

Your 2C Bidding Structure

http://home.comcast.net/~kwbridge/bb/b_2c.htm

Part 1 -- IS this a 2C opening?

Back in our game's early years, the experts of the day emphasized "sound values" in bidding. Opening notrumps were 16-18 points, jump shifts were 19+, and preempts always followed the rule of two and three. Every bid seemed to promise "two bull elephants backed up in the garage" (as one of our local rubber-bridge players used to say).

Today's players like to bid higher and more often than Culbertson, Goren and the other bridge pioneers. As a result, modern bidding has embraced lower minimums for many standard bids and conventions. One of the bids that has undergone this reverse inflation is the strong two-bid. It doesn't "cost" nearly as much to make one today as it did forty (or even twenty) years ago, when it virtually guaranteed game. Back then, Goren recommended a minimum of 25 high-card points with a good 5-card major, 23 points with a 6-carder, and 21 points with a 7-carder. In a minor suit, two points more were required.

Today, most players have switched to a strong-and-artificial 2C, and they open it with somewhat less than Goren recommended. Some even stretch the limits to include any hand with 8 to 9 playing tricks. I still remember a long-ago club game where one player opened a strong 2C with ♠5 ♥AQJ10987542 ♦6 ♣8. In the mayhem that ensued (his opponents had missed a slam), he defended his bid with some creative arithmetic: adding in distribution and 2 points for each card after the fourth in his suit, he counted 25 playing points. He was also quick to quote all the old rules-"I have 9 playing tricks, I don't have two quick losers in any suit, I want to force to game ..."

If you use a playing-tricks-only definition like this one, your 2C openers may encompass weak, distributional freaks like the hand above. However, it's a marked deviation from what most players consider a "standard" 2C opener-and what experts recommend.

Put your hand to the test

So what type of hand should you have for a strong 2C? With a balanced hand, your decision is easy because you can rely on high-card points. If your range for an opening 2NT is 20-22, you need 23 points to open 2C and rebid 2NT.

Unbalanced hands involve more difficult decisions because you have to evaluate your hand in terms of both trick-taking power and defensive strength. In making decisions about whether or not to open 2C with a distributional hand, many good players "test" their hand with some combination of the guidelines below:

- **Playing tricks** -- at least 8 ½ to 9 tricks if your long suit is a major; 9 ½ to 10 tricks if it's a minor.
- **Defensive strength** -- a minimum of three (preferably four) quick tricks.
- **Loser count** -- your hand's quick tricks should outnumber its losers.
- **The "two-queens" test** -- Do you want to be in game if partner has two queens and nothing else?
- **Rebid problems** -- How difficult will this hand be to describe if you open it with a one-bid instead of 2C?

Although high-card points aren't the main factor in evaluating an unbalanced hand, it is important to remember that strong is still the operative word in the convention's name. A strong 2C should not be used to describe a preempt-type hand. In practice, your hand will seldom meet many of the guidelines unless it has at least 16-18 honor points.

The Quick Tricks vs. Losers Rule

Your hand doesn't necessarily have to pass all five of the tests to make a 2C opening a good choice. You'll always have borderline decisions where you'll have to use your judgment. But if you're looking for a "tie-

breaker" to help you choose an opening bid for a strong, unbalanced hand, one of the most useful guidelines is the loser count (#3 above).

Using this evaluation method, you open 2C only with hands that contain more quick tricks than losers. To count your quick tricks, use the standard formula (each ace or KQ combination is 1 quick trick; an AK is 2; an unsupported king is ½; and an AQ is 1 ½).

Note that quick tricks are not the same as playing tricks. A hand with a solid 9-card suit and no other honors will have nine playing tricks, but only two quick tricks (the AK) and four outside losers.

To determine your hand's total losers, count one for each missing ace, king or queen in each suit of 3 cards or more (up to a maximum of three in any suit). In shorter suits, count only missing aces (for singletons) or aces and kings (for doubletons). Voids, singleton aces, AK doubletons and suits headed by AKQ have no losers. Ax and Kx are each one loser; any lower doubleton (including Qx) counts as two.

There are a few distinctions you'll want to make with this formula. Technically, suits of Axx, Kxx and Qxx (or longer) each have two losers, but these obviously aren't comparable holdings. For this reason, you should count a queen-high suit as three losers unless it also contains the jack or it's a long suit that's likely to be trumps.

Another exception is a holding of AJ10(x). Even though you're missing the king and queen, this suit is usually counted as only one loser because of the 75% chance of a successful double finesse (this assumes, of course, that you'll be able to lead the suit from partner's hand).

Try your evaluation skills

What's your opening bid with the following hands?

♠AK5 ♥6 ♦KQ987654 ♣8

Open 1D. You could count this as 9 playing tricks (7 diamonds and 2 spades), but you should have at least 9 ½ when your long suit is a minor. And even 9 tricks is optimistic-if partner doesn't have a fit, you could easily have 2 (even 3) diamond losers. Since you have only 3 quick tricks and 4 losers, it's better to open with a 1-bid and hope to describe your playing strength later in the auction.

♠AKQ10975 ♥Void ♦AQJ10 ♣52

Open 2C. You have dead-minimum honor strength, but this hand qualifies on all other counts -- 10 playing tricks, 3 ½ quick tricks vs. 3 losers, and you expect to make 4S opposite a 4-point hand (in this case, a Yarborough will be sufficient). The losing doubleton is a liability, but that alone shouldn't talk you out of opening 2C if the rest of the hand is "right".

♠AKJ ♥K ♦AQ6 ♣KJ8643

Open 1C (some would even try 2NT). Although you have plenty of points and defensive tricks for a strong opening, how high do you really want to be if partner can't scrape up a response to 1C? Your suit is so weak that you can't count playing tricks, and you have more losers (5) than quick tricks (4). It's true that if partner holds the "right" two queens (hearts and clubs), you might make 3NT, but it's seldom wise to base your decision on the chance that partner has specific cards for you.

♠A ♥A105 ♦AK98764 ♣A3

Open 2C. Many would choose a 1D opening, mainly because your suit is a minor and the hand counts to only 9 playing tricks (6 diamonds and 3 aces). However, you have more quick tricks than losers, and holding all four aces is a big plus. The deciding factor here is your possible rebid problems. If you start with 1D and partner responds 1S, you could risk the minor distortion of a 2H reverse. But what if partner instead responds 1H? The only 100% forcing bids you'll have available (4NT notwithstanding) are jump shifts to 2S or 3C, both of which are major distortions of your distribution.
