

THE KLEINMAN 2NT

Standard 2NT and 3NT responses to opening suit bids show balanced hands with neither primary support for opener's suit nor a 4-card major that can be bid at the 1-level. 2NT shows 13-15 HCP, 3NT shows 16-18 HCP. I call the standard 3NT response the "Old Slam Killer," for it requires that the hunt for a suit-fit (essential to good slam bidding) begin at the 4-level.

After a 3NT response, there simply isn't enough bidding space to seek slam intelligently. Most sequences are laden with trouble, for with an unbalanced hand, opener faces three tasks: (1) finding the right strain, (2) showing or denying slam interest; (3) showing the controls that are needed for slam. Sometimes he cannot accomplish even the first of these tasks. For example, suppose the auction begins 1♠-3NT (Old Slam Killer); 4♥. Can responder tell whether opener has four hearts or five, a bare minimum or extra values, strong major-suit holdings or weak? No. Can responder tell whether opener is unbalanced or merely semi-balanced, in which minor (if either) opener is short, and whether opener's short minor is a singleton or a void? Again no. Though this is the most troublesome Old Slam Killer auction, others present some of the same problems.

A 3NT response to an opening suit bid should terminate the hunt for a suit fit. The simplest way for it to do so is by promising primary support for opener's suit. When that suit is a minor, 3NT may be the right contract, so a 3NT response should show a balanced hand with stoppers and deny interest in a major-suit game.

The standard 2NT response presents no problems. However, it is also largely superfluous. With a hand that qualifies, responder can bid a new suit and jump to 3NT at his second turn. Pairs that use a forcing 1NT response to a major-suit opening may agree to play a 2NT rebid by a 2-over-1 responder as forcing, giving responder another way to force to game with a balanced hand.

The real trouble hands are the balanced 16-18 HCP responding hands. These are not quite strong enough to jump-shift, but too strong merely to start with a suit response then bid 3NT showing mere game values (13-15 HCP). With such hands, using standard methods, responders must often "manufacture" 3rd- or 4th-suit bids to force, bidding balanced hands as if they were distributional, a practice that is not conducive to accurate game and slam bidding.

More than 50 years ago, some British experts devised a means of coping with these trouble hands: the Baron 2NT response, which shows a balanced 16-18 HCP. The *Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* and comprehensive reference books like *Modern Bridge Conventions* (by Bill Root and Richard Pavlicek) and *Bridge Conventions Complete* (by Amalya Kearse) say that the Baron 2NT swaps the meanings of the standard 2NT and 3NT responses. If so, then the Baron 2NT, though a step in the right direction, is still inadequate. Giving all due credit to the authors of the Baron 2NT, I propose some modifications that make it more useful and efficient.

First, the Kleinman 2NT may be used independently of any meaning assigned to the 3NT response: it doesn't require that a 3NT response show a balanced 13-15 HCP.

Second, responder bypasses a 4-card major that he could bid at the 1-level and bids 2NT routinely with a balanced 16-18 HCP hand.

Third, the Kleinman 2NT includes a prescription for finding a suit fit after a 2NT response. If opener knows that the hand belongs in notrump, he raises to the appropriate level. If opener thinks that the hand may belong in a suit contract, he bids "extra length" in any suit in which the partnership may belong (normally "up-the-line"). With a 4=2=3=4 pattern, for example, opener bids 1♣-2NT; 3♠. Unless opener has a fifth spade and intends rebidding spades at his third turn, this 3♠ rebid denies a fifth club. With a 4=2=2=5 pattern, opener's rebid depends on his evaluation of partnership prospects. If he thinks the hand may belong in slam, he bids 1♣-2NT; 3♣, planning to bid 3♠ over responder's possible 3♦ or ♥3 next. If he thinks that the hand belongs only in game, he bids 1♣-2NT; 3♠. Likewise, with a 4=2=5=2 pattern, after 1♦-2NT, opener rebids 3♠ with only game values but 3♦ with slam hopes. However, with a 2=2=5=4 pattern, after 1♦-2NT, opener rebids 3NT with only game values but 3♣ with slam hopes. If opener rebids 3♦ and then bids 4♣ at his third turn, he shows six diamonds and four clubs.

After opener rebids, responder also shows extra length (always up-the-line). For example, with a 4=4=3=2 hand, responder bids 1♦-2NT; 3♦-3♥ to find a heart fit if opener has four hearts and longer diamonds. Some inferences may be drawn from responder's rebid: 1♦-2NT; 3♦-3NT, for example, suggests a 3=3=3=4 pattern. 1♦-2NT; 3♦-4♦ suggests a 3=3=4=3 pattern (with four diamonds and another 4-card suit, he might have jump-shifted). 1♦-2NT; 3♦-3♠ not only denies four hearts, but also suggests fewer than four diamonds (with four diamonds and four spades, responder might have jump-shifted).

If you use the Kleinman 2NT in response to major-suit openings as well as minors, and do not play jump raises of major-suit openings as forcing, you may want to use a 3NT response to a major-suit opening as an artificial balanced forcing raise. However, it is possible to use the Kleinman 2NT in response only to minor-suit openings and use a 2NT response to a major as an artificial forcing raise (an efficient treatment played by many pairs). In that case, a 3NT response to 1♥ or 1♠ may be used as a *displaced* splinter. For example, the standard 1♥-3♠ splinter lets the next player double to suggest a profitable save, but 1♥-3NT (surrogate spade splinter) does not. A 3NT response to a major may also be used as

part of a set of splinter raises that distinguishes voids from singletons. For example, 4♣, 4♦ and 4♥ responses to 1♠ may be used as *void* splinters (or *displaced* void splinters), with a 3NT response showing a singleton in an unspecified suit (if interested in slam, opener can bid 4♣ to ask which suit).

Some pairs who play a 2♣ response to 1♦ as a game force play a 2NT response to 1♦ as merely invitational (a useful adjunct to their system). These pairs would do well to adopt *Diamond Restorations*, a convention in which 1♦-2♥ is ambiguous, showing either a standard jump-shift with hearts, a standard jump shift with clubs, or a strong hand with which others could jump to 2NT. Opener relays with 2♠ to let responder clarify: responder continues with 2NT (natural and forcing), 3♣ (strong jump shift in clubs) or anything else (strong jump shift in hearts). I recommend that *Diamond Restorations* users play 1♦-2♥; 2♠-2NT as showing a Kleinman 2NT rather than a standard 2NT response.