

## FORCING THE BIDDING AS THE OPENER

One of the biggest myths in bridge is the rule that “All New Suits (by an unpassed responder) Are Forcing”. While it’s almost always true, there are quite a few exceptions. The reason it’s almost-but-not-quite-true is because it’s close to the REAL rule which is:

UNLIMITED HANDS ARE FORCING.

This is the better way to put it because there are auctions where an unpassed responder can bid new suits and still put an upper limit on their hand, and you don’t want to stumble into one by accident. For example: Playing 2/1, including New Minor Forcing, you have the auction of 1♦-1♠-1N-2♥. Responder didn’t use NMF, so he must have less than an invitational hand. This means that, yes, he can be passed even though he is an unpassed responder that has bid new suits at every opportunity – this is the case because he has limited his hand. But I digress.

The reason we just talk about responder’s new suits being forcing is because it’s simple to teach, usually right, and in standard bidding, there’s only one unlimited opening bid: 2♣. Every other opening can be passed (so all the teaching focus gets put on responder’s forcing options, rather than opener’s forcing rebids).

But there are times where you will be just short of a 2♣ opening hand, and so you will make a normal opening bid, and the moment partner responds with anything other than a PASS, you will now know you want to force to game. But how do you do this? There are two ways.

### Method One: The Jump-Shift

This one is easy. Ex: 1♥-1♠-3♣.

Opener jumps over a level of the bidding. He could have bid clubs at the 2 level but chose to jump to bid the new suit. This is natural and immediately game forcing. He has 19-21 points, only limited by his failure to open 2♣. Opposite a hand this strong, any response was enough to go to game. And this is how he is telling you that you must keep bidding.

### Method Two: The “Reverse”

Some people like to say, “I don’t play reverses”. Those people are painfully wrong. You simply MUST play them. You have no choice in the matter. These aren’t “gadgets”. As you are about to see, it is just that math of bridge dictates to you that you must play them.

Let’s say you are dealt this hand

♠32 ♥AK43 ♦AQ987 ♣97

You will open this 1♦ all day, every day. Anyone would. Change the Queen into a Jack and you still would. But say partner responds 1♠? Do you now bid 2♥?

I should hope not. Partner could have this for his 1♠ bid:

♠K764 ♥86 ♦63 ♣KT432

What is poor partner supposed to do here? By bidding your suits in this order, you have put partner in the position of having to go to the three level to make the weakest bid possible (retreating to diamonds). Partner may have no more than a shapeless 6 hcps for his response. You don't have any promise of an 8-card fit, and you might not even have half of the hcps in the deck and will be at the three (!!) level. The answer is: He shouldn't ever get put into this position unless opener knows it is a safe one. So, opener must have extra values in his hand to "reverse" like this. Since in this case, he does not, opener's correct rebid is 1NT.

What exactly is a "reverse"? Opener is reversing if **he bids his first two suits in such an order that, should responder want to retreat to the first of opener's suits, he'd have to bid it at the three level.**

So, in order for opener to reverse, he should have about 17-21 hcps and the first bid suit must be at least one card longer than the second bid suit (These are often 18-19 point hands that are too unbalanced with which to jump to 2NT). The reverse is forcing for at least one round and possibly (if he has 19+) to game. As you have just seen, opener must have these extra values to be safe at the 3 level opposite a balanced min response.

Not all reverses are alike though. Say you have this sequence:

1♥ – 2♣  
2♠ - ??

Opener has reversed here as well (we call this a "high reverse"), but responder has shown a higher minimum strength by virtue of his first bid being at the 2 level. This means that opener doesn't need to be quite as strong as was required in the first example. In fact, in 2/1, the 2♣ bid promises a game forcing hand already, so opener needs NOTHING EXTRA for that spade bid. In Standard American, though he still needs a little extra. In SA, responder could be as weak as 10 points, So the opener shouldn't hold a bare "rule of 20" hand, but something a bit more sound. Say 14 or a very good 13. Opener still needs to bid something, but it cannot be a reverse if he doesn't have these values.

**What about Jump-Shifting AND Reversing at the same time? Ex: 1♣-1♥-3♦**

This is not necessary to show strength. You already have a reverse or a jump-shift available, so most partnerships agree that this is a splinter-bid: a raise of partner's suit, showing shortness in the suit shown in the jump-reverse. In this sequence. It's a game forcing heart raise with at most one diamond. How do you know it's a jump-reverse splinter? **It is a splinter when opener had a forcing bid (either a reverse or jump-shift) available to him in the same suit at a level below this bid.** In this case, 2♦ is a reverse, so 3♦ is a splinter.

Examples:

1) 1♥ - 1♠ - 4♣

2♣ is non-forcing, making 3♣ a jump-shift, so 4♣ is a splinter in support of spades.

2) 1♦ - 1♥ - 3♠

1♠ is non-forcing, making 2♠ a jump-shift, so 3♠ is a splinter in support of hearts.

3) 1♦ - 1♠ - 3♥

2♥ would be a reverse, so 3♥ is a splinter in support of spades.

Also take note how this is stronger support than any spade bid opener could make. Any number of spades you would bid could be passed. But here, you have established a game force in spades before even bidding that suit at the three level! You have plenty of room to explore slam if you want (or for partner to send a clear message about it if he does not).

As always, TALK TO PARTNER about your agreements before you wheel them out.

Post Lesson additions from questions that came up.

- 1) What if you have an opening hand with 5 clubs and 4 diamonds that's not strong enough to reverse with? What do you do with that?

Very good question. You may have to decide what the smallest lie is.

You might open the clubs and either rebid 1NT or if that's not suitable, you'd have to rebid them at the two level despite only having 5 of them.

If the 4 diamonds are awesome and the 5 clubs are not, you might open the 4 card diamond suit first and bid the longer clubs at the 2 level. You also can rebid the clubs again a second time if necessary.

Neither option is perfect, but if your partner knows what you would do, it's usually okay. Just make sure you discuss with your partner so you both know what you might be doing before this issue comes up.

- 2) What If partner reverses and I am really broke? I know it's forcing but how do I tell partner I barely have my bid, or only bid the first time because I didn't want to pass him with a singleton in his opening minor? Can I pass him if I have overbid already?

The answer to the last part is: NO YOU CANNOT PASS. If partner made a forcing bid, you need to respect that. If you had to stretch, that's understandable, but you should never try to recover from one lie by telling another, and that's true in places besides Bridge.

The first part though is a good question. Unfortunately, it requires a very long answer that you don't want me to have to explain, but you basically nailed it:

17 hcps opposite 6 hcps usually does not a game contract make. One of you must be the one to drive on if you have extras and cannot expect partner to do it for you.

So, the short answer to the first question is, "Decide what your weakest response to a reverse is when you are broke" and plan on wheeling it out when required. Many advanced partnerships say that responder rebidding any suit at the three level directly is game forcing, and conversely, rebidding a suit at the 2 level shows weakness. For situations where that rebid is not available, they also use 2NT to show weakness as well (a convention called Lebensohl, which entire books have been written about). In a "Leb" auction, 2N makes partner bid 3C, but not because they have clubs.

So why do this?

The gross over-simplification is that after:

1D-1S-2H-?

An immediate 3D bid makes this into a game forcing auction

And

2N\*-3C\*-3D is still diamonds, but partner telling you he is very minimal.

In both auctions, responder shows diamond support at the 3 level. But in the 2<sup>nd</sup> one, he is telling you that he is not happy that you made him do it and that you need to be at the top end of your reverse range if you want to continue to game. The 2N->3C relay shows weakness. Not using it in this situation would deny weakness.

You don't need to adopt this or any other method you are not comfortable with, but you should discuss with your partner how to force to game (and how to stop below game) after a reverse.