

Almost 2/1

[Pete Matthews Jr](https://3nt.xyz) – <https://3nt.xyz> – © November 23, 2023

This article has been removed from the Appendix of my book.

The methods described here free up jump shifts at the three level to be sensibly used for purposes other than an invitational jump shift – perhaps fit-showing (our choice), mini-splinters, or Bergen raises.

Unless both you and partner are already comfortable with Almost 2/1 methods, they probably are not worth your effort.

Responder Has a Long, Decent Suit

In addition to game-forcing hands, we make a two-over-one response on an invitational hand containing no 4-card major and a long, decent suit (instead of playing an invitational jump shift). Responder plans to show this hand by immediately rebidding the suit. When playing this way, at the top of the convention card, enter as the general approach: “2/1 GF Unless Suit Rebid.” I call this approach *Almost 2/1*, for short.

Usually, responder will hold an opening bid or better for the 2/1, and will force to game. The fundamental rule of *Almost 2/1*:

If either partner raises or bids notrump, a 2/1 auction becomes forcing to game.

Consider (again) these hands for responder:

- | | | | | | |
|----|---------|-----|----------|----------------|----------------|
| a. | ♠ A 7 3 | ♥ 9 | ♦ K 10 3 | ♣ A Q 10 8 3 2 | [game force] |
| b. | ♠ A 7 3 | ♥ 9 | ♦ 10 5 3 | ♣ A Q 10 8 3 2 | [invitational] |
| c. | ♠ Q 7 3 | ♥ 9 | ♦ 10 5 3 | ♣ K J 10 8 3 2 | [weak] |

After an opening 1♥ bid, both hands [a] and [b] respond 2♣. Unless opener shows extra values, responder plans to rebid 3♣ (non-forcing) with hand [b]; and to rebid 2NT with hand [a]. Any rebid by responder other than 3♣ effectively sets a game force. Hand [c] remains a 1NT response, planning to sign off in 3♣ (or pass 2♥).

Opener's Rebid after a 2/1 Response

Any rebid by opener below game is forcing.

New suit at two level. After a 2/1 response, opener's bid of a new suit at the two level shows a suit of four or more cards, but does not show extra values.

- Specifically, a 1 ♠ opener should always rebid 2 ♠ with four spades. This won't interfere with responder's potential invitational rebid and may be the last chance to find a 4-4 spade fit when responder has game values.
- After a 2 ♣ response to 1 ♦, opener's 2 ♦ rebid is a catch-all, still only promises 3 to 4 diamonds, and does not deny a major suit; bidding a major shows shape (at least five diamonds and four of the major) but not extra values. Over any of these rebids, responder's 3 ♣ is invitational and non-forcing.

After the 2 ♦ rebid, responder's bid of a major suit shows game values; it may show a real suit, or just a stopper. We need a bidding trick to sort this out:

- opener's raise of the major shows 4-card support *without* a stopper in the other major;
- opener's jump to 3 NT shows 4-card support for the major, *with* a stopper in the other major.

2 NT or 3 NT. Per the rule, opener's 2 NT sets a game force, and thus requires extra values (a medium hand). Opener also needs a stopper in each of the unbid suits. Opener's jump rebid of 3 NT shows a large hand (at least 18 HCP). The meanings of these rebids differ from playing full 2/1.

Raise. Raising responder's suit shows extra values and sets a game force. If the raised suit is hearts, then hearts are trump, and spades cannot become trump (a practical rule subject to discussion). If a minor suit has been raised, then responder's immediate bid of opener's major sets that suit as trump, and the minor suit is no longer trump. If the minor suit is trump and 3 NT cannot be played, it is possible to play in a 5-2 fit in opener's major or a 4-3 fit in the other major.

Splinter. Other than 3 ♡, any jump shift by opener is a splinter, promising extra values, at least 4-card support for partner, and a singleton or void in the bid suit.

High reverse or 3 ♡. Opener's non-jump rebid of a new suit at the three level shows extra values and often a 5-card suit, is forcing, and promises another bid unless game has been reached. The 1 ♠ opener's jump shift to 3 ♡ promises five hearts and high reverse values; rebidding 2 ♡ and following with 3 ♡ shows a lesser hand.

2 M and 3 M. Opener's jump rebid in the opening major suit sets trump and demands control-bidding toward slam. Promising a suit with at most one loser opposite a void, this jump rebid is forcing to game, but no higher. Serious 3 NT applies.

Opener's two-level rebid of the opening major suit is a catch-all. It shows a hand that is unsuitable for any other bid. It may conceal extra values, lacking requirements for a stronger bid (such as a stopper for 2 NT). It may conceal a fit for responder, lacking the values to force to game.

Responder's Two-Level Preference to Opener's Major Suit

Responder may be stuck for a rebid. Suppose the 1 ♠ opener rebids 2 ♡ and responder holds:

♠ K 9 ♡ A 7 3 ♦ 10 3 ♣ A Q 10 8 3 2

We must not raise opener's second suit (hearts) with only three cards, we do not have a diamond stopper for 2 NT, and 3 ♣ would not be forcing. The answer is a preference to 2 ♠, which (being a raise) is forcing to game, but does not commit the partnership to play in spades. Opener should expect a doubleton containing one of the top three honors, or three cards lacking a top honor. With stronger spade support, responder usually jumps to 3 ♠.

If opener instead rebids 2 ♠, we cannot bid that, so we bid 3 ♡, the stopper we have, to force to game. If partner shows four hearts by raising, we can play there in the 4-3 fit; holding one fewer heart, we would convert to four spades. (Since 3 ♡ only shows a stopper, the raise does not set trump, and 4 ♠ is not kickback. Game over slam.)

Searching for 3 NT after a Two-Level Response

Example 1:

This opening 1♥ bid is not strong enough for a 2 NT rebid, so over a 2♣ response, opener rebids 2♥:

♠ K 10 2 ♥ K 10 8 3 2 ♦ A 9 7 ♣ K 4

With that beautiful club honor and prime stoppers, this hand should convert responder's non-forcing 3♣ rebid to 3NT. Here is hand [b] again – 3 NT only requires the clubs to run:

b. ♠ A 7 3 ♥ 9 ♦ 10 5 3 ♣ A Q 10 8 3 2 (invitational)

Example 2:

If opener rebids 2 NT, hand [b] raises to 3 NT. Change hand [b] to:

♠ 7 3 ♥ A 9 ♦ K 10 3 ♣ K J 10 8 3 2

and responder bids 3♦ over 2 NT, showing doubt about spades. Another rule:

When two suits are in doubt, bidding one of them shows a stopper in the suit bid.

Example 3:

Consider this related auction:

1♥ – 2♣; 2♥ – 3♣; 3♦ – 3♠

Here is the rule for this 3♠ bid:

When one suit is in doubt, bidding it asks for a stopper, or in a pinch, half a stopper.

We are definitely in a pinch, with this auction. Opener's 3♦ shows a diamond stopper. With a solid spade stopper, responder would bid 3 NT, so 3♠ here asks for half a stopper (and shows a half stopper): either ♠Q-x or ♠J-x-x. This pair of holdings, one in each hand, cannot be attacked by the defense without yielding the lead to declarer. Responder might hold:

♠ J 7 3 ♥ Q 9 ♦ 10 3 ♣ A K J 8 3 2

If all this stopper bidding and asking does not pan out, we play four or five of responder's suit, or four of opener's major.

Avoiding the High Reverse

Here is a hand I held in a pairs event:

♠ Q 10 9 8 3 ♥ A 10 ♦ 5 ♣ K Q 8 3 2

With 21 Bergen points (11 HCP [all working] + 10 cards in the two longest suits), this is a clear opening bid. 2/1 Bidders open 1 ♠, without a care in the world. If the response is two of a red suit, these folks continue with 3 ♣, since they are already forced to game. Playing 2/1, a *high reverse* is OK with this hand. This may or may not work out well, but the strategy is simple.

Playing Almost 2/1, the high reverse does show extra values. After opening 1 ♠ on my hand, opener would have to rebid 2 ♠ over a red suit response. The club suit could get lost, but this auction is appropriate if spades are much stronger than clubs.

The solution, dating back to Goren and before, is to open this hand with 1 ♣, and then plan to bid spades twice. Since partner is clued in, this works fine, unless the opponents get in the way. Use this method to show a minimum 5-5 hand with the black suits. Open this stronger hand 1 ♠, prepared to follow with a high reverse to 3 ♣:

♠ A Q 10 9 3 ♥ A 10 ♦ 5 ♣ K Q 8 3 2

Conclusion

Almost 2/1 is my preferred method, with a partner already comfortable with it. It solves significant problems in the 2/1 Game Force system, while keeping responder's jump shifts available for special uses – but the cost of learning it has become too high.

Backstory

In the 1970s, my ex-wife Val Montanus and I had a string of second place finishes in club games, playing Kaplan-Sheinwold. Switching to strong notrumps improved our results to many firsts – and entry fees back to a young couple. In that era before lebensohl, the weak notrump proved to be a disadvantage at matchpoints, especially when vulnerable.

Strong notrump systems descended from Kaplan-Sheinwold are often called Eastern Scientific. Some of the world champion Dallas Aces played Almost 2/1 methods, described by Bobby Goldman in *Aces Scientific* (1978). A reference on Almost 2/1 methods is Mike Lawrence's *Workbook*.

Many years ago, I laid out two full systems for Almost 2/1 to handle { 1 \diamond – 2 \clubsuit }, and presented them to Gary. The other is lost to posterity; our method is presented in my article "Responding to One Diamond with Clubs," also available at 3NT.ZYX.