain circumstances, a bid can mean something special. So while we'll go into more depth on this particular artificial bid later, for now the important thing to remember is that on any hand with 22 or more points we start with 2♣. Its special meaning is “Partner, I have a huge hand and unless you've got absolutely nothing over there, we should bid at least to game”.

So that's it, our checklist to decide whether to open the bidding is complete for now. Eventually we will add just one more item to it but for the next several weeks, it's just these three items. To recap:

- 1) If we have a balanced hand (no voids or singletons and no more than one doubleton) then we can open 1NT with 15-17 points or 2NT with 20 or 21 points.
- 2) If we have 13-21 points and couldn't open 1NT or 2NT, we will open one of a suit.
- 3) If we have 22 or more points, we will open 2♣.

If your hand doesn't fit any of the above are, you pass.

Bidding Messages

Our goal in an auction is to determine two things; how high we want to play (part-score, game or even slam) and what strain we want to play in (either a specific suit or in notrump). With that in mind, our primary objective is to look for an 8 card major suit fit. If we do not have an 8 card major suit fit then we will generally play in a notrump contract. That said, playing in a minor suit contract is fine on occasion particularly if we're playing a part-score.

The Opener starts to describe the hand with the opening bid. The Responder considers what picture Opener has painted. The Responder decides whether there are enough combined points to go for one of the bonus levels (Golden Games) and what strain the partnership should play in. This makes Responder the captain.

If the opening bid is one of a suit, Responder can't make these decisions right away because opener has a wide range of possible strengths (13 to 21 total points) and distribution (balanced or unbalanced). However, Responder usually has enough information when partner opens 1NT. This shows a narrow range of points — 15, 16 or 17 — and a balanced distribution (4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2 or 5-3-3-2).

The Responder's bids will fall into one of three categories to help Responder decide on the level and strain of the final contract. These categories are essentially bidding messages to the Opener. They are called signoff, invitational and forcing bids.

- A signoff bid is a response that asks the Opener to pass.
- An invitational bid gives the Opener the opportunity to pass or bid again.
- A forcing bid requires the Opener to bid again.

You will learn more about how these three types of bids help you decide on the level and strain of the final contract throughout the course. For now, just recognize that each bid sends a message.

Responding to a 1NT Opening

When our partner opens 1NT, we have a lot of information about their hand. We can often make an immediate decision on both where we want to play and how high. Responder can have one of three hands:

- 1) A hand with 0-7 points. We know we want to play in a part-score.
- 2) A hand with 8 or 9 points. Now we're not sure. We call this an invitational hand.
- 3) A hand with 10 or more points. Now we know we want to play in game so we have a "game forcing hand".

Soon we will create a chart on our options with each of the above hand types. First, we're going to explore the wonderful world of "Conventions".

Stayman and Transfers

Much like the 2♣ opening bid that is completely artificial, there are literally thousands of similar “code words” in Bridge. They are both wonderful and terrible all at the same time. Far too many beginners get wrapped up in wanting to learn conventions as they see the better players playing “lots” of them and they assume that this is the mark of a good Bridge player. The fact is that idea couldn’t be further from the truth. My strong suggestion – don’t learn too many conventions for a very long time. That said, there are a few that are so mainstream and so important that you need to learn them and today we will start with the two most important ones. In all honesty, you could never learn any other convention and still become a very good Bridge player.

The first one we will talk about is the Stayman convention. Invented back in the 1930’s or 1940’s, it is the most widely used convention in the world. The premise is simple, when your partner opens 1NT you bid 2♣ to ask them if they have a 4 card major. They say “no” by responding 2♦. They say “yes” by bidding their lowest 4 card (or longer) major. It’s that simple! One thing to keep in mind, since this can force the auction up to 2NT, you need to have either an “invitational” or “game forcing” hand to bid Stayman. You cannot do it with a 0-7 point hand.

The idea of transfers came out not too long after Stayman. You will often hear them referred to as “Jacoby Transfers” as they were invented by Oswald Jacoby, one of the greatest Bridge players of all time. The idea is that usually, the person who opens 1NT will have the better hand amongst the two of you. Due to this, it’s advantageous for that hand to be Declared and the weaker hand to become Dummy. So here is what we do...if we have a suit we actually bid the suit immediately below the one that we have and this FORCES the 1NT opener to bid our suit! Remember, when you open 1NT you’re turning over control to your partner. Although you can also transfer to the minor suits, generally we don’t want to do that on very many hands. For now we will focus on transferring to the major suit. A 2♦ response to a 1NT opening bid FORCES Opener to rebid 2♥. Similarly, a 2♥ response to 1NT FORCES Opener to rebid 2♠.

We’ll talk more about the follow ups in the next segment. For now, we’ve learned how to ask if Opener has a 4 card major and we’ve learned how to FORCE them to bid our long major.

All Possible Responses to 1NT Opening

We are going to build a chart of what we do with the three possible hand “ranges” we discussed earlier.

	0-7 points	8 or 9 pts	10+ points
With a 6+ card Major suit	Transfer and pass	Transfer and raise to 3 level	Transfer and bid game
With a 5 card Major suit	Transfer and Pass	Transfer and bid 2NT	Transfer and bid 3NT
With a 4 card Major suit	Pass	Bid 2♣ Stayman	Bid 2♣ Stayman
With no 4 card Or longer major	Pass	Bid 2NT	Bid 3NT

At this point in our “Bridge careers” these are ALL of the possible responses that you need to know. In fact, these will serve you well forever as they cover about 97% of the responses you’d ever want to make.

Opener’s Rebids

After you’ve opened 1NT, you’re going to have almost nothing to think about afterwards as you’ve passed control over to your partner. Let’s look at what we’ll do after their possible responses:

- 1) If they pass....trick question. The auction is over when it gets back to you.
- 2) If they bid 2♣ Stayman - there are ONLY 3 possible answers you can give:
 - a. 2♦ says “I don’t have a 4 card major”.
 - b. 2♥ says “I have 4 hearts, I might also have 4 spades”.
 - c. 2♠ says “I have 4 spades, I have less than 3 hearts.”
- 3) If they bid 2♦ or 2♥ (transfers) – you MUST bid the suit above theirs. NO EXCEPTIONS!!!
- 4) If they bid 2NT – they are saying they aren’t sure if there’s enough to bid game. If you have 15 points you pass. If you have 17 points you bid 3NT. If you have 16 points....flip a mental coin. In all seriousness, my recommendation is to pass with 16 points until you’ve been playing for a while.
- 5) If they bid 3NT – you PASS! Their 3NT bid is a sign off bid demanding that you pass.

This covers all of Opener’s rebids for now.

Stayman Continuations

Once you've initiated a Stayman sequence, as we've just seen, Opener will answer with one of three possible answers; 2♦, 2♥ or 2♠. Here's Responder's possible rebids:

- 1) If Opener says they don't have a four card major or if they show one that you don't have four of:
 - a. Bid 2NT with an invitational hand (8 or 9 points).
 - b. Bid 3NT with a game forcing hand (10+ points).
- 2) If Opener shows a four card major that you also have 4 of:
 - a. Raise it to the 3 level with an invitational hand (8 or 9 points).
 - b. Raise it to the 4 level (game!) with a game forcing hand (10+ points).

For Opener, if Responder's second bid is 2NT or 3NT, you can treat it almost exactly like they had immediately responded with that bid. One exception is this:

Here's your hand: ♠K762 ♥AQ73 ♦AJ9 ♣K8

If your partner bid Stayman, you would respond 2♥. If they now bid 2NT or 3NT you know that they do not have four hearts. Wait a minute!! Why did they bid Stayman in the first place??? It's because they had 4 spades in their hand. We don't want to play this hand in notrump, we want to play it in spades. Since we have 17 points we will raise EITHER 2NT or 3NT to 4♠. If we only had 15 points, we would still raise 3NT to 4♠ but we should only raise 2NT to 3♠.

Transfer Continuations

If our partner transfers us to a major and then rebids 2NT or 3NT then we know they have exactly 5 cards in their major. If we have 3 or more cards in that major we know that we would prefer to play it in their major. So we would now always raise 3NT to 4 of the major if we have 3 or more cards. If they've rebid 2NT, we can do any of the following:

- 1) Pass if we only have two of the major and a minimum 1NT opening.
- 2) Bid 3NT if we only have two of the major but have a maximum 1NT opening.
- 3) Bid 3 of their major with 3 or more and a minimum.
- 4) Bid 4 of their major with 3 or more and a maximum.