

Improving 2/1 Game Force - Part 1

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Originally Published in Canadian Master Point, November, 1993
Repaired December, 2018, Pete Matthews Jr.

A great many club and tournament players these days write "Two Over One Game Force" in the General Approach area of their convention cards. The main advantage of playing 2/1 is that the early establishment of a game force allows for extra bidding space to explore for slam or choose the right game contract. There are two main weaknesses inherent to the 2/1 system:

1. You cannot play in 1NT if your partner opens the bidding with one of a major. The 1NT response is forcing.
2. Responder often has a rebid problem after his forcing 1NT when opener rebids 2 of a minor (possibly a 3 card suit) due to the wide high card ranges and many possible distributions of both hands.

If you are going to play 2/1 you better get used to these problems since there isn't much you can do about them. The way that most partnerships play 2/1 creates many other problems that are not inherent to the system. The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the problems caused by the way that most people use 2/1 and to suggest some solutions.

PROBLEM 1: The lack of definition of the 2/1

Since a 2/1 response to a major suit opening is a game force, many pairs use a 2/1 simply to establish a force without regard to the fact that they may be misdescribing their hands. They assume that all of the room that they save will allow them to "catch up later". They are wrong. Imagine, for example, that you hold:

♠ A Q x x x x ♡ x ♦ A x x ♣ Q x x

You open 1 ♠ and your partner bids 2 ♣, forcing to game. You rebid 2 ♠ and partner raises to 3 ♠. Do you like your hand? You should. Despite your minimum point count you have good trumps, good controls and a good fit for partner's suit. Unfortunately, partner's "suit" may not really be a suit. Partner could have:

♠ K J x ♥ A K x x ♦ K x ♣ J x x x

where even the five level is not safe. On the other hand, if you reverse partner's hearts and clubs slam is laydown. If you reverse your hearts and clubs, slam is also laydown. Would you like your hand as much if you had a singleton in your partner's suit? You shouldn't, but when a 2/1 can show just about any balanced hand with game forcing values you are asking for trouble like this. There are several popular solutions to this sort of problem. Most of them involve making some other bid besides a 2/1 when responder has a balanced game force with 3 card support for opener's major. Some players bid 1NT forcing followed by a jump to four of opener's major as showing a balanced 13-15 with 3 card support. Some players play that a 3NT response to a major suit opening shows this type of hand. Variations of the Swiss convention use jumps to the four level to show various balanced raises. All of these methods have the problem that they take up too much room and make it impossible to find out how well the hands fit at a safe level.

The solution that I suggest is to use a 2NT response to a major suit opening just like Goren did - as a game-forcing balanced hand with 13-15 HCP (you can play that it could also show 19+ with a 3NT response showing 16-18). The 2NT response can (and frequently does) contain 3 card support for opener's major. 2NT usually should not contain a side 5 card suit (make a 2/1 with that), but if you have a really bad five card suit (like Qxxxx) in an otherwise suitable hand, it may be best to bid 2NT rather than make a 2/1. Opener's rebids after the 2NT bid are natural. Opener will bid another 4 card or longer suit if he has one giving responder a chance to take preference with 3 cards in opener's major. Opener can rebid his major when he has 6 or more cards or bid 3NT or 4NT (quantitative) with 5332. Over

opener's 3NT rebid responder may elect to pass with 3 card support for opener's major, especially if he is 4333.

As a consequence, a 2/1 response will almost always show a good 5 card or longer suit - a source of tricks. Having this information will frequently help opener decide how well the hands fit and if a slam try is warranted. It will also allow opener to feel more comfortable with raising the 2/1 suit with 3 card support.

If you currently play Jacoby 2NT, you will have to find another way to make a forcing raise of opener's major. I suggest using the cheapest jump shift (1♥ – 2♠ and 1♠ – 3♣) as a forcing raise. Hands for strong jump shifts are very uncommon and modern methods like 2/1 and fourth suit forcing are usually effective for dealing with these hand types. If you play Bergen raises, the 3♣ response to 1♠ may already have a use. In this case, I suggest that you make 3♦ and 3♥ your Bergen raises over 1♠. I will not get into my suggested responses to the 2♠ and 3♣ forcing raises here – perhaps in another article.

PROBLEM 2: The (misguided) principle of fast arrival

You hold this hand:

♠ x x x ♥ A Q J x x ♦ A x ♣ K J x

You open 1♥, partner forces to game with 2♣. You raise to 3♣ (isn't it nice to know partner has a good five card suit?) and partner jumps to 4♥. What should you do now? If you play 2/1 the way that most pairs do, partner's unnecessary jump in a forcing auction shows a minimum hand (the principle of fast arrival). That information is not very useful here. Opposite this minimum:

♠ A x ♥ K x x ♦ x x ♣ A Q x x x x

you have a laydown grand slam. Opposite this minimum:

♠ Q x x ♥ K x x ♦ K x ♣ A Q x x x x

the five level is not safe. The problem here is the jump to 4 ♥. This bid prevents your finding out at a safe level whether or not a spade control exists. The theory, of course, is that without "fast arrival", neither partner ever gets to express whether or not they have extra values. Standard 2/1 places such a large emphasis on bidding out your pattern and finding out how well the hands fit that the bidding is often at a high level before either partner has been able to limit his hand. Using fast arrival gives responder a chance to say that he has a minimum 2/1. Unfortunately, the price that must be paid for limiting responder's hand is too high. There are simply too many times that you need the four level for cue-bidding, especially when opener's hand is virtually unlimited (as is usually the case in 2/1 auctions). Even if both opener and responder are minimum, twelve tricks can easily exist if the hands fit well. Here is the solution that I propose:

In the above auction (1 ♥ – 2 ♣ – 3 ♣) and in all similar 2/1 auctions in which responder can raise opener's major for the first time at the three level:

- A jump to four of opener's major, instead of a raise at the three level, is a picture jump. A picture jump shows good trump support, a good suit of your own (promised by the 2/1) and no first or second round control in any unbid suit. Opener usually has such a good picture of responder's hand that he can place the contract (sometimes after using Keycard Blackwood). Here is an example of a hand for a jump to 4 ♥ by responder in the auction we have been discussing:

♠ Q x ♥ K x x x ♦ x x ♣ A Q J x x

- A jump in a new suit is a splinter (a singleton in the suit bid), but it is very well defined. Like the picture jump it shows good trumps and a good 5 card 2/1 suit. The splinter bid denies first or second round control in the unbid suit. Also, do not splinter with a singleton Ace or with a void. Here is an example of a splinter bid of 4 ♦ in the above auction:

♠ x x x ♥ K x x x ♦ x ♣ A Q J x x

Once again, responder's hand is so well-defined that opener will frequently be able to place the contract. In the above example, opener will know that:

♠ A x x ♥ A Q J x x ♦ x x ♣ K J x

produces slam while the same hand with the ♦ A instead of the ♠ A belongs at the four level. Notice that in the auction that we have been discussing, responder never mentions the word "hearts": the raise is implicit. It is certainly not obvious that the splinter should be in support of hearts (as opposed to clubs) and you should have an explicit partnership understanding before making this kind of bid.

- With all other hands with 3 card or more support for opener's major, raise at the three level (auctions in which you can raise at the two level are different - perhaps I will discuss those in another article). Since both opener's and responder's hands are virtually unlimited at this point, it is necessary to have a way for either partner to show genuine slam interest. The answer is a convention called "Serious 3NT" (John Gowdy discussed Serious 3NT in a previous issue of Canadian Masterpoint). Here is the definition of serious 3NT:

When an 8 card or longer major suit fit is agreed at the three level and the bidding is forced to game, a bid of 3NT by either partner is completely artificial. It says: "partner I have serious slam interest, please cue-bid for me."

If you fail to bid serious 3NT when you have the opportunity and cue-bid instead, that carries the following message: "Partner, I do not have serious slam interest, but I am cue-bidding in case you do."

What should you cue-bid? In my partnerships with Geoff Hampson and Sheri Winestock we have found the following approach very successful: I suggest that a cue-bid in partner's 2/1 suit shows one of the top three honours (Ace, King, or Queen). A cue-bid of your own 2/1 suit shows two of the top three honours. A cue-bid in an unbid suit shows any first or second round control (Ace, King, singleton, or void). Cue-

bidding is always done up the line. By skipping a step, you deny an appropriate holding in the step that you skip. 4NT by either partner is always Roman Keycard Blackwood. Some consequences of this approach to slam bidding:

- It is impossible to get to the five level off two quick tricks in any suit.
- It is almost never necessary to cue-bid at the five level. In case you haven't noticed, cue-bidding at the five level is usually a sign of desperation - you don't know what to do so you cue-bid at the five level to transfer the decision to your partner.
- You will never get too high when neither partner has the extra values or knowledge of a good fit needed for a serious slam try.
- You can never play in 3NT when you have an eight card major suit fit after a 2/1 auction. Some players (Irving Litvack for example) would find this to be a big enough problem that they would not consider playing this method. In my experience, playing in 3NT in these sorts of auctions is the least of your problems. This is especially true when responder is known to have at least a five card 2/1 suit and the odds are high that at least one person has an unbalanced hand and/or has extra values.

Here are some examples of using serious 3NT and the cue-bidding style that I recommend in 2/1 auctions:

EXAMPLE 1:

♠ K J x x x
♥ A x x
♦ Q x
♣ Q x x

1 ♠
2 ♠
4 ♦
5 ♥

♠ A Q x
♥ x
♦ A K J 10 x x
♣ A x x

2 ♦
3 ♠
4 NT
7 NT

Opener's 4 ♦ denies serious slam interest (else 3NT) and denies first or second round club control (else 4 ♣), but shows one of the top three honours in diamonds. Responder can count 13 tricks.

EXAMPLE 2:

♠ A Q J x x
♥ A x
♦ K x x x
♣ Q x

♠ K x x x
♥ K Q
♦ A Q J x x
♣ J x

1 ♠
3 ♦
3 NT
4 ♠

2 ♦
3 ♠
4 ♦
Pass

Opener's 3NT shows serious slam interest. Responder's 4 ♦ shows good diamonds but denies a club control. Opener's 4 ♠ is an absolute sign-off - a statement that no club control exists. Responder, despite holding extra values, must pass.

EXAMPLE 3:

♠ A J 10 x x
♥ K J x
♦ x
♣ Q x x x

♠ K Q x
♥ x x x
♦ A K Q J x x
♣ A

1 ♠
2 ♠
4 ♥
5 ♦

2 ♦
3 ♠
4 NT
6 ♠

4 ♥ denies serious slam interest, a club control, and a top honour in diamonds (do not cue-bid shortness in partner's suit). A heart control is all responder needs to know about.

What would happen if you exchange opener's honours in hearts and clubs?

EXAMPLE 4:

♠ A J 10 x x	♠ K Q x
♥ Q x x	♥ x x x
♦ x	♦ A K Q J x x
♣ K J x x	♣ A
1 ♠	2 ♦
2 ♠	3 ♠
4 ♣	4 ♦
4 ♠	Pass

When responder bids 4 ♦, he is announcing serious slam interest. This is due to the fact that opener has denied serious slam interest by not bidding 3NT. Responder would sign off over 4 ♣ if he did not have serious slam interest of his own. Opener is now obligated to show a heart control if he has one. When opener bids 4 ♠, responder knows that the defense can take at least the first two heart tricks.

EXAMPLE 5:

♠ K x x	♠ Q x
♥ A J x x x x	♥ K x x
♦ x x	♦ A Q x x x x
♣ K x	♣ A Q
1 ♥	2 ♦
2 ♥	3 ♥
3 ♠	3 NT
4 ♣	4 ♦
4 ♥	Pass

When hearts is agreed at the three level, opener must bid 3 ♠ if he has a control in spades. Any other bid would deny a spade control (3NT would be Serious with no spade control). Responder has extra values and shows this by bidding 3NT. 4 ♣ shows a control and 4 ♦ shows two of the top three honours. When opener does not take charge (by bidding Blackwood),

despite the fact that all suits are known to be controlled, responder knows that opener must be minimum. Responder has bid out his hand and should pass 4 ♥.

EXAMPLE 6:

♠ A x x
♥ A K J x x x
♦ A J
♣ x x

♠ Q x
♥ Q x x
♦ K Q x x x
♣ K Q x

1 ♥
2 ♥
3 ♠
4 NT
6 ♠

2 ♦
3 ♥
4 ♣
5 ♣

Responder, despite having a terrible hand, must bid 4 ♣ because opener is still unlimited (remember, Serious 3NT by opener would deny a spade control). Responder can take some comfort in the fact that his 4 ♣ cue-bid denies serious slam interest. In this example, opener can take over once he learns that responder can stop clubs.

As you may have realized by now, the approach to cue-bidding in 2/1 auctions that I recommend is quite a bit different from the fast arrival methods that most 2/1ers play. I suggest that if you decide to adopt this approach you and your partner should discuss it thoroughly first. Serious 3NT is a convention for serious players. It is not something that you can casually adopt. If you are really serious about this, you might ask me about a convention called Last Train to Clarksville. Last Train is a convention that fills some of the holes in the cue-bidding style that I recommend (holes that my carefully constructed examples do not fall into).

If there is one lesson to be learned from this article it is that there is considerably more to effective bidding than just writing down the name of a convention or a system on your convention card. Good partnership agreements are much more important than the system that you play. If you and your partner decide to

play a complex non-standard system, put in the time to do it right. Discuss your auctions and make sure you understand why you play bids to mean what they do. When you truly understand your system, you will start to see the benefits in your results.