

Convention analysis

After a 2♣ opening



by Mike Bell



COLIN Payne writes, 'Since moving to Cambridgeshire, I have found many players respond to Benjamin 2s with artificial bids showing their point count. The method is referred to as 'Barber', and it is typically played with each bid showing a range of three points: 2♦ = 0-3, 2♥ = 4-6, etc. I can find no mention of this in any bridge book or on the internet. Is it widespread? Is it a good agreement or can you recommend something better?'

Ah yes. I've seen this convention pop up in various corners of the country. It's also known as Steps.

Opposite your second strongest bid – 2♣, assuming normal Benji – I think it has little merit. The 2♣ opening has quite a narrow strength range, so responder is well placed to decide how high the bidding should go. You don't gain much from opener knowing responder's strength as well. Instead, responder should (almost) always bid 2♦, leaving room to find out about opener's hand.

The game-forcing opening, on the other hand, has a wider range. It could be stretching slightly, or it could have eleven clear-cut tricks, or even more! Here, some communication about strength is of use, as otherwise neither hand knows if the other has extras; but still, there are two issues with showing your point count.

The first is that the responses can be quite space-consuming. If you hold 4-6 points, wouldn't you much rather the auction started

2♦:2♥ [relay]
2♠

than

2♦:2♠ [4-6 points]
3♠:?

What about

2♦:2NT [7-9 points]
3♠:4♣

Is this natural or a cue bid for spades?

This would be a worthwhile trade-off if it was very useful to know partner's point-count, but actually it is quite a blunt tool. If opener is unbalanced, he will often care more about where your points are than how many points you have.

♠A K J x x ♥A K J x x ♦A K ♣x
2♦:2♠
3♠:4♠
?

Does responder hold:

♠Q x x ♥Q x x ♦x x x x ♣x x x
or

♠x x x ♥x x x ♦x x x x ♣K Q J?

Opposite the first hand, slam is cold. Opposite the second, we are high enough already. If responder had made a space-saving 2♥ bid, opener could have further described his hand below game.

2♦:2♥
2♠:3♠
?

Many would play cue bids here, but, given that responder knows little about opener's shape, trial-bids would be more useful. Either 4♥ (natural slam-try) or 4♣ (short suit slam-try) would let responder know that his two queens are gold-dust.

AN ACE UP THEIR SLEEVE

So, what methods might be better than Barber? Standard French uses Benji twos (although I'm guessing they don't call them that!) so I decided to look at the convention cards for the French pairs in the European championships. Two pairs (out of nine) were playing Benji, and they play the same continuations. 2♣:2♦ is a relay, as I suggested. However, over the 2♦ opening, they play ace-showing responses where 2♥ = no ace, 2♠ = a major-suit ace, 3♣ and 3♦ show an ace in that suit. Not something I've tried but I don't feel I can endorse those responses either!

IMPROVING BENJI RESPONSES

To make the best of the following methods, I propose a little switch:

- 2♣ = 20-21 balanced, or 8.5-9 playing tricks with a 6+card suit
- 2♦ = Game Forcing (includes 24+ balanced)
- 2NT = 22-23 balanced

Over the 2♣ bid, we should normally just respond 2♦ and wait to hear opener clarify their hand at the next bid. However, there is one hand-type that is best off described immediately – very weak hands with a 5+card major. So, I recommend that you play that 2♣:2♥ and 2♣:2♠ are non-forcing.

Let's say partner opens a Benji 2♣, and you look down and see:

♠Q x x x x ♥x x x ♦x x ♣10 x x

If you respond 2♦ and partner rebids 3♣, what now? I imagine, looking at a balanced two-count, you'll pass. That will be right if partner holds

♠ x
♥ A K x
♦ Q x x
♣ A K Q J x x

Unfortunately, today partner holds:

♠ A K x
♥ x
♦ Q x x
♣ A K Q J x x

and you miss a very good 4♠ contract.

Playing 2♣:2♠ as a weak bid, the auction would be:

2♣:2♠
3♣:Pass on the first hand
2♣:2♠
4♠:Pass on the second hand

Meanwhile, if partner holds:

♠ A K J
♥ J x x
♦ K Q J
♣ K Q J x

You'll bid 2♣:2♠, Pass, when others are opening 2NT and playing in 2NT or 3♣, both going off more often than not.

What about the game-forcing 2♦ bid? By now it'll come as no surprise that I advocate most hands

bidding a 2♥ relay! Nearly every other bid is as it sounds – a natural, decent suit, with at least a few points. The only bid that isn't much use as a 'natural positive' is 2NT.

♠A x x ♥K J x ♦x x x ♣x x x x

Traditionally we might bid 2NT on this hand, but I much prefer bidding 2♥. First, that leaves room for partner to describe their hand. Second, if we belong in no-trumps, it's likely to be better that partner's strong hand declares.

Instead, use the 2NT bid to show a positive with 5+ hearts. This is much better than having to jump all the way to 3♥ with this hand-type – now partner can introduce their suit at the three-level, bid 3♥ to agree our suit, or even jump to 4♣ or 4♦ as a splinter.

I've found these methods to be a great improvement – I'm sure you will too! □

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