

Improving 2/1 Game Force - Part 2

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I have written an article in each and every issue of Canadian Masterpoint. In the last issue (November 1993) I wrote my first article about bidding, specifically on improving the way that most people play 2/1 game force. Much to my surprise, I received far more fan mail than usual for this article. Many people requested a follow-up article. Well readers, you asked for it! I recommend that you (re-)read the November 1993 article (and make some coffee) before reading this. I apologize in advance for how technical this article is. I have tried to keep things as simple as possible. Unfortunately, the subject is complex.

What is "Last Train to Clarksville"?

"Last Train to Clarksville" (LTTC) is a convention I mentioned in my last article. I claimed that it was necessary to make the method of cue-bidding that I recommend effective. LTTC is not an easy convention to understand. It can mean different things depending on exactly how the auction has gone. There are 2 rules that can at least tell you when a bid is LTTC.

1) We have an agreed 8+ card major suit fit at the 3-level and the bidding is forced to game. We have embarked upon a cue-bidding auction of the type discussed in the last article. One hand has shown serious slam interest. There are 2 ways to show serious slam interest. One way is by bidding Serious 3NT. The other way is by continuing to try for slam despite the fact that partner has denied serious slam interest by bypassing Serious 3NT.

2) The bid by either partner of the step immediately below 4 of our agreed major (4 \diamond if hearts agreed, 4 \heartsuit if spades agreed) is LTTC.

Before I attempt to tell you how LTTC is used, I first want to define what I mean by "Blackwood" in this article:

We play some sort of Roman Keycard Blackwood. This means that the King of the agreed trump suit counts as a fifth Ace and it is possible to find out about the trump Queen. By bidding Blackwood, you commit the hand to the six level if only one of these cards is missing. You cannot use Blackwood and sign off when you discover that only one of these six cards is missing. Since people seem to do this all of the time against me, perhaps it is an acceptable practice in some schools of bidding theory. It is not an acceptable practice in the methods I am discussing. Hopefully, you will gain some insight into why this is so as you read my examples.

I will also refer to a convention called Lackwood. As you will see, when you play LTTC, you can no longer cue-bid in the LTTC suit (Diamonds if Hearts is agreed, Hearts if Spades is agreed). Lackwood can be used to resolve any problems of missing controls in the LTTC suit while retaining the possibility of bidding grand slams.

Lackwood is always a bid of 5 of the agreed major. It is either a bid immediately after LTTC or as a direct raise of 4 of the agreed major. Bidding Lackwood always denies control of the LTTC suit. Lackwood is a last resort. It is a convention you should go out of your way not to use. Most of the time you can infer the presence or absence of a control in the LTTC suit and simply bid Blackwood. Here are the responses to Lackwood:

PASS	I have no control in the LTTC suit
1st step	First round control of LTTC suit & 0 or 3 Keycards
2nd step	First round control of LTTC suit & 1 or 4 Keycards
3rd step	First round control of LTTC suit & 2 Keycards no Queen
4th step	First round control of LTTC suit & 2 Keycards & Queen
6 trump	Second round control of LTTC suit

If you play 1430 RKCB feel free to invert the 1st and 2nd steps.

There is no simple rule for what it means to bid LTTC since it doesn't always mean the same thing. Assuming that we have agreed a major suit at the 3-level, there are 16 possible LTTC sequences. In 4 of these sequences, it is necessary to play that LTTC has a very specific meaning.

AUCTION 1:

	1 ♠
2 ♦	2 ♠
3 ♠	3 NT
4 ♦	4 ♥ [LTTC]

In Auction 1, 3NT is serious. 4 ♦ shows good Diamonds and denies a control in Clubs (see last article). 4 ♥ is LTTC. In this example LTTC means:

"Partner, I have forced you to cue-bid and I do not know how good your hand is. If I was to bid 4 ♠ it would be an absolute signoff, a statement that we have at least 2 Club losers. I have the Club control that you are lacking, but my hand is flawed in some way so that I cannot bid Blackwood. Perhaps you have sufficient strength to move towards slam (by bidding Blackwood or Lackwood depending on the Heart situation).

AUCTION 2:

	1 ♥
2 ♦	2 ♥
3 ♥	3 NT
4 ♦ [LTTC]	

In Auction 2, 3NT is serious but it denies a Spade control (else 3 ♠). 4 ♦ is LTTC (denying a Club control). In this example LTTC means:

"Partner, you have shown a strong hand with no control in Spades. If I also had no Spade control, I would bid 4 ♥ as an absolute signoff. I cannot bid 4 ♣ (showing both Spades and Clubs controlled) or bid above 4 ♥ because I do not have a Club control. Therefore, I am bidding LTTC. Since my hand is still unlimited, you are expected to continue (Blackwood or

Lackwood depending on the Diamond situation) any time you have a Club control."

AUCTION 3:

2 ♥	1 ♠
3 ♠	2 ♠
4 ♣	3 NT
	4 ♥ [LTTC]

In Auction 3, 3NT is serious and 4 ♣ is a cue-bid. 4 ♥ is LTTC, denying a Diamond control. In this example, LTTC means:

"Partner, I have taken control of the auction, but I am lacking a Diamond control. If you do not have a Diamond control either, please signoff. Otherwise, please bid Blackwood or Lackwood depending on the Heart situation."

By bidding 4 ♠ instead of 4 ♥ (LTTC) the message would be:

"Partner, I have shown extra values, but I am lacking a Diamond control. If you have a Diamond control please use your judgement as to whether you should bid PASS or bid Blackwood or Lackwood depending on the Heart situation."

AUCTION 4:

2 ♥	1 ♠
3 ♠	2 ♠
4 ♥ [LTTC]	4 ♣

In Auction 4, 4 ♣ is a cue-bid denying serious slam interest (else 3NT). 4 ♥ is LTTC. In this example LTTC means:

"Partner, you have told me that you have a minimum hand, but I am still interested in slam. However, I am lacking a Diamond control. If you also have no control of Diamonds, please signoff. Otherwise, please bid Blackwood or Lackwood depending on the Heart situation."

In the first two auctions, LTTC is a statement that a control exists in a particular suit. In the last two auctions, LTTC is a question that asks for a control in a particular suit. In all of these auctions, LTTC is completely artificial, saying nothing about the suit mentioned.

There are 12 more possible LTTC auctions where the meaning of LTTC is not clear. Here are some examples:

AUCTION 5:

	1 ♠
2 ♥	2 ♠
3 ♠	4 ♦
4 ♥ [LTTC]	

4 ♦ is a cue-bid denying serious slam interest and denying a club control. What does 4 ♥ mean? It must show extra values and a club control. Without either of these, you would signoff in 4 ♠. There are 3 possible further interpretations (of which only one can be used):

- 1) A cue-bid of a Heart control, but in a hand with not quite enough strength to bid Blackwood. The message is that the other hand should use their judgement as to whether or not to bid Blackwood.
- 2) A denial of a Heart control. The message is that the other hand must bid Blackwood with a Heart control and bid 4 ♠ otherwise.
- 3) Neither showing nor denying a Heart control. The message here is that the 4 ♥ bidder is still interested in slam, but needs help somewhere. Their partner can choose to bid Blackwood with a Heart control or Lackwood without one.

AUCTION 6:

	1 ♥
2 ♦	2 ♥
3 ♥	4 ♦ [LTTC]

4 ♦ clearly denies spade and club controls as well as serious slam interest. This time there are only 2 possible interpretations (of which only one can be used):

1) A cue-bid of a Diamond control. Bidding 4 ♥ instead would deny a Diamond control.

2) Neither showing nor denying a Diamond control but showing a good hand given what has been denied (a good minimum with no control in spades or clubs - chances are you would have a Diamond control). This interpretation implies that you could sometimes bid 4 ♥ with a really bad hand and a Diamond control. With a really good hand with controls in Spades and Clubs, the 3 ♥ bidder can still choose to bid either Blackwood or Lackwood (depending on the Diamond situation).

I prefer to play interpretation 3) in Auction 5 and interpretation 2) in Auction 6. These interpretations cause there to be a little bit of murkiness in an otherwise highly structured cue-bidding style. In my experience, however, the partner of the LTTC bidder can almost always figure out when to advance. Therefore, I am going to propose the following interpretation of LTTC for auctions other than auctions 1-4.

Bidding LTTC means that you are still interested in slam, but do not have sufficient values or controls to bid Blackwood. You would like to involve your partner's judgement.

If your hand is suitable for Blackwood, but you lack a control in the LTTC suit, bid LTTC, not Lackwood. Hopefully, partner will take over and bid Blackwood. If partner signs off you can still judge to use Lackwood if you want.

Bidding 4 of the agreed major instead of LTTC is an absolute signoff when:

1. Partner has shown a missing control.
2. Partner has denied serious slam interest and you have not yet limited your hand.

Bidding 4 of the agreed major instead of LTTC shows a lesser hand than bidding LTTC but does not preclude slam when:

1. You have made a serious slam try and there are no suits (besides the LTTC suit) with unresolved control problems.
2. Your partner has made a serious slam try and there are no suits (besides the LTTC suit) with unresolved control problems.

Here is a summary of the structure I have described:

When an 8+ card major suit fit is agreed at the three level and the bidding is forced to game (as in 2/1 auctions):

- Cue-bidding starts one step above 3 of the agreed major. Cue-bidding is done "up-the-line". Bypassing a step denies something.
- A cue-bid in an unbid suit shows any first or second round control (Ace, King, singleton, or void).
- A cue-bid in the first suit you have bid shows two of the top three honours. A cue-bid in a suit your partner has bid shows one of the top three honours.
- 4NT is always some form of Roman Keycard Blackwood. RKCB is forcing to slam if only one Keycard or the trump Queen is absent.
- 3NT shows "serious slam interest". A better description is that it assumes the captaincy, forcing partner to cue-bid. By bidding serious 3NT you force yourself to show your (unlimited) partner any controls he has denied (possibly via LTTC, see auction 1 above).
- Bypassing 3NT to cue-bid denies "serious slam interest". A better description is such a bid relinquishes captaincy. That is you will respect your partner's sign-off, but respond appropriately to his slam try having already got the minimum nature of your hand off your chest.
- Bidding the last step below 4 of our major (4 \diamond for Hearts, 4 \heartsuit for Spades) is Last Train to Clarksville. Bidding LTTC versus bidding 4 of our major can carry different messages. LTTC means either:
 1. I have a specific control that you denied.
 2. Please tell me if you have a specific control.
 3. I want you to use your judgement.
 4. Some combination of 1, 2, and 3.

There are a few other aspects of these methods that you should know about:

1. Play 1430 RKCB instead of 0314. I will not explain why in this article.
2. If Hearts is the agreed suit, play that a bid of 4 ♠ is a "transfer to Blackwood". This is an especially useful bid if you want to bid RKCB but fear a response of 5 ♠ (2 with the Queen) will get you too high. Having your partner bid Blackwood will solve the problem. You should also bid 4 ♠ instead of 4NT if your own RKCB response would be 5 ♣ and you lack the trump Queen (you can figure out why).
3. Whenever a major suit is agreed, a bid of five of any other suit is "Exclusion RKCB". This means that you have a void in the bid suit and you want to know how many Keycards your partner has, not counting the ace of your void. Before you make this sort of bid, make sure none of the possible responses will get you too high if you are off two keycards.

2) and 3) have serious disaster potential. Always remember WE NEVER CUE-BID AT THE FIVE LEVEL.

If you and your partner feel that you thoroughly understand this article and my last one, you are probably ready to try these methods. I suggest that you practice bidding with computer generated hands (I sell them) before you actually try playing the structure I have described.

The rules are not clear in this area, but I think it is best not to alert serious 3NT, LTTC, or your cue-bids. Instead inform the opponents as to what your auction meant before the opening lead is made.