

RESPONDING TO AN OMNIBUS TWO CLUBS

In *Modern Bridge Bidding Complete* (1968), authors Al Roth and Jeff Rubens offer two arguments for the Omnibus 2♣ (the artificial strong opening that is a usual concomitant of Weak Two-Bids). First, they call it a “waste” to devote four openings (2♣, 2♦, 2♥ and 2♠) to the rare hands that are good enough to force to game. Second, they claim that Strong Two-Bids “waste” useful bidding space, for they say that after responder makes an artificial 2NT “weakness” response, “the bidding is at the three-level before it has hardly begun.”

Both arguments are wrong.

Arguments from frequency carry no weight unless the methods favored are not only frequent but effective. For example, a 14 to 20 HCP range for 1NT openings would permit us to open twice as many notrumps as the *good 15 to 18* range that I recommend, but it would yield poor results and we'd have to be crazy to adopt it.

In fact, the *less* frequently hands for a given bid occur, the more effective the bid is when the hands for it do occur. Of course, this “effectiveness effect” diminishes with each successive narrowing of the range of a bid, as invitational replies by the bidder's partner and clarifying rebids by the bidder become superfluous. It would be just as crazy to narrow the range of a 1NT opening to a *good 16 to bad 17* HCP as to expand it to 14 to 20 HCP.

When you cease playing Strong Twos and adopt the Omnibus 2♣ as your only powerhouse opening, the frequency of your 2♣ openings increases dramatically and their effectiveness, compared to that of any of the four (actually five, if we include old-fashioned 2NT openings) natural Strong Twos they replace, shrinks equally dramatically. The Omnibus 2♣ occurs at least four times as often as a Strong 2♠ Bid (likewise a Strong 2♥) and at least sixteen times as often as a Strong 2♦ Bid (likewise a Strong *and Natural* 2♣). I say “at least” because good estimates of frequencies are almost impossible to obtain. Much depends on the range of the 2♣ opener's 2NT rebid. For Roth and Rubens, it was 24 to 26 HCP. For users of the current (2002) version of Bridge World Standard, it is 22 to 23 HCP. The frequency of hands in the range decreases dramatically as the range increases, so the BWS2002 2♣-then-2NT hands occur more than three times as often as the Roth-Rubens 2♣-then-2NT hands. If you use the Roth-Rubens range, about one-sixth of your Omnibus 2♣ openings will be based on balanced hands and a plan to rebid 2NT; if you use the moderate 23 to 24 HCP range, the fraction rises beyond one-quarter; if you use the BWS2002 22 to 23 HCP range, the fraction rises beyond one-half.

The “wasted bidding space” argument has it backwards. First, it flogs a dead horse when it assumes that 2NT is the “weakness” response to a Strong Two-Bid; any intelligent use of Strong Twos makes the *cheapest bid* (or perhaps the *cheapest suit bid*) the artificial negative. Second, it is the Omnibus 2♣ that often puts the bidding at the three-level prematurely. The old-fashioned Strong Two-Bidder shows diamonds, for example, by opening 2♦; the Omnibus 2♣ bidder shows diamonds only at his second turn, when he bids 3♦. There is only one kind of hand on which the Omnibus 2♣ usually *saves* space: that is the truly huge hand with a solid major suit, shown in the *usual* Omnibus 2♣ methods by 2♣-2♦; 3♥ or 3♠, after which responder is supposed to cue-bid an ace if he has one. However, that is not even true for sophisticated pairs who are willing to devote those jump 3♥ and 3♠ rebids to more frequent hand types. For example, Drew Casen and Richie Schwartz (see “Challenge the Champs” in the November and December 2001 *Bridge World*), appreciating the difficulties they would otherwise have with strong *diamond* hands that also contain a four-card major, use the jumps to 3♥ and 3♠ to show these most awkward Omnibus 2♣ hands. In the December 1998 *Bridge World*, where I advocated a *Tricolor Two Diamonds* that encompasses (among other hand-types) game-forcing hands with primary diamonds, and uses 3♥ and 3♠ rebids to show 4-card majors, Jeff Rubens suggested that 2♣-2♦; 3♥ and 3♠ be used to show strong *club* hands that also contain a 4-card major.

The case for replacing Strong Two-Bids with an artificial 2♣ must rest on the premise that the other uses for the bids that are replaced are so advantageous as to outweigh the disadvantages of artificial 2♣. Though I have not seen a convincing argument for replacing Strong 2♥ and 2♠ Bids with the artificial 2♣ and using Weak 2♥ and 2♠ Bids, I believe that it can be profitable (for expert pairs) to do so. However, I do not believe that it is profitable to play Weak 2♦ Bids instead of Strong.

Despite my conviction that the Omnibus 2♣ is overburdened when it encompasses strong *diamond* hands, I shall not argue the point here, but shall proceed on the assumption that you have adopted 2♣ as your *only* powerhouse opening. It is important, however, to realize that by abandoning other Strong Twos, you have put yourself at a *disadvantage* on the hands that qualify. This realization frames the discussing of choosing a system of *responses* to the Omnibus 2♣. Your goal should be to *minimize* the disadvantage.

Responder's first priority should be to *avoid preempting opener's intended rebid*. Therefore 2♦ should be his *usual* response. Any other response preempts the 2♥ rebid that opener intends to make at least one-sixth of the time (and perhaps substantially more often, especially if using the "Kokish" 2♥ rebid that shows *either* hearts *or* a balanced hand too strong for a 2NT rebid). Responses beyond 2♥ also preempt the 2♠ rebid that opener intends to make much of the time, and responses beyond 2♠ preempt opener's very frequently intended 2NT rebid.

The usual methods require a decent hand and a "good suit" (usually interpreted as at a suit with two of the top three honors, at least five long for 2♥ or 2♠, at least six long for 3♣ and 3♦) for a natural positive response in a suit.

For the most part, rigid requirements for positive responses are beneficial, because they stop responder from preempting opener. Permitting *any* response but 2♦ may be counter-productive. By bidding a "natural positive" 2♥ or 2♠, responder may wrong-side some major-suit games and slams that would otherwise be played by the strong hand after a 2♦ response, a 2NT rebid, and a Jacoby Transfer. However, if responder is forbidden to bid a *natural positive* 2♥, opener may preempt him with 2♣-2♦; 2♠. Permitting responder to bid 2♥ without suit-quality constraints lets the bidding start smoothly, 2♣-2♥; 2♠. This is the one instance in which an Omnibus 2♣ Bidder actually does better than a Strong Two-Bidder, whose 2♠-3♥ start is his most awkward. For this reason, I recommend relaxing the usual suit-quality requirements for a natural positive 2♥. A natural positive 2♥ response preempts none of opener's intended rebids but 2♥ itself, and if opener intended rebidding 2♥, it's "Off to slam we go!" (The same cannot be said for the currently popular use of a 2♥ response as an artificial negative, a treatment that was first advocated in the Roth-Rubens book along with the use of a 2♦ response as an artificial positive.)

In *Bridge World Standard* (Twentieth-Century versions as well as the current), an *Omnibus* 2♣ is the only powerhouse opening. In response (the "default" in the current version), 2♦ denies the values for a positive response in a suit (a "strong" five- or six-card suit) or 2NT (presumably a notrumpish 8 to 10 HCP with stoppers in all suits will do). If opener rebids 2♥, 2♠ or 3♣ over 2♦, responder's cheapest minor-suit bid next is an artificial second negative, but responder has no way to show a weak hand over opener's 3♦.

Here is a problem posed recently by Matthew Granovetter. You may ignore form of contest, vulnerability and dealer, as they are not relevant, but these were the stated conditions:

IMPs, N-S vulnerable

	♠AK842	♥J7	♦10632	♣73	
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST		
pass	pass	2♣*	pass		*strong, artificial and forcing
2♠**	pass	3♥	pass		**natural positive
?					

I would guess that few of the difficult bidding problems faced by bridge players are suitable for the Master Solvers' Club; most arise only because players have erred earlier in the auction. By the usual standards, 2♠ was not only acceptable but mandatory, as 2♦ would have denied a hand and suit as good as South's. Nonetheless, 2♠ created a difficult rebid problem that a superior *structure* for responding to 2♣ could have avoided.

A casual examination of deals from world championships or a computer-generated sample will reveal statistical information about 2♣ openings. The most common hand type on which they are based is a balanced hand that is too strong for a 2NT opening yet not strong enough to insist on game. The next most common is the "strong 2♠" bid. That is slightly more common than the "strong 2♥" bid because with five-five in the majors, the 2♣ bidder plans to rebid 2♠. Far less frequent are the "big notrumps" that qualify for 3NT and the "strong twos" in clubs and diamonds.

The frequencies of different hand types for the 2♣ bidder change when responder has a strong suit. Then the most frequent hand type is a "strong two" in an unbid major. When responder has a positive

response in *hearts* and bids 2♥, he does not obstruct opener's intended rebid (except on the very rare occasions when opener has a "strong 2♥" bid). So the standards for a 2♥ response may be loosened. I don't think that a 2♥ response should require ♥KQxxx or better; I'd be happy to bid a natural positive 2♥ on ♥K10xxx with a couple of queens on the side. Indeed, a 2♦ response on ♠J7 ♥K10632 ♦Q96 ♣Q105 may rob the partnership of valuable bidding space when opener bids 2♠ and responder bids 3♥.

A pair that bids 2♣-2♥; 2♠-2NT; 3♦ is far ahead of a pair that bids 2♣-2♦; 2♠-3♥; 4♦.

Along with loosening the standards for a 2♥ response, I recommend tightening the standards for a 2♠ response so severely that very few responding hands qualify indeed. For a 2♠ response is likely to fetch a 3♥ rebid from opener, as in the problem above. Let's return to that problem. Why is it so tough?

I could appraise all of South's possible rebids and say what is wrong with each of them, but the answer is simple. South has no good rebid because after saying that he has a pretty good hand with a strong suit he has *exhausted* what he wants to say. In contrast, North, with by far the stronger hand, undoubtedly has lots more to say. Yet South must make a *second* descriptive bid before North does. South has a problem largely because his partnership structure over an Omnibus 2♣ (the structure not only in Bridge World Standard but for most modern pairs) led to an *offbeat* auction. Instead of the OOM-pah, OOM-pah of most other auctions (opener sends a suit message, responder replies with a suit message of his own, opener sends another message about strain, responder replies again), we hear a syncopated pah-OOM, pah-OOM that sounds strange to our bidding ears.

A neutral 2♦ response that denies only a natural positive in hearts, followed by a *delayed* natural positive in spades, keeps the downbeat in its proper place (opener's second bid). Then, given the hand that Granovetter shows for opener, the "problem" becomes:

IMPs, N-S vulnerable

	♠AK842	♥J7	♦10632	♣73	
SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST		
pass	pass	2♣*	pass		*strong, artificial and forcing
2♦**	pass	2♥	pass		**neutral response
2♠***	pass	3♥	pass		***delayed natural positive
?					

Now South has an *easy* call, 4♥, and the partnership is well on its way toward the best contract, 6♥, instead of the inferior 6♠ reached after a 2♠ response to 2♣, opener's 3♥ next, and responder's 3♠ rebid.

So, how should responses other than 2♦ diamonds and 2♥ be used?

It wouldn't be far wrong to say, *not at all*. Indeed, that is what I would say about a 2NT response (which risks wrong-siding an eventual notrump contract). However, 2♠ and 3♣ responses can be given some useful meanings. I suggest that 2♠ show a *one-loser red suit* and 3♣ show a *one-loser black suit*. Over a 2♠ response, opener may bid 2NT, even with an unbalanced hand, to ask responder to *transfer* to his red suit. Over a 3♣ response, opener may bid 3♦, even without any interest in a diamond contract, to ask responder to *transfer* to his black suit. This scheme lets opener play in responder's suit while conserving precious bidding space. Note, however, that opener is not required to "relay"; he will often know which suit responder has without asking.

Responses beyond 3♣ should be vanishingly infrequent. However, jumps to 3♦, 3♥, 3♠ and 4♣ may be defined as *transfers to no-loser suits*. Although responses beyond 2♥ will be rare, they figure to work well when the hands for them arise.

Can we improve the usual methods for a 2♦ responder to show a weak hand next? I think so.

First let's supply the *second negative* that is lacking in Bridge World Standard after opener bids 3♦. Because responder will have bid 2♥ rather than 2♦ with a positive in hearts, he won't have the decent hand and decent suit he needs for a natural 3♥ now. So 3♥ can serve as a second negative virtually without cost.

By the way, responder won't have the decent hand and decent suit he needs for a *natural* 3♥ rebid after 2♣-2♦; 2♠ either. So we may as well divert 2♣-2♦; 2♠-3♥ to some artificial use. I suggest that it be used as an artificial spade raise *promising at least four-card support*. This allows 2♣-2♦; 2♠-3♠ to show *three-card support* specifically, so that 2♣-2♦; 2♠-3♠; (4♣, 4♦ or 4♥) shows a second suit (slam in a 4-4 or 5-4 fit in that suit may be best) but 2♣-2♦; 2♠-3♥; (4♣, 4♦ or 4♥) is a cue bid with spades anchored.

Next let's examine the usual use of 3♦ as a second negative after opener bids 3♣. What is responder to do with a hand like ♠10632 ♥J7 ♦AK842 ♣73 if he can't bid a *natural positive* 3♦ now? Jumping to 3♦ initially would be very destructive even if not defined as showing a no-loser heart suit. So we must allow the 2♦ responder to bid a natural positive 3♦ at his second turn. Because his 2♦ denied a natural positive in hearts, responder can use 3♥ as a second negative after opener bids *either* 3♦ or 3♣.

Finally, let's examine the usual use of 3♣ as a second negative after opener bids 2♥ or 2♠. That leaves only a second-round jump to 4♣ as responder's delayed natural positive in clubs. Moreover, it keeps opener from bidding 3♣ at his third turn when his second suit is clubs. I suggest, therefore, that the 2♦ responder's second negative over opener's 2♥ or 2♠ rebid should be 2NT. It is unlikely that this will lead to many wrong-sided notrump contracts, as opener will seldom have a balanced hand.

Here is the structure of responses to the Omnibus 2♣ that I recommend.

2♦: neutral. Second negative: 2NT or 3♥, whichever is cheaper.

2♥: natural positive. Any hand that would respond 3♥ to a strong 2♠ bid qualifies.

2♠: a one-loser red suit (opener's 2NT next requests a *transfer* to that suit).

3♣: a one-loser black suit (opener's 3♦ next requests a *transfer* to that suit).

3♦, 3♥, 3♠ or 4♣: a *transfer* to a no-loser suit.

Everything changes when an opponent overcalls an Omnibus 2♣. Then further artificiality becomes a luxury you can ill afford, for advancer may raise preemptively. Though the overcall may make it more difficult for you to reach your best contract, it simplifies your bidding. I recommend that responder:

... *double* with length and *lower honors* in overcaller's suit and not too much outside that suit.

... *make a natural positive bid* with a decent hand and a decent suit.

... *cue-bid* overcaller's suit with a singleton, support for the other suits, and a decent hand.

... *pass* with nothing special to show, allowing opener to bid or to *double for penalties*.

For many years I had favored (*Kleinish*, an improved version of) the *Kokish* 2♥ as a means of avoiding an awkward, space-gobbling 3NT rebid. Recent practice with 2♣ auctions has convinced me that I was mistaken. The gains on the big notrump hands are outweighed by the losses on the auctions that start 2♣-2♦; 2♥-2♠; 3♥, leaving responder without any "second negative" to show a weak hand ... and therefore no delayed natural positive responses either.