

Hallmarks of Standard Bidding

Communication, Not Secrets

Bridge is a game of communication. Partnerships that are better at communicating information about their hands will achieve better results. But Bridge is not a game of secret messages. If your partner's call or play has an unexpected or highly unusual meaning, you're obligated to alert your opponents to the meaning conveyed. They get to have access to all the same information you do.

For new players, and especially for players returning to bridge after some time away from the game, this raises a conundrum. How are you supposed to alert your opponents to "unexpected" meanings if you don't know which meanings are "expected"?

In this newsletter, I'll look at some of the hallmarks of modern standard bidding, and point out where earlier treatments are "unusual or unexpected" in the context of the modern game.

5-card Major Opening Bids

In modern standard bidding, an opening bid of 1H or 1S promises a five-card holding in the major suit, along with opening values. The "five-card" promise applies only to *opening* bids in major suits. This has some important consequences.

First: After partner opens 1H or 1S, responder can safely raise the major even when holding only three cards in the suit.

Second: An opening bid of 1C or 1D now is made when holding as few as three cards in the minor suit, but does not deny a four-card major suit.

Third: When partner has opened a minor, and you hold responding values, you should always bid a four-card (or longer) major suit in case an eight-card fit can yet be found — but don't bid a 3-card major suit because opener almost surely does not hold five cards in a major suit.

Blackwood & Gerber

In most auctions after a trump suit has been agreed, a jump to 4NT is an Ace-asking conventional bid of the Blackwood variety.

In most notrump-family auctions, a jump to 4C is an Ace-asking conventional bid of the Gerber variety.

There are number of different systems of coded responses to the various Ace-asking bids, and continuations thereafter. Be sure you have thoroughly discussed your systems with your partner.

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Limit Raises

Consider the auction [1S-(P)-3S ...], in which responder has made a double raise of opener's major suit.

Previously, this was a game-forcing raise, showing opening values in responder's hand, along with a known 8-card fit in the major suit.

In modern standard bidding, this is a "limit raise" showing about 10-12 points and 3-card support for the major suit. The major-suit opening shows 5 cards, so there is an 8-card fit.

Some partnerships agree that the double raise shows 10-12 points and 4-card support for the major suit.

Negative Doubles

Consider the auction [1H-(2C)-Dbl ...], in which responder has made a Double of an opponent's overcall.

At one time, this Double was for penalty of the overcalled suit.

In modern standard bidding, this is a "Negative Double"—an artificial call, not for penalty. This Double generally shows that responder holds one or both of the unbid suits and normal responding values.

If your agreement is that the Double of an opponent's overcall is for penalty of the overcalled suit, talk with the Director for further guidance.

Michaels Cuebid & Unusual 2NT

When an opponent has made an opening bid, it can be very useful to show your partner a 5-5 holding in your own hand.

The Michaels Cuebid is a bid of the opponent's suit. If you are cuebidding a minor suit, you are showing 5-5 in the majors.

If you are cuebidding a major suit, you are showing 5 cards in the other major suit and 5 cards in an unspecified minor. Your partner can ask for your minor by bidding 2NT.

The Unusual 2NT call is a jump to 2NT after an opponent's opening suit bid. This bid is usually used to show a 5-5 holding in the two lowest unbid suits.

Many partnerships agree that the Michaels Cuebid convention and Unusual 2NT convention are employed with either minimum values (say, 6-10 HCP) or maximum values (16+ HCP). With values in between, generally you will overcall in the higher-ranking of your 5-card suits, and then bid the other if needed.

Adding Agreements

This newsletter is intended to present only the broadest description of each of these conventions and treatments. If you want to add any of these agreements to your partnership, seek additional sources of information.

When adding any agreements to your partnership, be sure you both understand how & when to use the convention; and the continuations after the convention is initiated.

For further guidance, talk with a local club Director.

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Strong 2 Clubs Opening

At one time, an opening bid at the 2 Level in any suit was a forcing bid that described a very strong hand with length in the suit named. These sorts of blockbuster hands are relatively rare, and many bidders wanted ways to describe weaker-than-opening hands with some distributional features instead.

In modern standard bidding, all very strong hands (22+ HCP, or 8.5+ playing tricks) are opened with a strong, artificial, and forcing bid of 2 Clubs. Responder keeps the auction alive (often with a “waiting” bid of 2D) so opener can further describe the strong hand with the first rebid.

If your agreement is that an opening bid of 2D, 2H, or 2S is a strong forcing bid, talk with the Director for further guidance.

Weak Two Openings

In modern bidding, we use opening bids of 2D, 2H, and 2S to show a hand with:

- Values between about 6 HCP and opening values
- A six-card holding in the suit bid, generally with some agreed quality
- Generally no void, no outside four-card major, and no more than one outside Ace or King

The idea of a Weak Two bid is related to the idea that a 3-Level opening bid is preemptive and shows a 7-card suit. Shorten the suit by one card and you can open the bidding with a weak bid at the 2 Level.

In the standard continuations after a Weak Two opening bid, the only nonforcing response is a raise of opener’s suit to any level. *If you are playing Weak Two bids, but your agreement is that a non-raise response is nonforcing, talk with the Director for further guidance.*

Weak Jump Overcalls

Consider the auction [(1H)-2S ...], in which you have skipped a level of bidding while overcalling the opponent’s suit bid. This is a jump overcall.

At one time, jump overcalls were used to show hands too strong for a simple overcall.

The modern style is to use a jump overcall to show a long suit and less-than-opening values. This is the same kind of hand that would open with a Weak Two bid, or even a preemptive 3- or 4-Level bid.

To show a hand that is too strong for a simple overcall, modern bidders will first Double (which initially looks like a Takeout Double), then bid their own suit on the next round of the auction.

If your agreement is that a jump overcall shows opening values or higher, talk with the Director for further guidance.

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1NT Opening of 15-17 HCP

Especially in competitive play, modern standard bidding is more aggressive than it used to be.

One example is in the modern high card point (HCP) range for an opening bid of 1NT. Whereas many experts once recommended a 1NT opening range of 16-18 HCP, modern bidding uses a range of 15-17 HCP. Many competitive bridge players use 1NT opening ranges that are even lower.

Each time your partner makes an opening bid of 1NT, you should Announce your partnership's agreed HCP range for the bid. For instance, say "fifteen to seventeen" before your RHO chooses their call.

Stayman

The Stayman convention is a bid of 2C in response to a 1NT opener. It shows 8+ HCP and exactly 4 cards in at least one major suit. Opener's rebid either denies a 4-card major suit, or shows one if it exists.

Responder's rebid clarifies the strength of responder's hand, and confirms an 8-card major suit fit if a match has been found.

Jacoby Transfers

Prior to the advent of Jacoby Transfers, when your partner opened 1NT and you held a five-card suit, you would bid that suit naturally: at the 2 Level to sign off; at the 3 Level to invite to game; and at the 4 Level to force game. The hand with the five-card suit became declarer, which would expose the strong 1NT hand as dummy.

The idea of Jacoby Transfers is to improve the playability of the hand by ensuring that the 1NT opener is the declarer in a major suit. When playing Jacoby Transfers, your partnership can no longer stop in a contract of 2D.

Playing Jacoby Transfers opposite a 1NT opening bid, the responder shows a 5+card Heart suit by bidding 2D; or a 5+card Spade suit by bidding 2H.

Opener accepts the transfer by bidding the indicated major: usually 2H over a 2D transfer bid, or 2S over a 2H transfer bid.

Further bids by responder clarify the strength of responder's hand and the length of responder's major-suit holding.

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