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This Week in Bridge

(70) Kokish over Strong 2♣

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Level: 4

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General

Big, balanced hands are relatively easy for Opener to describe:

- 2NT 19+ to 21 points
- 2♣ 2♦
 2NT 22 to 24- points (same if 2♥* bust response to 2♣)
- 2♣ 2♦
 3NT 24+ to 26 points (If 2♥* bust response to 2♣, then 3NT could be 24+ points.)

Note: After a 2♦ game force, 2NT could be 27-28 points.

But when the Opener has a 3NT rebid, then Responder is left with a difficult problem. Most players play Systems On over 3NT rebids (Stayman and Transfers) but they must still guess what to do if they have a 5-card Major. If Opener has 3-cards in Responder's Major, it will be right to transfer. If Opener has 2-cards in Responder's Major, then it will be right to pass. This is a problem for Responder because we are too high --- no room to show 5-card Major and still offer 3NT.

Kokish Solution

Kokish is a conventional bid by the Opener after they have opened 2♣. We will use this relay to help us save space and better describe our hand. Let's see how this works.

We use a 2♥ rebid by Opener as a relay.

2♣ 2♦
2♥* 2♠*

This 2♥* bid forces Responder to bid 2♠* - Responder's bid means nothing about ♠.

Now the Opener gets a chance to make another bid. Specifically, this allows the Opener to show more balanced hands:

- 2NT directly after 2♣.
- Bid 2♥ relay first, then rebid 2NT.

We use these two different auctions to show more ranges of balanced hands at a level that gives us more space to communicate, starting at 2NT.

- 2♣ 2♦
2NT 22 to 24- points
- 2♣ 2♦
2♥* 2♠*
2NT 24+ to 26 points

Now we can have much better auctions when we have the 24 to 26 point balanced hands because partner can still use their normal 2NT responding tools at the 3-level (Stayman and Transfers) and stop in 3NT if we do not have a fit.

Note: Kokish can be played regardless of the meaning of 2♦ in response to 2♣, i.e., whether you play 2♥ as a bust or not.

Bigger Balanced Hands

Now that we can show our 22 to 24- point and 24+ to 26 point hands with 2NT, then we can use 3NT to show even larger hands:

- 2♣ 2♦
3NT 27-28 points
- 2♣ 2♦
2♥* 2♠*
3NT 29-30 points

Partner will then be in a good place to judge how high for us to get – to bid slam or not. This is an excellent structure of describing balanced hands and giving Responder room to continue the auction and look for fits, since we will play Systems On.

What To Do with Hearts

You might ask yourself, if we use 2♥ as an artificial bid (relay to 2♠) then what do we do when we actually have ♥? First, if we are 5332 with a 5-card ♥ suit then we treat this as a balanced hand – as we do with all 5332 hands. So we will not have to deal with trying to describe that hand type.

If we have 5+♥ and a 4+cards in another suit or 6+card ♥ suit we still need to know how to describe our hand. Well, it turns out to be easy – we just bid naturally. After we bid 2♥ (Kokish relay) we then bid our other suit:

2♣ 2♦
2♥* 2♠*
—?

- 3♣ -- This shows 5+♥ and 4+♣.
- 3♦ -- This shows 5+♥ and 4+♦.
- 3♥ -- This shows 6+♥.
- 3♠ -- This shows 5+♥ and 4+♠, with longer ♥ than ♠.

Once we make any bid other than Notrump over the 2♠ relay, then that new bid is natural and it turns the 2♥ bid into a natural 5+card ♥ suit.

Some Advanced Kokish Variations

We can add some additional conventional variations. These are Kokish variations and not something that all players who play Kokish play (or need to play.)

Problem Hands - Strong hand with 4-card Majors and with 5+card ♦. Some players play that the following auctions shows this hand:

- 2♣ 2♦
3♥ 4-card ♥ and 5+♦
- 2♣ 2♦
3♠ 4-card ♠ and 5+♦

There are other advanced switches to the classical Kokish structure, but we won't get into too many here.

Conclusion

Kokish is another application (just like *Lebensohl*) of a conventional relay. This relay allows the Opener to make two calls in a very small amount of space. Thus, the Opener is able to show a lot about their hand without eating up much bidding space. This is valuable because the 2♣ opening bid already ate up a lot of bidding space. *Kokish* helps us describe our hand and gives up very little - just what we want in a convention!