

Two Club Openings - Introduction

In so-called "Standard" methods, 2♣ is used as a general purpose strong bid ... the other two-of-a-suit openings are used for other purposes, most commonly as preemptive actions. But the 2♣ opening bid is artificial, strong, and, in most cases, it is forcing to game.

Consider this hand:

♠ AKQ875
♥ AK7
♦ 8
♣ AQT

A nice 22-count! With reasonable luck, this hand will have a play for game most of the time, even opposite the most pitiful of dummies. So, we open 2♣ to create the force. Why not open 1♠? Well, to understand why, here is a hand from the other end the spectrum:

♠ 96
♥ 86
♦ 76542
♣ 9743

A magnificent Yarborough! No, we are not being sarcastic, we present this hand as an example of how little it takes to make game opposite that earlier hand. In fact, the way the hands fit together, an overtrick is not out of the question! The point we are making here is that we open 2♣ whenever we are afraid that our opening one-of-a-suit bid may get passed out, resulting in a missed game by us.

Major Suit Hands

When your long suit is a major, you can stretch things just a little when it comes to opening 2♣. For example, that hand we gave earlier cannot, on its own, guarantee game. But, it takes so little from Partner to actually make game that you should have no qualms about opening 2♣. The risk of your 2♣ opening pushing you overboard is less than the risk of playing in 1♠ when game is cold. Here is the previous hand repeated for convenience:

♠ AKQ875
♥ AK7
♦ 8
♣ AQT

Is this a bottom-end 2♣ opening bid? Or can we weaken it a bit further, and still open 2♣? Some would say that this is about as low as a 2♣ opener should go. We disagree! We would even stoop as low as:

♠ AQJ875
♥ AK7
♦ 8
♣ AQT

To open 1♠ with this hand is to risk getting passed out there. But there are just too many awful hands that Responder might hold which he will pass, when game is quite cold. For example, if Partner could only have the decency to show up with the K♠, or the Q♥, or a doubleton Heart, or some Spade length, or the K♣, then 4♠ will have a play, and may well be cold.

Yes, opening 2♣ with this hand is somewhat borderline, perhaps, but, in our view, it's the right call, just to avoid the danger of getting passed out at the one-level when 4♠ is cold. True, once in a while, our ebullience will get us to a game going down, but that's all part of the overall equation.

How about this hand?

♠ AKJ6543

♥ KQJT

♦ 6

♣ 8

Yes, you could open this 2♣. After all, you do have close to 10 tricks in your own hand, why not? The answer is twofold. First of all, you have enough distribution, and few enough HCPs, to make it highly unlikely that 1♠ will be passed out. Secondly, if we open 2♣, Partner will expect some defense from us, and things could get quite un-partnership-like if they compete to 5 of a minor.

Minor Suit Hands

Here is our original hand, with the suits reversed:

♠ AK7

♥ 8

♦ AKQ875

♣ AQT

Suddenly, it does not look so good! Game in Diamonds will require more than a little help ... and 3NT requires a Heart stop from Partner, to say nothing of a running Diamond suit. Not all would agree with this, but we would open the hand above with 1♦ ... if it doesn't get passed out we will be in good shape. And, as we shall see later, 2♣ auctions, where the Opener has a minor suit, have a tendency to get very crowded ... you open 2♣, Partner makes some kind of artificial or negative bid, and now Opener bids 3 of his minor ... let's face it, the 3-level is rather high to start introducing suits for the first time!

Even though some might balk at opening 1♦ with the above hand, few experts would open 2♣ with this collection:

♠ AK7

♥ 8

♦ AQJ875

♣ AQT

Yes, this is the hand from before, but where Spades was the long suit. In that case, it looked like a 2♣ bid to us. And, now that Diamonds is the long suit? Not even close! This is a 1♦ opening bid!

Two Club Openings - Follow-Up

Numerous follow-ups have been devised for auctions which start with a 2♣ opening bid. Here we outline the basics of just three of these methods, those most frequently encountered on the tournament circuit.

Control Responses (aka "Steps")

In this method, Responder shows his number of "controls" ... in this context, a King counts as one control and an Ace counts as two controls. After 2♣, one commonly used set of Control Responses goes as follows:

- 2♦: 0-1 Controls (in other words ... no Ace, maybe a King)
- 2♥: 2 Controls (an Ace or 2 Kings)
- 2♠: 3 Controls, but specifically an Ace and a King
- 2NT: 3 Controls, specifically 3 Kings (the responses are designed to get the holder of the 3 Kings to be on play in a No Trump contract)
- 3♣: 4+ Controls.

This method (and other similar methods) of responding has the benefit of sometimes telling Opener right away whether slam is a possibility. But the method also suffers from a couple of serious disadvantages, which we can best explore through some examples. Suppose that you open 2♣ with this lovely collection:

♠ AQ
♥ AKT987
♦ K4
♣ AQJ

Partner makes the inconvenient response of 2♥, so he has the A♦ or else both missing Kings. This response has forced us to show our suit at the 3-level, and, additionally, if we end up playing this in Hearts, it's going to be played from the wrong side. Here are 3 hands that Responder might have after that 2♣ 2♥, 3♥ start:

<i>Hand A</i>	<i>Hand B</i>	<i>Hand C</i>
♠ K6542	♠ 642	♠ 642
♥ 76	♥ Q97	♥ 7
♦ 872	♦ AQ5	♦ AQJT97
♣ K74	♣ 9865	♣ 865

With Hand A, what would be your choice? Raise to 4♥ on a small doubleton? Introduce the moderate Spade suit at the 3-level? An awkward choice, and even if Responder guesses right and bids 4♥ he'll still be playing it from the wrong side.

With Hand B, Responder is slammish with Heart support, but has no convenient slam try available. What would 4♦ mean here? It would be convenient if that were a cue-bid with Heart support, but then what are you supposed to do with Hand C?

That covers the basics of Control Responses, but there is some hidden complexity in the method, especially what happens when they overcall or double 2♣. Also, what adjustments do you make to Blackwood after controls have been shown? To us, it sounds like a lot of complexity for a method that sometimes results in wrong-sided contracts and crowded auctions. But the method has many adherents, no reason to change if you like it!

2♦ as a Waiting Bid

There was a time when 2♦ was commonly used as a negative response to 2♣, and all other bids showed “positive values”, where positive was typically defined as showing an Ace and a King, or better. Nowadays, with the “waiting” method, 2♦ is used with all sorts of hands, some of them quite strong, the basic rule being that Responder bids 2♦ with most hands ... to bypass 2♦ (and thereby to risk crowding the auction) Responder needs something well worth saying, such as a good suit *and* a good hand.

Just how good does the suit have to be? At least 5 cards, of course ... and a good starting point for suit quality would be “2 or the top 3” ... but with numerous exceptions as dictated by good judgment. Here are some examples ... remember the recurring theme that we tend to avoid minor-oriented 2♣ openers, so much so that probably about 90% (perhaps more) of those 2♣ openers will be either No Trump or major-oriented hands.

<p>♠ KQ972 ♥ 97 ♦ A32 ♣ 543</p>	<p>Looks like an obvious 2♠ bid, eh? Showing a good hand a good suit, what could be simpler? The auction to worry about here is 2♣ 2♠, 3♥. Now, Responder has no good bid! We’d suggest a waiting bid of 2♦ here. If Partner rebids 2♥ we can try 2♠, and a nice economical auction will ensue.</p>
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13th June, 2006

Board 23 Both Vul

	South	West	North	East
♠ K9				
♥ AKQT32	2♣	Pass	2♦	Pass
♦ AQ	2♥	Pass	2NT	Pass
♣ A74	3♥	Pass	3♠	Pass
	4♣	Pass	5♣	Pass
	??			

What’s happened so far? Partner made a 2♦ waiting bid, and her 2NT rebid was also somewhat nebulous, it showed some values by dint of the failure to make a “second negative bid of 3♣”. Stoppers in all of the unbid suits? No, we don’t think so. North’s 3♠ bid can hardly be natural, she merely has a good hand and something in Spades. It’s not even clear at this point that she has Heart support, she may just be too good to sign off in 3NT. Our 4♣, and Partner’s 5♣, were both cue-bids, and now it’s crunch time.

It’s fair to assume that Partner has the A♠ and the K♣, so assuming that the Hearts are running we can count 11 tricks. Yes, surely there’s a 12th somewhere and the question is not whether to bid slam, but which slam to bid. No doubt we are missing the K♦ and it’s too bad that we cannot play 6NT from our side. As that is not an option, we’d suggest playing in 6♥, reluctantly settling for the lower scoring contract in order to right-side the contract.

7	♠ 7543	North	East	South	West
	♥ Q4			2♣	Pass
	♦ T9	2♦	Pass	2♥	Pass
	♣ KJ653	2NT	Pass	3♠	Pass
		4♣	Pass	4NT	Pass
		5♦	Pass	5NT	Pass
		??			

So far, North's bids have meant as follows:

- 2♦: Waiting
- 2NT: If N-S are playing 3♣ as a "second negative" then 2NT must be used to show some values. There's no rush to support Hearts with honor doubleton, that can be done later. Nor does it seem appropriate to introduce an xxxx suit by bidding 2♠
- 3♠: Natural
- 4♣: This has to be a cue-bid in support of Spades. Responder cannot start introducing new suits at the 4-level expecting them to be a possible place to play.
- 5♦: No Key Cards

Now, South's 5NT is the King Ask (let's assume that you are playing Specific Kings). The obvious bid is no doubt 6♣, but we ask you to consider the bold bid of 7♠, based on this logic:

- South's 5NT did not merely ask for Kings, it also announced that N-S had all the Key Cards. And the ♠Q, too, without that card surely South would have tried a Queen Ask of 5♥.
- There is not much point in showing the ♠K, the earlier 4♣ has already laid claim to that card.
- If Partner had wanted to know about the ♥K she could have made an earlier cue-bid of 4♦. That would have given North a chance to show the ♥K before South launched into Roman Key Card.

So, if N-S are on the same wavelength then we'd say that 7♠ is a reasonable bid. How good is the grand slam? As it happens, Partner does not have a 5th Spade or the ♠J, so a 3-2 trump break is required (plus a modicum of reasonable luck elsewhere). Around 60% we would say.

Cue Bidding

Roman Key Card Blackwood is a powerful slam bidding tool, but it's not the solution to all our problems. Sometimes, cue-bidding works better, or should be used as a prelude to Blackwood, in order to make sure that there are not two top losers in one suit.

2nd June, 2010

Both Vul

23	♠ K	East	South	West	North
	♥ 53		Pass	2♣	Pass
	♦ AQ62	2♦	Pass	2♠	Pass
	♣ T8763	2NT	Pass	3♠	Pass
		??			

East has a pretty good hand opposite a 2♣ opening, but standard methods will prevent him from showing his Clubs, the suit is just not good enough for a 3♣ response. So, East makes a 2♦ "waiting" bid. The next time around East *still* cannot bid 3♣ naturally, as this usually shows a "second negative" (a rotten hand, in plain English). Our East decided to bid 2NT, despite the Heart weakness, at least that is a bid which does not consume bidding space, and it shows some values. Bidding 3♦ instead is also tempting, at least that is where East's stuff is.

After West rebids his Spades, you (as East) will be happy to play in that suit. But your hand is too good simply to bid 4♠, you must try for slam. It would be misguided to charge into Roman Key Card here, better to bid 4♦ instead. This cannot be long Diamonds (you would have bid 3♦ earlier), it has to be a cue-bid in support of Spades.

All

♠ KQ972

♥ 543

♦ A32

♣ 97

Here we have a 3rd Heart, so our plan is to bid 2♠, showing a good hand and a decent suit, and then, if Partner bids 3♥ we can try 4♦, surely a cue-bid in support of Hearts.

♠ KQJ972

♥ 8

♦ 865

♣ 743

We'd bid 2♠ with this one, too. Then we would rebid 3♠ and leave the rest up to Partner.

♠ 97

♥ A32

♦ KQ972

♣ 543

This is nowhere near a 3♦ bid, that suit is just not worth consuming a whole round of bidding over, especially considering that it is a minor. Even more to the point, in our opinion, Responder has no satisfactory rebid if the auction goes 2♠ 3♦, 3♠.

There's a school of thought which says that 2♦ is almost mandatory opposite a 2♣ opening ... we wouldn't quite go that far, but we would make sure that:

- (a) when we make a positive response, we should have something worth saying;
- (b) when we make a positive response, we should have already planned our rebid.

With a 2♦ "waiting bid", Responder could hold all sorts of hand types, good or bad. The usual follow-up is for Responder to clarify his hand strength on his second bid by bidding the "cheaper minor". Thus, 2♣ 2♦, 2♥ 3♣ is the aforesaid "cheaper minor" ... it's an artificial bid showing less than a King (or, perhaps, less than two Queens). Similarly, 2♠ 2♦, 3♠ 3♦. These sequences are the so-called "second negative".

Immediate Second Negative

Using this method, after a 2♣ opening, 2♥ is used as an immediate "second negative", the type of hand that might have got into the aforementioned 2♣ 2♦, 2♥ 3♣ auction. Thus, holding a decent hand with good Hearts, Responder bids 2NT as a surrogate for his 2♥ positive response.

This method suffers from defects similar to the Control Responses method (though to a lesser extent) ... the contract might get wrong-sided when Responder bids 2♥ or 2NT ... and the auction might get crowded if Opener is forced to introduce his major suit at the three-level.

Summary

We've only scratched the surface, there are many other (less popular) methods available. Each of the three that we have outlined above has its adherents, and also its benefits ... our own preference is the "Waiting" style, primarily for its simplicity and because it gives Opener the best chance of showing his major (if that's what he has) at the two-level.