



Ken Rexford

**NEW FRONTIERS
FOR STRONG
FORCING OPENINGS**

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New Frontiers for Strong Forcing Openings

How to Split Your Strong Forcing Openings

2♦ for Hands with Spades

2♣ for All Other Hands

By Ken Rexford

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
INTRODUCTION	7
THE TWO DIAMONDS OPENING	9
WHEN RESPONDER HAS FOUR OR MORE SPADES	11
<i>When Responder has a Weak Hand without Shape</i>	12
<i>When Responder has a Weak Hand with Shape</i>	17
<i>When Responder has Any Other Game-Forcing Spade Raise</i>	18
<i>Possibilities for the Immediate Spade Raise in the Real World</i>	21
WHEN RESPONDER HAS FEWER THAN FOUR SPADES	33
<i>The Artificial Two Hearts Waiting Response</i>	35
Spades as the Longest Suit.....	35
Minor-Spade Canapé Bids	36
Handling the Specific 4-4-4-1 and 4-4-5-0 hands.....	38
Some Hands Featuring a Canapé Minor Rebid.....	40
Heart-Spade Canapé Hands:	43
Freak Two-Suiters.....	48
One Possible Optional Treatment	49
Balanced Hands	50
<i>The Positive Responses</i>	51
Extra Discussion of the 2♠ Heart Positive	52
THE TWO CLUBS OPENING	58
WHEN RESPONDER HAS A BUST HAND	60
<i>The 2♠ Rebid for Hearts</i>	60
<i>Other Options after a Bust 2♥ Response</i>	62
Opener Bids Two Spades to Show Five or More Hearts	62
Opener Bids Either Minor Naturally.....	62
THE POSITIVE RESPONSES WITH A SUIT OR SUITS	63
<i>The Positive Major Flags</i>	63
<i>The Positive Minor(s) Relay</i>	64
THE WAITING POSITIVE	65
<i>Kokish Two Hearts by Opener</i>	67
Responder's Alternatives to Kokish 2♠	67
When Opener has the Super-Strong Balanced Hand	68
When Opener Has the Unbalanced Hand with Hearts.....	68
Some Practical Analysis	69
<i>The Minor-Heart Canapé Two Spades Rebid</i>	69
If Responder has a Heart Fit	70
If Responder Has No Fit for Hearts	75
With the 1-4-4-4 hands	76
With Four Hearts and a Longer Minor	76
The Heart-Minor Canapé with a Spade Fragment	76

The Heart-Minor Canapé without a Spade Fragment	77
<i>Straight Minor Rebids</i>	82
<i>The Jump to Three Hearts</i>	87
<i>The Jump to Three Spades</i>	87
<i>The Jump to 3NT</i>	89
<i>A Note on 6-5 with the Majors</i>	90
WHEN OPENER SHOWS A STRONG, BALANCED HAND.....	92
A QUICK NOTE AS TO RANGE	92
WHEN OPENER STARTS WITH TWO DIAMONDS AS HIS OPENING	93
<i>When Responder Has a Minor and Slam Interest</i>	93
<i>When Responder has Interest in the Majors</i>	96
The 3♦ Jacoby Transfer	96
The Modified Puppet Stayman 3♣	97
WHEN OPENER STARTS WITH TWO CLUBS AS HIS OPENING	98
<i>The Jacoby Transfer to Hearts, and Texas Transfers</i>	99
<i>The Modified Puppet Stayman 3♣ after the Initial 2♣ Opening</i>	100
DEALS FROM ACTUAL PLAY	101
WHEN OPENER HAS THE SUPER BALANCED HAND AND BIDS 2NT AFTER KOKISH	109
<i>Three Spades as a Minor-Oriented Asking Bid</i>	110
<i>Modified Puppet Stayman</i>	110
<i>A few from actual play</i>	111
HANDLING INTERFERENCE.....	113
INTERFERENCE AFTER A TWO DIAMOND OPENING	113
<i>Responder's Options After 2♦ if Doubled</i>	113
<i>Responder's Options After a 2♥ Overcall</i>	114
<i>Responder's Options After a 2♠ Overcall</i>	115
<i>Responder's Options After a 2NT Overcall</i>	115
<i>Responder's Options After Higher Interference</i>	115
Special Idea after 3♣ or 3♦ Interference – Submarine Style	115
After 3♥ or Higher	116
<i>Opener's Options</i>	116
INTERFERENCE AFTER A TWO CLUBS OPENING	117

FOREWORD

Back in 2006, I published my first bridge book, *Cuebidding at Bridge: A Modern Approach*, a book that I had written for myself as a method of putting my thoughts down on paper. I had no real intention of actually publishing it, until my wife suggested that I send it in to Master Point Press to take a look. I was quite tickled and surprised at their interest, and ultimately at the enthusiasm that many had for my ideas.

One major question was raised by Sandy Long in his review of my book in *W A Bridge Focus* (an Australian bridge newsletter), namely whether I could come up with some solution for the ultimate problem, as I had not done so yet. The ultimate problem was 2♣. I, of course, knew this, as does everyone else. The Achilles' heel of natural systems is that extremely preemptive strong 2♣ opening, which has yet to be resolved with any response and rebid structure that actually works. When Opener has 21+ HCP, the partnership should be happy, not dreading the ridiculously daunting task of even agreeing on strain.

I mean, think about how difficult these auctions can be. With two-suiters, most do not even try launching into 2♣ sequences, sometimes opening with a non-forcing one-bid and praying for a response, even then unsure how to put these unexpected points on the table. Minor rebids after a 2♣ opening are so difficult that most require about a 4-loser hand at worst to even try that bid, and some avoid the call with more than three losers. We all know how difficult 4441 hands are, but how about 4-3 or 3-4 in the majors with a five-card minor that is not that impressive a suit? When I played Precision and a canapé system, these obvious problems gave rise to a joke of ours where we defined a 2♣ opening for the opponents as “Strong, artificial, and preemptive.”

So, why did I skip that whole subject in my book? Simple. There is no good solution, in my opinion, within the confines of the 2♣ opening.

I decided, however, to re-think the issue. What about splitting a 2♣ opening into two bids? What about making 2♦ a second strong, forcing opening? This has been tried a few times, with sometimes strange methods attempted and discarded. Is there something better?

The initial response I would often hear while thinking this through is that you would then give up any other meaning for a 2♦ opening, like “weak.” That seems to be a silly objection. Precision players, who like to taunt natural players for their silly 2♣ opening, also must forfeit this type of meaning for 2♦. Canapé players also have this result, except in the Neapolitan system, which is a messed up, inconsistent canapé approach anyway, just to save that silly weak 2♦ opening. Even people who use a natural approach often ditch a weak 2♦ opening for some other meaning, whether Flannery, the dubious “Mini Roman” convention, Mexican

2♦, or any number of other pet meanings for a 2♦ opening. So, the idea of using two distinct strong, forcing openings, 2♣ and 2♦, could not possibly fall to that sort of objection.

Next issue. Having decided to split the 2♣ opening into two separate openings, what should be the difference? Many over the years have tried various ideas, but most have failed because the distinction between these two openings was not one that answered the basic problem that exists with the 2♣ bid – strain selection difficulties. If the issue is strain, then it seems to me that the two bids should each handle some set of hand types that is wildly different from the other. I thought about complicated ideas, sometimes even branching into wild thought like parity differences (open 2♣ if I have three odd suits but 2♦ with three even suits). Obviously, I was in danger of losing my mind.

It then occurred to me, somewhat as a Eureka moment, that perhaps it would work well to have a 2♦ opening show spades, with a twist inspired to some degree by my prior and lengthy experience with canapé bidding. What if a 2♦ opening handled any hands with five or more spades or with four spades and a longer second suit? This seemed to solve some of the most glaring of 2♣ problems, as it eliminated out some of the problem hands immediately.

The basic structure would be fairly simple. Let's assume partner bids 2♥ as his response, the cheapest and most frequent response. If I have five or more spades, I could rebid 2♠ and be back to a normal sequence, except that I happened to open 2♦ instead of 2♣; but who cares what I opened? However, if I held a longer, second suit, I just bid that as my rebid, actually showing two suits in this process (the original four spades and this other longer suit). Easy, and easy is good.

But, then it occurred to me that the use of a 2♦ opening to handle these hands frees up the 2♠ rebid after a 2♣ opening as unnecessary to show spades and perhaps useful for some other meaning. That could then handle the parallel hands of four hearts and a longer minor, the second major problem pattern, as I could bid the minor after partner rebids a semi-forced 2NT.

In other words, 2♣ - P - 2♦ - P - 2♠ - P - 2NT - P - [3minor] was an easy sequence to show hearts with a longer minor. Now, I was getting somewhere.

After working through the bidding and realizing what was needed, a few things became apparent. This solution solved almost every conceivable strain issue, and only the most freakish hands required bids above 3NT to settle the strain issue. Furthermore, we could actually agree trumps early enough to actually cuebid effectively. Most importantly, though, the approach was logical, easy to remember, and easy to handle. I think that this is the solution to the ultimate problem posed by Sandy Long.

As I started to put all of this together, I eventually discovered that Mats Nilslund, of Sweden, had come up with a very similar idea¹ and played with this technique for a few years with Anders Wirgren, also of Sweden. His idea of a two-way opening structure also included almost this same 2♦ opening, although he had a much more complicated rebid and response structure that was an extremely artificial methodology to capture every conceivable pattern with extreme and frightening detail. I believe that my structure is vastly superior, not in the grabbing of every possible hand pattern, but in the practicality of a simple and easy to remember approach, because I use as much natural bidding and parallel structure as I can.

What follows is my idea.

You will find, as you read through the material, that I discuss both a basic structure and also some gadgets that I recommend for taking advantage of the structure in slam sequences. Obviously, your own preferences for slam bidding should govern how you explore slams. I truly believe that the basic structure is of benefit to intermediate players without all of the bells and whistles, but, being who I am, I cannot help but mention these as well.

Ken Rexford
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¹ I never have achieved a complete translation of his Swedish-language system notes, but I was able to decipher the general meaning.

INTRODUCTION

One of the lingering problems with natural bidding systems like Standard American and 2/1 GF is that the strong 2♣ opening is a mess. Back when I played a lot of strong 1♣ systems, we used to joke that a standard 2♣ opening should be defined as “strong, forcing, artificial, and preemptive,” because of the amount of space it deprived for the side “blessed” to have a very strong opening hand.

We all know the problems. Consider one typical scheme, where a strong 2♣ opening has a response structure where 2♦ shows a game-forcing hand and is “waiting” and where a 2♥ response shows an immediate double negative. The problems are similar with a simple waiting 2♦ response, and probably worse with control steps.

Several problem hands and situations are well-known. After the negative 2♥, Opener has a difficult time if he holds a strong hand with five hearts. If he bids 3♥, this is essentially forcing to game. Thus, a 2♣ opening with five hearts is essentially a game-forcing opening. That induces a lot of very heavy 1♥ openings, or an occasional fly-by-night game.

How about when the strong hand is a minor two-suiter? You open 2♣, hear a response, rebid 3♦, and then what? Because you have to bid at the four-level to show the second suit, you tend to open 1♦ with some extremely strong hands when you have a minor two-suiter.

What about minor rebids generally? How long must Responder’s major rebid be? If four, how do we find the 5-3 fit? If five, how do we find the 4-4 fit? Again, the minor-based 2♣ opening is extremely strong, and accordingly the one-level minor opening could be extremely strong, as well.

We can do better. We can fix the problem.

In the pages that follow, you will be introduced to a new convention, a 2♦ opening that shows a strong, forcing hand with at least four spades. This will make a strong 2♣ opening usually deny four spades. That simple change to the system will accomplish a truly remarkable feat. Every primary problem with a strong and artificial 2♣ opening will be solved, as well as many unimaginable advances made to your bidding generally.²

Among the amazing results are the following:

1. You will have no problem handling strong hands with four hearts and five or more of a minor. In fact, you will be able to agree hearts at a level low enough for all calls above 2NT to be cuebids. You will also

² This new convention is actually not all that new. Mats Nilstrand introduced this concept as part of his Super Standard system. My version is very similar to his version.

- be able to agree the minor, instead, at a level below 3NT, and often with space for some cuebidding below 3NT.
2. You will be able to set spades as trumps when Opener has four and Responder has a fit, at a level low enough for all calls above 2NT to be available to help look for a slam, no matter what Opener's pattern may be. If the major is not agreed, you will be able to agree any longer second suit held by Opener below 3NT.
 3. You will not bypass 2NT to show five hearts after opening 2♣, even if Responder shows an immediate double negative by bidding 2♥.
 4. You will be able to find any major fit, whether Opener has four, five, or even only three of the major, below 3NT when Opener has a balanced hand with 20+ HCP's. Puppet Stayman has a problem when Responder has five spades and four hearts. You will not even have a problem finding either possible fit when Responder has, for instance, five spades and *three* hearts or five hearts and *three* spades.
 5. You will be able to identify a specific minor with slam interest, below 3NT, when Opener has 22-23 balanced.
 6. You will occasionally even be able to identify a specific four-card minor with slam interest, again below 3NT, opposite an Opener with 22-23 balanced, and even after asking Opener about the majors.
 7. You may be able to agree a major below 3NT, and start cuebidding with a Serious 3NT available, when Opener has 20+ balanced.
 8. Responder will never have a problem deciding whether a new major shows, or should show, four or five after Opener shows a long minor.
 9. Hands with 4-4-4-1 pattern will not be that difficult after a strong, forcing opening.
 10. You will be able to show both minors below 3NT.

There are many, many more benefits, but I am sure that this list has you doubting already, or wondering if my approach is wildly artificial and, accordingly, quite unusable for the average player. Far from it, I believe that the approach is extremely logical and extremely manageable by most intermediate players. I hope you enjoy the journey.

THE TWO DIAMONDS OPENING

The first major change to the system is ditching the Two Diamonds opening that you currently use. Instead, Two Diamonds will be a second bid to show a strong, forcing, and artificial opening, roughly equivalent in strength to a standard Two Clubs opening. However, on some patterns where you would be loath to open Two Clubs because of rebid problems unless you were extremely strong, you will not be as troubled. Thus, in a sense, you might have a slightly lower “minimum” for some hands. In other words, that “grown up” view that you learned where 21 HCP is not always enough to open 2♣ will now change to a new view where some 20 HCP hands and 19 HCP hands will merit a strong, forcing opening, for the unexpected reason that using the strong, forcing opening will actually be easier than the one-level opening.

Two Diamonds shows roughly the same strength that a standard Two Clubs opening shows, except that it promises four or more spades. Why four or more spades? Well, one answer is that, “It just does. Don’t worry about it.” For the theoreticians, if you figure out why this works so well, let me know. I believe that my experience with canapé bidding may have suggested this solution, and I never understood why canapé bidding is so effective either, but it just is. There is probably some sort of mathematical “proof” to explain this, but understanding why this works so well is not all that important. Just sit back and watch what happens when you have one strong, forcing opening dedicated to hands with four or more spades and the other therefore tending to deny four or more spades. This opens up an amazing amount of inference and an impressive number of tools.

Because almost all hands with four spades go through a Two Diamond opening (the exception being super-strong balanced hands), you will open Two Diamonds any time you have five or more spades, but you will also open Two Diamonds with perhaps unexpected holdings, like any 4-4-4-1 hand with four spades and some other stiff, as well as hands with four spades and a longer second suit.

You will learn that Responder’s first option is to immediately agree spades. Responder will be able to bid 2NT with promising hands, 3♥ with weak hands, and even a splinter with minimal game-forcing hands and support.

You will also learn that a 2♥ call by Responder is waiting and denies four spades, allowing a bid of the spade suit after this denial of four spades to be used as an artificial bid if Opener does not show extra spade length.

After Responder bids 2♥, Opener will be able to describe balanced hands with a fairly normal 2NT, but those auctions will be enhanced because of what we already know about Opener’s spade length, and about Responder’s spade length for that matter.

When Opener has a regular, five-card or longer spade suit, he will rebid 2♠ after Responder's waiting 2♥ call, and these auctions will be fairly standard, like your grandparents used to play. Similarly, Opener's minor rebids and heart rebids will be normal and natural, showing five-card suits, except that we will know that the possibility of a spade fit is out because Responder will have denied four spades. Plus, these calls are not truly "normal." For example, a 3♣ rebid after a 2♦ opening will be a canapé auction. Opener will be showing a long club suit, but he will have already shown a four-card spade suit and will have denied a fifth spade by not rebidding 2♠. This 3♣ call, therefore, will show a club-spade two-suiter, but with longer clubs. The same will be the case for a 3♦ or 3♥ rebid.

This all works together. When Opener starts with a 2♦ opening, he has four or more spades. With a balanced hand, he will rebid 2NT. With five or more spades, he will rebid a normal 2♠. With a spade canapé hand, meaning four spades and longer in a second suit, Opener will first check on the spade fit. If no spade fit is found, he will then bid his longer second suit.

All of this is explained further, in the following table.

The Opening Bid of Two Diamonds

Shape Requirements:

If Balanced:

22-23 HCP, with 4-5 spades

If Unbalanced:

5+ spades, or

4-4-4-1 with any singleton except spades, or

Four spades, with a longer second suit

Strength Requirements if Unbalanced:

Normally, 21+ HCP

Frequently lighter with good playing strength